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Hunger, food and Genetic engineeringÂ

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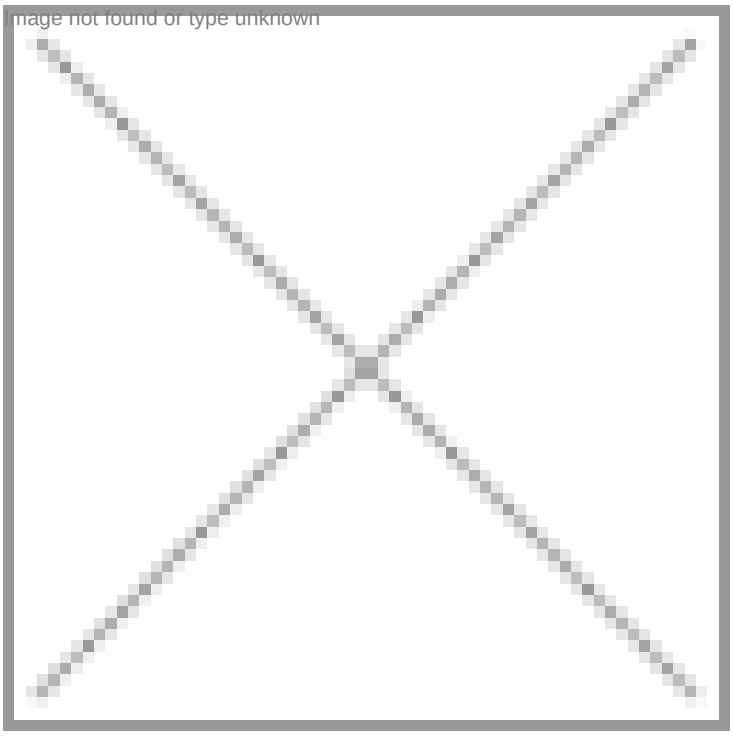

The United States is visibly unhappy. India's refusal to accept 1000 tons of food aid has brought the controversy shrouding the safety of genetically modified (GM) foods right to its shores. And the battle lines are getting clearly drawn.

The US Embassy in New Delhi and the United States agency for international development (USAID) have already swunginto action. While CARE India and catholic relief services (CRS), which wanted to carry the relief supplies, have moved the environment appellate authority (EAA), seeking reconsideration of the decision, the battle has moved onto the media columns, mainly in the American press and for obvious reasons. It was the genetic engineering approval committee (GEAC)--the country's highest regulatory authority--that refused to accept the food aid unless certified that the shipment did not contain Star-link GM corn, which has been certified in the US only for animal feed consumption.

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The relief agencies have continued to dilly-dally for nearly two years, refusing to make a commitment. For the multi-billion dollar biotechnology industry, the acceptance of the GM food aid by India is crucial to its sagging morale over the consumer backlash that has kept the genetically altered food out of Europe. After all, how can a nation with millions in the clutches of hunger and starvation refuse a humanitarian aid? But what is being kept under wraps is the fact that India has an unmanageable foodgrain surplus exceeding 51 million tons, much of it rotting in the open. Importing food, even if it is part of the relief aid supplies, will therefore render more and more of the food stocked within the country to go waste. For the US, on the other hand, the major headache is to get rid of its burgeoning GM food stocks that remains piled up for want of buyers. What happens as a result to the food security concerns in India is none of its concern, it never was.

The biotechnology industry as well as a dominant section of the scientific community, thinks that genetic engineering, despite the risks involved for human health and environment, is essential for meeting the food requirements in the next quarter of the century. Whether it is food aid or the introduction of GM crops, the world must open up for the sake of the hungry millions in the year 2030. Not realizing that the world has an over-production of food in the year 2003. The Indian government, for instance, has been asking farmers not to produce more wheat and rice and in turn diversify from staple foods to other commercial crops. And yet, highly subsidized food from the Organization for Economic Corporation and Development(OECD) countries is being slowly and steadily dumped into the developing countries thereby further accentuating the crisis on the farm front. India too is gradually moving towards cheaper food imports as the answer to food security.
It is, therefore, obvious that either the governments do not know of the threat on the food front that lies ahead or thescientists are not aware of the ground realities. The fact is that it is the scientists, more importantly the biotechnologists, who refuse to look beyond their research laboratories. The emphasis on biotechnology in the developed world is linked to the global paradigm that aims at destroying food self-sufficiency in the majority world. Given the pathetically small land holdings in the developing countries and with the mounting farm debt, it is futile to expect that the sophisticated technology can rescue resource-poor farmers and rebuild their confidence in agriculture.

Food production will have to come from agricultural systems in countries with huge populations like India. Farmers are not only resource poor â€“ with no or little access to credit, and markets â€“ but also a majority of them live in arid and semi-arid zones or in harsh climates. India has come a long way since the days of 'ship-to-mouth' existence. Forcing biotechnology and genetically modified foods will only push the country into the era of 'lab-to-mouth', the socio-economic fallout of which can be disastrous.

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