

A farmer but no friend to farmers



Photo: Paysan Breton hebdolo

In November 2009 Luc Guyau, a French farmer, was elected chair of the FAO Council. He will act in tandem with the FAO secretary general Jacques Diouf. The election was greeted by dismay by the European Coordination of Via Campesina, which said that Luc Guyau had long been a representative of industrial agriculture and was a known advocate of GMOs and agrofuels. In a statement, VC said that Guyau had been a strong advocate of the inclusion of agriculture into the WTO, a most unfortunate development which had "globalised agricultural trade instead of guaranteeing food security" and had "blocked policies for food sovereignty".

A Mexican horror movie

A remarkable Swiss documentary¹ has revealed strong circumstantial evidence linking the emergence of swine flu in March 2009 to industrial farming. The first verified case was that of a five-year-old boy, Edgar Hernández from the village of La Gloria in the state of Vera Cruz, central Mexico. The villagers, who had been suffering from flu-like symptoms long before Edgar was taken ill, had associated their ill-health with the proximity of huge pig farms run by the world's largest pork producer, the US company Smithfield. Time and again they had complained to the authorities, who had done nothing.²

The Swiss TV team, however, took their complaints seriously. With the assistance of a Mexican economics lecturer, Octavio Rosas Landa, and of many of the villagers themselves, who agreed to help despite threats, the Swiss TV team unearthed a really shocking story. The team located on local maps 65 huge pig factories in the region around La Gloria. Each of the factories has the capacity to house about 100,000 pigs (albeit in very cramped conditions). As the piglets are injected

with growth hormones and antibiotics, they take only three months to reach the weight needed for slaughter (compared with 18 months when reared by the local farmers), so each factory handles about 400,000 pigs a year.

Altogether, the pigs in the farms produce huge amounts of slurry (excrement), which is then scattered on the fields. No wonder the villagers complain of a constant stench in the air. And no wonder the villagers are fearful that their drinking water has been contaminated.

Worse still, the villagers took the filmmakers to an area near the factories where untreated dead pigs were being buried in concrete pits. The film shows thousands of flies gathering around these pits, and the film crew said that the smell of putrefaction was overwhelming. Although Smithfield refused to give the team an interview, one can assume that it was disposing of its pigs in this way to save the cost of incineration. Used syringes were also found scattered on the ground.

The pigs were fed not on Mexican maize (though Mexico is where maize originated), but on genetically modified maize imported from the USA and mixed with the ground-up remains of chickens. This is apparently a common practice on pig farms, and is reportedly safe even if the chickens are infected with bird flu, provided the feed has been sterilised by heating to a very high temperature. Smithfield has assured the Mexican government that this is the case, but, as only Smithfield employees are allowed inside the plants, there has been no independent verification.

No one has yet proved that swine flu emerged in one of these big factories, but the risks of new viruses appearing when animals are kept in close concentration are known to be significant. It is for this reason that many countries – including Brazil – have established a maximum size for animal factories.



Intensively farmed pigs in batch pens

One of the most worrying aspects of the story is the lack of independent verification of the safety of the factories. Only vets employed by Smithfield checked the pigs' health. And only doctors employed by Smithfield tested the local population for swine flu. All the tests (except the one for Edgar Hernández, carried out in Mexico City) proved negative. Not surprisingly, the villagers of La Gloria remain sceptical.

1 To see the film in English, go to <http://blip.tv/file/3062019> for the French version, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zbr361fXxPQ> See also *Against the Grain*, "Remembering La Gloria", January 2010 <http://www.grain.org/articles/?id=58>

2 See *Against the Grain*, "A Food System that Kills", April 2009, <http://www.grain.org/articles/?id=48>; and GRAIN, "An Update on Swine Flu", *Seedling*, July 2009, <http://www.grain.org/seedling/?id=619>

Farmer suicides continue in India¹

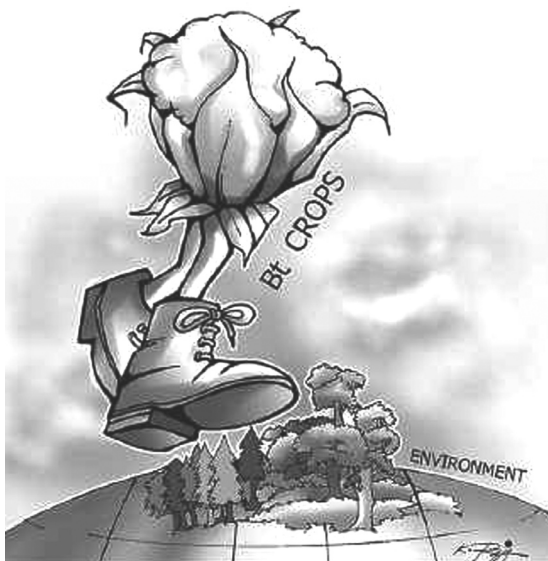
As the cotton-growing season drew to a close in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, farmer suicides once again became almost daily occurrences. Officially, the total number of suicides within a six-week period between July and August 2009 stood at 15, but opposition parties and farmers' groups said that the true total was more than 150.

By November, similar reports were coming from Maharashtra, another cotton-growing state. Farmers of Katpur village in Amravati district sowed Bt cotton four years ago. Instead of the promised miracle yields, huge debts have driven many to suicide, and cattle were reported dying after feeding on the plants. Successive studies in Maharashtra have concluded that indebtedness was a major cause of the suicides among the farmers.

