

POLITICS

BUSINESS

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YOUTH / SCIENCE

SPORTS

ENTERTAINMENT / ARTS

TRAVEL

HEALTH

WORLD / REGION

SPECIAL REPORT

COMMENTARIES

EDITORIAL

Vietnam's food safety and sovereignty in jeopardy

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Genetically-modified (GM) maize on trial cultivation at a farm in Vietnam. More and more people are concerned about the harmful consequences of GM crops and Vietnam's plans to cultivate them on a wide scale. PHOTO: QUANG DUAN

The worldwide protests against Monsanto and their various genetically modified products on May 25 were more than successful. We expected and hoped for 200,000 participants, but the latest estimates put the numbers at between 2.5 million and three million participants throughout the world.

At the time, I happened to be in Saigon.

I walked by the Opera House as I often do, as well as the photography exhibit across the street. One picture showed President Ho Chi Minh tilling the soil outside his modest home. It was captioned with a quote from the late president: "Have plenty of food for mighty army."

I think we can extrapolate President Ho's war-time statement to a time of peace, and it would translate into: "Have plenty of food for all Vietnamese people;" and it would go without saying that it would refer to safe food that also secures the sovereignty it represents for the Vietnamese people.

This is one of several problems with accepting and embracing genetically modified (GM) products and genetically modified

organisms (GMOs) in Vietnam. The business model that Monsanto has created prevents, actually prohibits, the saving/storage/replanting of seeds. The company does so contractually with farmers. It is the farmer who is responsible – not the government. It will be the farmer who will pay the consequences should he or she "violate" the terms of this contract. The farmer could, and likely will, lose everything. And Vietnam would surely lose its sovereignty over food production.

But there are many other reasons why Vietnam, as well as the entire international community, should reject any and all GMOs, including but not limited to genetically modified seed, materials, livestock and fish.

I have been perplexed as to how easy it has been for Monsanto and other biotech companies to implement their diabolical strategy. They do so because they are self-regulated. The US Food and Drug Administration as well as the US Department of Agriculture have granted the company unlimited authority to "self-regulate" their products. From a business perspective, this is ideal.

However, we are indeed talking about the destruction of mankind. Monsanto and Dow approve their own products for consumer consumption – the US government has no say in this whatsoever. How better to make whopping profits each and every quarter, for hundreds of quarters? After all, billions of US dollars are at stake here. In 2012, Monsanto earned, in net sales, US\$13,504,000,000. That is no mistake – Thirteen billion, five hundred and four million US dollars.

Another important aspect of this problem that we are all faced with is that these companies, who produce GM products and GMOs, are indeed the very same companies that brought us, among other things, Agent Orange. The very same companies who told the US government that Agent Orange was absolutely safe and would never harm the environment or human beings.

How wrong was that? Today, over three million Vietnamese still suffer and die as a result of Agent Orange. Over 5,000 victims in my home city of Da Nang. 20,000 in neighboring Quang Nam Province. I can continue, but we all know how horrible the Agent Orange problem was, is and will be. It's now affecting the fourth generation of victims.

YOUR TWO CENTS

Many expatriates have written to *Vietweek* concurring that despite the problems they face in Vietnam, it is simply not acceptable that people direct their anger and slurs at all Vietnamese. This forum, "Your two cents", opens the floor for you, the expats, to hold forth on the changes you see in Vietnam: what disappoints, what pleases and what you would like to see happen. Email your thoughts to editor@thanhniennews.com. We reserve the right to edit your submissions for reasons of space and clarity.

But I wonder why, after knowing all of the dark history of companies like Monsanto and Dow, governments, including Vietnam, would allow them to open offices, do business, field test GM seeds – the list goes on.

Monsanto and Dow are responsible for over three million Vietnamese deaths. Neither has paid a single dong to Vietnam. Neither has admitted any wrongdoing. This is surely criminal and, I submit, a war crime and a crime against humanity.

I wonder: What would President Ho Chi Minh have to say about all of this?

I am fairly certain that Uncle Ho would not agree with what has and continues to occur in Vietnam regarding genetically modified products and GMOs.

He was fond of children and would never let them come to harm because of a few companies' desire to make profits at the expense of people, communities and the environment.

Please consider these and other reasons to stop the proliferation of GMOs in Vietnam.

By Chuck Palazzo*

*The writer is a long-time American peace activist and Vietnam War Veteran who lives in Da Nang. The opinions expressed are his own.

'ENOUGH IS ENOUGH'

It was a sad day for me and for many others when I read that Monsanto had been allowed to open an office in Ho Chi Minh City; sad as I had visited the company's young victims at the Tu Du Hospital. I spoke to a number of children seriously affected by Agent Orange, a Monsanto product.

No doubt there has been pressure from the US to allow Monsanto into Vietnam so soon after the effects of Agent Orange was becoming known. Now the second threat, and it is a threat, to the people of Vietnam is Monsanto's killer genetically modified organism (GMO) seeds. Yes, there are scientists that state there is no danger with GMO, I just wish they would say that to the many thousands of Indian widows of farmers who, having planted GMO cotton, saw their crops fail and committed suicide, unable to repay debts incurred in cultivating the crop.

But there are many more scientists who have opposed the use of GMOs and continue to do so. On May 25, over two million people in 465 cities in many countries marched to express their opposition to Monsanto, the message has got across, and we must hope that in Vietnam the authorities will also hear that message and say to Monsanto: You brought Agent Orange to our country and left thousands of families mourning the loss of their children, mourning to see their crippled child unable to speak, move or play as a normal child. Now you bring us your GMO seeds. Enough is Enough. Get out of our country.

By Len Aldis

* The writer is the Secretary of the Britain-Vietnam Friendship Society.*The writer is a long-time American peace activist and Vietnam War Veteran who lives in Da Nang. The opinions expressed are his own.

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Editor-in-Chief: **Nguyen Quang Thong**

248 Cong Quynh St . , Distr. 1, HCMC, Vietnam. Tel: (84-8) 39255738 - Fax: (84-8) 39255901

Email: admin@thanhniennews.com

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