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Alarm Over GM Crops Grows

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Mexico remains in red alert following the ambitious attempts of Monsanto and other multinationals to win government approval for the planting of 2.5 million hectares of transgenic corn in the crop's center of origin. The solicitation calls for planting more than half of these acres with the same type of corn that has been shown to cause cancer in rats. But resistance is also growing stronger day by day—both inside and outside of Mexico, voices are rising in indignation at this outrage against the very heart of our cultures, health, food, biodiversity and nature. There are now so many denunciations of GM maize, through campaigns with thousands of signatures, radial protests, workshops, forums, meetings, in social and print media, and petitions by artists, activists and scientists, that it is difficult to keep a count of all the protests. Numerous letters have been sent to the government demanding a ban on GM maize, along with pressure on the United Nations to act to protect the crop's center of origin, biodiversity and farmers' rights.

And with good reason. As the artist Lila Downs notes on her website: "If the government of Mexico allows this historic crime, GMOs will quickly reach the tortillas and everyday food of the entire Mexican population, since corn from the states soliciting permission to plant transgenics supplies the majority of the cities in the country. Additionally, genetic contamination of locally adapted landrace varieties will be inevitable. This signifies very serious damage to over 7000 years of indigenous and peasant labor which created corn—one of the three most important crops for feeding the world " (citing Veronica Villa of ETC, www.etcgroup.org). Within a few hours of publication, more than 6000 people had replicated Lila Downs' webpage.

Fundamentally, maize, in its many manifestations, is like the skin of the Mesoamericans. Everyone reacts to the feeling of being threatened. Corn is like skin, but at the same time it is deeper, in the heart, mind, creativity, history, from the ancestors. And it is in economies, the sharing of food, in poems, music, art, knowledge, popular wisdom, and in scientific studies.

The Union of Scientists Committed to Society (UCCS) circulated a petition against the planting of transgenic corn in Mexico which now has been signed by more than 2,500 scientists, researchers and experts from Mexico and around the world, including two Nobel laureates and dozens of scientists with major national awards (www.uccs.mx/doc/g/planting-gmo-corn_es). In support of this petition, on November 27 several global networks of scientists (including UCCS, European Network of Scientists for Social and Environmental Responsibility (ENSSER), International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility (INES), as well as international organizations including the Third World Network and Grain) published a summary of arguments, titled "GM Maize in Mexico: An irreversible path away from agricultural biodiversity, farmer livelihoods and the right to food within the center of origin of maize" (available in English <http://www.grain.org/article/entries/4622-gm-maize-in-mexico-an-irreversible-path>). This report raises awareness of the deep scientific, legal, social and

economic concerns associated with GMOs and points to the need to stop all planting of GM maize (experimental, pilot or commercial) in Mexico. In an open letter to the Mexican government, the UCCS explains that the combined evidence is strong enough to necessitate a precautionary policy and a ban on the commercial release of transgenic varieties of maize in Mexico, its center of origin. They note that despite many scientific arguments against the release of GMOs, the Calderon administration unlawfully rushed the planting of transgenic maize. Taking on the risk of GM corn cannot be justified by the argument that the country has a maize deficit, as there is evidence that the Mexican countryside has the resources necessary to achieve self-sufficiency in maize using public, non-GM technology.

Grain has also published the analytical document “Alarm! Avalanche of GM in Mexico” (www.grain.org), which is essential to understanding the situation and fight against GM corn. Mexico can be seen as the focal point of an attack by Monsanto and other biotech transnationals, who are also at war with other Latin American countries. This attack was one of the main drivers of the coup in Paraguay, and involves pressures to allow GM maize in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Bolivia and other countries. As Grain explains, the multinationals’ attack is an attempt to control the market and eliminate the independent production of food and rural economies.

At the time of this writing, all evidence indicates that Felipe Calderon failed to keep his word to Monsanto to authorize millions of hectares of GM maize. This is a direct result of massive social opposition. But the secretary of the environment, Juan Elvira Quesada, took a preemptive strike to facilitate authorization: a few days before leaving office, he changed the internal rules of Semarnat so that they no longer are required to take into account the advice of their own experts (!). It has reached the point that the National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity (CONABIO), the National Institute of Ecology (INE) and the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas (Conanp) have given opinions against the release of GM maize.

Along with this and other aberrations, Calderon's outgoing proposal to privatize communal ejidal property, the nucleus of the Zapatista revolution, is part of a vast attack on peasant life, against the cultural, economic and alimentary base of the country, in order to favor multinationals. But as numerous struggles have shown, Zapata lives in his people and his land--and also in the native corn that feeds them.

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