

## Roundup Ready diplomat

The US State Department is still pressing for a massive programme of aerial fumigation in Afghanistan, despite serious reservations by the Pentagon and Afghan President Hamid Karzai. Despite the failure of aerial spraying in Colombia, where coca production has actually increased, the US officials believe that it is the only way to halt the booming cultivation of poppies for opium. Afghanistan produces 92 per cent of the world's opium.

US officials pour scorn on any concern about the impact of the glyphosate-based herbicide on local communities and the environment (even though the Ecuadorian government has filed a lawsuit against the US government for damage caused to the health of its citizens by herbicide used in the spraying, which was blown across the frontier by wind). The US ambassador to Afghanistan, William Wood, has offered to be sprayed with Roundup to demonstrate how safe glyphosate is. His action would be strongly backed by President George W. Bush, who during his 2006 trip to Afghanistan told a group of government leaders and US counter-narcotics officials, "I'm a spray man myself."

## Land conflict in Egypt

According to a report issued by the Land Center for Human Rights in Cairo, 126 farmers were killed, 445 injured and 634 arrested in Egypt in 2007. The conflicts were the result of disputes over land ownership, borders and irrigation. The report also documents many cases of abuse and negligence by the authorities. It says that the authorities have taken away land from farmers without paying compensation, have distributed irrigation water unfairly and have been negligent in maintaining and renewing water resources. ([www.lchr-eg.org](http://www.lchr-eg.org))

## Increased pesticide use in GM crops

The biotechnology industry has long asserted that one of the most valuable benefits of GM crops will be a marked reduction in the use of pesticides. But, as Friends of the Earth International shows in its latest report in the "Who benefits from GM crops?" series, this is not the case. A study by Charles Benbrook, a leading US agricultural scientist, shows that the adoption in the USA of GM soya, maize

and cotton led to the application of 55 million more kilos of herbicides from 1996 to 2004 than would have been applied if these GM crops had not been introduced. Part of the reason for the heavier-than-anticipated use of herbicides has been the emergence of resistant weeds that have required heavier and heavier doses of herbicide....

The response of the bio-tech industry to the dilemma? Another technical fix, of course. According to FoE's report, "the most significant development in biotech agriculture is new GM crops that tolerate heavier applications of pesticides and that tolerate two herbicides rather than one."

## Chickens growing faster

Because of their short reproductive cycle and their popularity as food, poultry have been more intensely bred than any other livestock. Broilers (chickens reared to be eaten) have been selected to develop traits that reduce costs of production. One of the most remarkable results of the breeding has been a rapid increase in the speed at which the chicks grow: according to a UK study into 51,000 chickens carried out by Toby Knowles of Bristol University's Division of Food Animal Science, "in the past 50 years broiler growth rates have increased by over 300 per cent, from 25g per day to 100g per day."

Good for the poultry company but not so good for the chickens. The study showed

that at 40 days (which is the age at which most of the chickens are sent to the slaughterhouse), 27.6 per cent showed poor locomotion and 3.3 per cent were almost unable to walk.

The study concluded that worldwide there are about 20 billion broilers reared in husbandry systems that are "biased towards economics of production and detrimental to poultry welfare". It called for an informed debate about current practice, with a balance drawn "between profitability and our moral obligation to maintain good standards of animal welfare".

## Indonesians take action over soya prices

In January 2008 about 10,000 people took to the streets in Jakarta to complain about the rising cost of soya, one of Indonesia's staple foods. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was forced to announce emergency measures to boost the local soya supply.

Indonesia, which has neglected its agriculture sector, now imports two-thirds of the soya beans it consumes. It has been hit by a combination of rising shipping costs and higher world prices for soya, which have stemmed from the decision of many US farmers to switch to maize, growing Chinese demand, and poor harvests in Argentina and Brazil.

## And not a drop to drink



*A severe drought in Chile has led to the declaration of an emergency in 50 rural districts, but the rich are still enjoying themselves in the world's largest swimming pool, built at a vast hotel complex in the coastal resort of Algarrobo.*