

India opens door to genetically modified crops

By John Vidal

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NEW DELHI: India, the world's largest grower of cotton, has opened the doors to GM varieties after a four-year rearguard battle by academics and powerful farmers' groups who fear its introduction will lead to hundreds of thousands of poor farmers being forced off the land.

New Delhi's Genetic Engineering Approval Committee has approved the release of Bt (bacillus thuringiensis) cotton into the environment with certain conditions. Bt seeds are genetically modified to contain a common bacterium which protects the cotton from bollworm - the most common pest that attacks cotton crops.

Monsanto, the world's leading GM

company and GM cotton seed producer, which has pressed New Delhi for years to accept the crop, made no statement yesterday pending further announcements on which variety had been approved, but was said to be delighted.

The company has invested millions of pounds buying several of India's largest seed companies to promote GM varieties if and when the government gave permission. With GM cotton finally approved, India is expected to move swiftly to approve GM foods. GM mustard, potato, fish and other crops are awaiting approval after trials.

If, as expected large-scale Indian

farmers switch to the GM varieties, then most of the world's cotton is expected to be genetically modified within a few years. Up to 90 per cent of all US cotton is now modified, and South Africa, Argentina and other major exporters have all changed in the past three years. China now grows more than 400,000 hectares (1m acres) of GM cotton.

The world supply of GM cotton seeds are effectively in the control of just four companies who own the patents. The companies say their research shows that GM cotton more than halves the need to use insecticides and also increases yields by up to 30 per cent, and returns by 8 per

cent. Average Indian yields are about 120kg per hectare, less than half the global average.

The government decision is likely to lead to further confrontations between Monsanto and powerful farmers' groups who can organize rallies of up to one million people. Field tests of GM cotton in Andhra Pradesh and other states were burnt down in the late 1990s by activists who feared that its introduction would prove suicidal for farmers who would be forced into buying expensive seeds from multinational companies and go further into debt.

The activists have argued that the introduction of GM cotton will lead

back to the economic colonization of India by outsiders. Freedom from cotton colonization was a central argument for independence, more than 50 years ago, and handwoven cotton cloth was Mahatma Gandhi's resistance movement's symbol of opposition to British rule.

Opponents of GM crops in India called the government approval process a "scandal" and demanded an inquiry.

He and others say the bollworm will develop resistance to the GM crop, as seen in other Bt cotton-growing countries.

Pro-GM groups were delighted. "India has finally joined the community of progressive nations by approving

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f the first biotech crop for use by its
farmers", said Dr CS Prakash, profes-
sor in Plant Molecular Genetics and
director of the Centre for Plant
Biotechnology Research at Tuskegee
University, US.

More than 50m hectares of GM
crops are now growrown worldwide
across a dozen countries. The vast
majority is in the US and Canada, but
Argentina and China are thought to be
catching up. Brazil, EU countries and
others have come under great pres-
sure from the US and its corporations,
who largely control the seeds, to allow
their introduction and commercializa-
tion.—*Dawn/The Guardian News*
Service.

I was a 13-year-old high school student when I first met Justice Kayani in the mid 30s in Parachinar and shook his hand. In my mind's eye, I can still see him playing tennis on a hard court not far from where we lived. Planting trees, grafting roses and pruning hedges was his hobby for spare hours. It helped him, "to bear grief and to clear his thoughts".

Describing his short car drive to the T.B. sanatorium just outside Quetta, Justice Kayani told a group of students in Lahore: "It is a few miles from the city, and after you have gone out, there comes a barren stretch of road, as bleak in appearance as the bleak rocks of Balochistan; not a tree on either side of the road, not a blade of something, not an idea even. Why this desolation? I asked. Why not grow trees? He (his companion) pointed to some dry stumps at regular distances and said those were trees that are dry stumps now. This sounded like Shakespeare's:

"Those are pearls that were his eyes"

My friend said he did not know what Shakespeare meant, but that those trees had withered... and drove on until we came to another stretch of the road, lined with trees, beautiful in habit, beautiful in foliage. "Hello, what!" I exclaimed, full of romance, full of hope. "Who has planted these"? "These", he said, "were planted by Englishmen, i.e. by these very natives under the orders of Englishmen". All the beautiful chinar trees brought by General Robert from Kandhar and planted on Lytton Road, as it was then known, are gone. as it was then known, are gone. Now trees is not a part of our culture. We have other priorities. How