"We were cheated by the seed companies. We did not get the yield promised by them, not even half of it. And the expenditure involved was so high that we incurred huge debts. We have heard that the government is now planning commercial cultivation of Bt brinjal. But we do not want Bt seeds of any crop any more", said farmer Sahebrao Yawiliker.

Within a week, two farmers in neighbouring villages in Wardha district killed themselves. Their Bt cotton crops were devastated by *lalya*, a disease that caused the cotton plants to redden and

Photo: Wikipedia



wilt. The first farmer, 55-year-old Laxman Chelpelviar in Mukutban, consumed the pesticide Endoulfan when the first picking from his six-acre farm returned a mere five quintals and an income of Rs 15,000, way below his expenses of Rs 50,000. The second farmer, 45-year-old Daulat Majure in Jhamkola, was discovered by his mother hanging dead from the ceiling. The cotton yield from his seven-acre farm was a miserable one quintal, worth Rs 3,000.

Agricultural scientists said *lalya* develops with pest attacks, moisture stress and lack of micronutrients in the soil. The plant's chlorophyll decreases with nitrogen deficiency, resulting in another pigment, anthocyanin, which turns the foliage red. If reddening starts before boll formation, it results in a 25 per cent drop in yield, said a scientist from the Central Institute of Cotton Research at Nagpur, who wished to remain anonymous. "Lalya is here to stay", he declared.

According to the agricultural scientists, the disease has its roots in the US Bt technology that India imported. Almost all of the 500-plus Bt seed varieties sold in India in 2009 are of the same parentage, the US variety Coker312 Bt cotton, a top CICR scientist said. They are F1 hybrids, crossed with Indian varieties.

Coker-312 (initially from Monsanto) showed high susceptibility to attacks by sucking pests like jassids and thrips. The thrips disperse within plant cells, while jassids suck the sap as they multiply under a leaf's surface, forcing the plant to draw more nutrients from the soil, aggravating the soil's nutritional deficiency.

Another characteristic of Bt cotton that

depletes the soil is that the bolls come to fruition simultaneously, draining the soil all at once. In a region like Vidarbha, plants wilt in two or three days. "It is like drawing blood from an anaemic woman." "If such a technology mismatch continues, soil health and farmers' economy will take a further hit", a top ICAR scientist with years of experience in cotton research was reported to have said.

1 This item is based on Institute of Science in Society (ISIS) report, *Farmers Suicides and Bt Nightmare in India*, 6 January 2010, <http://www.i-sis.org.uk/farmersSuicidesBtCottonIndia.php>

Monsanto calls time for its competitors

A recent report¹ by Associated Press journalist Christopher Leonard shows how Monsanto, having bullied and bribed its way to a near-monopoly control of the GMO seed market, is now tightening its grip over both smaller seed companies and the farmers who use its products. Leonard says: "Confidential contracts detailing Monsanto Co.'s business practices reveal how the world's biggest seed developer is squeezing competitors, controlling smaller seed companies and protecting its dominance over the multibillion-dollar market for genetically altered crops."

Leonard continues: "With Monsanto's patented genes being inserted into roughly 95 percent of all soya and 80 percent of all maize grown in the US, the company also is using its wide reach to control the ability of new biotech firms to get wide distribution for their products."

Monsanto's methods are spelled out

in a series of confidential commercial licensing agreements obtained by AP. The contracts include basic terms for the selling of engineered crops resistant to Monsanto's Roundup herbicide, along with supplementary agreements that address new Monsanto traits. The company has used the agreements to spread its technology – giving some 200 smaller companies the right to insert Monsanto's genes into their separate strains of maize and soya plants. But access to Monsanto's genes, AP found, comes at a cost, and with plenty of strings attached.

It goes on: "For example, one contract provision bans independent companies from breeding plants that contain both Monsanto's genes and the genes of any of its competitors, unless Monsanto gives prior written permission – giving Monsanto the ability to effectively lock out competitors from inserting their patented traits into the vast share of US crops that already contain Monsanto's genes." Monsanto's business strategy agreements are being investigated by the US Department of Justice and at least two state attorneys general, who are trying to determine if the practices violate US anti-trust laws.

Leonard spoke to Neil Harl, agricultural economist at Iowa State University, who has studied the seed industry for decades. He said: "We now believe that Monsanto has control over as much as 90 percent of (seed genetics). This level of control is almost unbelievable. The upshot of that is that it's tightening Monsanto's control, and makes it possible for them to increase their prices long-term. And we've seen this happening the last five years, and the end is not in sight."

Monsanto increased some maize seed prices last year by 25 per cent, with an additional 7 per cent increase planned for 2010. The cost of Monsanto brand soya seeds rose 28 per cent. "It's just like I got hit with bad weather and got a poor yield. It just means I've got less in the bottom line", Markus Reinke, a maize and soya farmer near Concordia, Missouri, who took over his family's farm in 1965, told AP. "They can charge because they can get away with it. And us farmers just complain, and shake our heads and go along with it."

1 Christopher Leonard, AP investigation, "Monsanto seed biz role revealed", *Atlanta Business News*, 14 December 2009, <http://www.ajc.com/business/ap-investigation-monsanto-seed-240072.html>

