

Politics of food and corporate farming

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RECENTLY there was a flurry of frantic government advertisements assuring the business sector that during 2005, Pakistan will not be affected by imports of duty-free agricultural products; no subsidies forbidden (that is, to big farmers; peasants don't get any). Nor will stricter standards imposed by the World Trade Organization (WTO) throw Pakistan out of the competition for foreign markets. Total free trade won't be introduced nor import duties reduced to zero; therefore Pakistani industry will not collapse.

Smallholders, NGOs and activists might have cheered had these assurances not been time-bound. The government did not say, however, that all of this would not happen eventually — merely that people had only a year left for some damage control.

Coincidentally or not, shortly before these ads appeared, the government announced it was putting corporate farming through to attract foreign investment. It had already decided on this several years ago; but after 9/11 and Afghanistan and no one in a hurry to come to Pakistan the idea was quietly shelved — until now. Nineteen foreign applications are awaiting, claim insiders.

The belated assurance-by-advertisement is small consolation at this eleventh hour. The Pakistan government had

horses in the mouth, as the famine experience of the Zimbabwe demonstrated, when the US sought to dump unwanted and risky GM food "aid" that would have contaminated the country's agriculture and environment and threatened their biodiversity.

Yet many southern governments — unlike the shrewder industrialized nations — give short shrift to peasants, overlooking their natural advantage in agriculture, simply to maintain the land monopoly status quo for a minority. Monopolies are supposedly banned the world over; so when citizens question the legitimacy of the WTO oligopoly, why do southern governments come down heavily in the defence of WTO instead of the people? — even though WTO is not an organization of governments like the United Nations or Saarc or Asean.

The WTO is a private, corpo-

sand pages of the WTO agreement.

US and WTO spokespersons constantly justify the creation of WTO on the grounds that a global body was needed to coordinate an entire world's overwhelming volume and complexities of trade, therefore, manufacture and other production as well, since not just finished goods but raw materials and components and services were also traded. True, but the United Nations Council for Trade and Development (UNCTAD) already existed and working in the relevant areas and would have been the next logical step towards coordinating and monitoring balanced global trade. But balance was not the objective of corporate interests and superpower foreign policy, and they bristled at being monitored.

In 1972, the mounting high-handed behaviour of many multinationals riding roughshod over sovereign governments, climaxed with an American corporation actually offering the CIA or anyone else a million dollars to overthrow Salvador Allende of Chile who appealed to the UN for justice. Ultimately, a small new UN office was set up known as the Centre for Transnational Corporations (UNCTC). The UNCTC started off by helping some southern governments work out some non-binding principles for foreign investment and documenting the nature of foreign investment in their countries.

This was too much for the multinationals who saw an international compulsory code for corporations in the offing, but who refused to be accountable to either the UN or governments. The lobbying and bad-mouthing of the UNCTC

Many global movements are demanding restoration of people's natural right to grow food for themselves so as to be self-reliant. At present, multinationals control the use of 80 per cent of the world's farmlands which are cultivated for export-oriented crops, causing displacement of the rural population. Just 10 agro-based corporations control 70-90 per cent of global seed, grain, chemical fertilizer and pesticide production and trade.

Pakistan government has a decade in which to inform and educate the citizens about the WTO's pros and cons, and initiate public and parliamentary debate before unilaterally and blindly signing the WTO Agreement on Agriculture in 1995. To this day — apart from the rumour floating that since other southern countries were signing it, the WTO had to be good enough for Pakistan too — no one cares to take credit for this questionable decision. Without studying the implications in depth, a mid-level bureaucrat is said to have been sent to sign the deal.

Even then, it was not too late to re-examine what the WTO really had to offer — or rather, extract. Thanks to the predilection of governments to leave everything to politicians or "experts" or finance ministers whether or not well-informed, and who seldom endure the wrong end of the economic stick, the public largely remained ignorant about the WTO except about the most contentious part of all on agriculture.

Historically, apart from colonization which was against local will, whatever deals were made with foreign investors or traders, countries never permitted outside control over agriculture because it is the very foundation of economies. A continuous and adequate source of food and adequate employment has to be ensured if governments are not to worry about constant conflict, instability and being overthrown. The history of warfare, which often turns out to be economic history, is replete with the issue of food security as catalyst.

Even the Americans are fond of reiterating that there's no such thing as a free lunch. Their short history documents top political leaders, various Congressmen, military generals and high-ranking intellectuals repeatedly driving home the strategy that to control other nations one had to control their food supply, namely, through agriculture. And that is exactly what they have been doing for over a century. Even tsunami victims need to look some gift

rate club — a sort of global contractor, except that rather than consulting with governments, it lays down the law and tells governments what to do. Its foundations were laid by a dozen or so American multinational corporations, seeking open and unregulated borders for trade and foreign investment especially in agriculture, intellectual property rights and services.

The "founding fathers" included the two most aggressive American banks, American manufacturers, investment and services associations, and their International Chamber of Commerce. Economic and financial control overseas has long been part of US foreign policy, and the corporate sector not only had full government support, their bureaucracy even paved the way for them. Nevertheless, since WTO was a private grouping, the peoples of agricultural developing countries did not have to go along with it; but their governments did — secretly and arbitrarily.

Apart from big countries such as Brazil and India, it was not difficult to persuade most southern governments to join the WTO "voluntarily." Those headed by dictators were among the earliest catches. Others — including authoritarian "democracies" — would unexpectedly find urgently-needed loans from World Bank or other trade deal or assistance suddenly held up or cancelled if they were hesitant about the WTO. Such arm-twisting was routine across the board.

Throughout the seven years leading to the formation of the WTO (known as the Uruguay Round) the industrialized countries earned notoriety for their closed-door "green room meetings" which firmly excluded the South from participating and negotiating as "equals." The North made the decisions privately beforehand among themselves, informing southern representatives about it later — whether they liked it or not. Consequently, most governments are yet to read and fully comprehend the several thou-

forced the hand of Boutros Boutros Ghali who had sought to defend the justified interests of a beleaguered South, to close down the centre in 1992. Later, the US blocked the popular choice of Boutros Ghali returning as secretary general for another term in favour of a more pliant one.

The many global people's movements are demanding the restoration of people's natural right to grow food for themselves so as to be self-reliant, and not be forced by policies or outside interests to reduce them to a floating, insecure mass of permanently-exploited temporary labour in a way of life not of their choosing; it is an obvious violation of human and civil rights. For, multinationals control the use of 80 per cent of the world's farmland which are cultivated for export-oriented crops, causing displacement of the rural population. Just 10 agro-based corporations control 70-90 per cent of global seed, grain, chemical fertilizer and pesticide production and trade. That leaves very little option for the world's four billion peasants, small farmers and other rural people but to starve.

Above all, they demand, not that WTO's agreement on agriculture be renegotiated for concessions which is the most that apathetic southern governments seek, but that agriculture be taken out of WTO completely. Food security, they contend — and it is impossible to dispute — is non-negotiable, and there is no such thing as a "right" to invest in or trade with others if basic needs are threatened; only surplus should be tradeable by mutually-agreed on choice, subject to change when citizens interests were compromised; without this principle, there can be no sovereignty.

If there is to be a judge or an arbitrator, it has to be the UN. A food-dependent, poor or not-so-rich country can never be in a bargaining position let alone dictate terms — which explain the present plight of many countries including Pakistan. This will be the final test of democracy: the public interest.