Ceremonial tree planting

~~Environment~~
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Roedad Khan

Agriculture

Trees are symbols of hope for the future and are planted by people who have faith in the future of their country.

else can one explain the absence of trees in the Margalla Hill which forms the backdrop of Islamabad and was declared a National Park by the Federal Government in 1980. It is mostly covered with shrubs and only a few pine trees cling to the top of the ridge. Once it comprised ever green pine forest, hundreds of species of flowering plants and ferns. The irony is that, after it was sanctified as a National Park, the hill was exposed to activities which are prejudicial to its preservation and are incompatible with the objectives of the National Park. A cement factory was established in 1984 in the green area. Its requirement of raw material i.e. limestone is quarried in the National Park. Consequently, in addition to creating serious pollution, the park's features, its rock, soil, fauna, flora are being gradually destroyed. Hundreds of stone crushers were installed in four beautiful valleys in the National Park and rock-mining allowed. This destroyed the landscape, the natural geological formations, the archaeological features, and native plant communities. An industrial atmosphere has been created in an otherwise pristine environment by the noise of motors, and machinery. dynamite-blasting, high truck traffic, worker's camps and polluted streams. Rawal Lake a part of the National Park and main source of drink-

ing water for Rawalpindi, is threatened by pollution caused by unauthorized human habitations all around the lake.

It was in vain that I raised this matter with successive Presidents and Prime Ministers. Nawaz Sharif issued a comprehensive Directive on preservation of the Margalla Hill National Park. "I have received", the Directive reads, "disturbing reports that the Margalla Hill National Park ... has been exposed to activities prejudicial to its preservation and are environmentally hazardous for Islamabad". The Directive remains unimplemented. What is worse, thousands of trees planted by students were bulldozed and the ground leveled for a political convention? Benazir

played a cruel joke on the country when she transferred some of her statutory functions to her spouse and made him responsible for the protection of the environment. In desperation, I filed a writ petition in the High Court in the hope that activities incompatible with the objectives of the Park would be declared illegal. Nothing happened. Instead, the writ petition was dismissed. Who wants to antagonize the rich and the powerful in this country? The wonder is how we achieved some success, however limited, in the teeth of opposition from a powerful mafia.

Of the thousands of trees planted by us since 1989, over 10,000 pine trees have survived the vagaries of nature and ravages of man. Quarrying in Kalinjar and Sinyari valleys was stopped under orders of Moin Qureshi, as caretaker Prime Minister. Mustafa Khar, as Minister of Water and Power, stopped stone crushing in Shahdara valley by simply ordering WAPDA to remove the transformers and discontinue power supply. With the crushers gone, nature has taken over and wild life has returned. The present regime has setup a Task Force to study the wanton destruction and decimation of Margalla Hill around Nicholson monument and submit its report.

Another endangered Park is Kirthar National Park, the first of its kind in

Pakistan to be included in the United Nation's List of National Parks and Equivalent Reserves. Shell-Premier and more recently Premier are threatening to make inroads into this park for commercial gain. It has secured a No Objection Certificate from the Federal Government under rule 17 of the Pakistan Petroleum (exploration and production) rules 1986. In the absence of a Federal Law, the exploration license is illegal as no authority can issue an exploration license in violation or disregard of laws of the land, whether Federal or Provincial.

Who among our leaders, elected or un-elected, in uniform or otherwise, will save our National Parks, our forests, our national heritage. Trees are symbols of hope for the future and are planted by people who have faith in the future of their country. All over the world, except Pakistan, trees are venerated, respected. We bulldoze them. Not surprisingly, Pakistan has a forest cover of 4.57 percent- a dismal performance by any standard and an alarming annual rate of deforestation ranging from 2.5 percent to three percent. How tragic that our leaders are much better at planting ceremonial trees than they are at saving the forests of our nation. Perhaps, a ban should be imposed on political and ceremonial tree plantation until the nation's forests and parks are fully protected. People who have no faith in the future of their country do not plant trees. They loot and plunder and leave behind a treeless desert for posterity. These are sad thoughts, but our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thoughts.