

Peoples' Voices Resound at the IFCS Forum V

Selected Highlights of the IFCS

By Jennifer Mourin

Budapest/Sept 27 -- The 5th Inter-governmental Forum on Chemical Safety (IFCS), now in its third day of proceedings, got off to a good start on Monday 25th morning with outgoing President, Dr Suwit Wibulpolpraset placing the need for transparency, punctuality, equality and mutual respect, and willingness to listen to the viewpoints of others, as crucial elements for the success of the Forum's proceedings. Citing Buddhist wisdom as a source of inspiration, he highlighted particular respect for the elderly and women, as part of the IFCS 'code of conduct' in fulfilling its role of providing countries the opportunity to place issues on the international agenda and emphasize special needs and concerns with respect to improving chemicals management—with all participants, including developing countries and NGOs, bringing emerging and contentious issues to the international agenda.

Notable among the Keynote addresses at the Budapest Congress and World Trade Centre, was the presentation by **Virginia Dammay, of the Alliance of Peasants in the Cordillera Homeland (APIT TAKO)**, (right) a regional alliance of the peasantry in the Cordillera Region, Northern Luzon, Philippines. In her presentation, Virginia highlighted the agriculture that has been practiced in her community since before the 12th century, when her ancestors carved their first terraces out of the steep



mountainsides of western Ifugao, and diverted water from mountain springs, and streams to irrigate these lands. Farming is the primary livelihood of approximately 211,000 of Ifugao households, more than 46 per cent of whom still practice traditional agriculture, while nearly 54 per cent have either shifted to modernised farming or adopted many of its elements. This shift has had negative impacts, she noted. These included: ***“intensive utilization of synthetic chemicals which has taken a heavy toll on the soil and general environment; frequent contact with pesticides continual intake of water laced with pesticides and fertilizer residues giving rise to numerous health problems among the farming households; and diminishing returns from production on existing croplands that has pushed farmers to clear more and more forest so that hardly any watershed still survives”***. In light of all these devastating impacts, Virginia elaborated on the communities struggle to seek an alternative course of agricultural development, developing their resources by utilizing low external-input sustainable agriculture expanding beyond their traditional levels of productivity to meet modern needs. Virginia, whose presence at the IFCS was a recommendation by PAN Asia and the Pacific proceeded to explain the numerous

activities to conserve, innovate, rehabilitate, and acquire or re-acquire and develop knowledge, skills, and material resources the communities could use for the low-input, organic production of the crops.

The Keynote addresses were followed by a Special Recognition Awards Ceremony to recognise exceptional contributions to a special topic or activity related to chemical safety. This was awarded to HRH Princess Chulaborn Mahidol of Thailand; while the Award of Merit which recognised overall contribution to chemical safety went to Roy Hickman of Canada, and Ulrich Schlottmann of Germany.

But this awards ceremony was almost overshadowed by an extra special Awards ceremony that IFCS President Suwit held after the official session, to recognize individuals who “in his humble opinion” deserved special mention. The big surprise of the day was Dr Suwit’s moving commendation for a man he described as his mentor and “**personal inspiration**” to many including himself—**Dr Romeo Quijano**. “**..He is a man who is willing to go to prison for his conviction in protecting human health and the environment from chemical harm**”, noted Dr Suwit. Reminding the plenary of the inspirational leadership and self sacrifice of President Nelson Mandela, who suffered years of incarceration for his struggle for justice, Dr Suwit publicly recognised and commended Dr Quijano for his courageous and unceasing conviction for chemical safety and his service for the public good.

During the session on the Future of the IFCS, the outcomes from the earlier Regional meetings were presented with Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific, Central and Eastern Europe, and Africa supporting continuation of then IFCS. Dissenting views were expressed by the U.S., and Japan. **PAN International** made an intervention via Henry Diouf of PAN Africa, who noted that, “**The IFCS offers a unique opportunity for addressing new and emerging areas of concern in chemical safety in a rapidly changing world through the collaborative work between technical people of the governments with other stakeholders, especially the academia, civil society and industry. The working groups set-up by the IFCS are a cost-effective mechanism to deal with such issues in a timely fashion. The IFCS provides an open, inclusive forum for all the stakeholders including governments to address vitally important topics of global concern without many political and bureaucratic constraints. In conclusion we strongly assert that IFCS is not a duplication of work of the ICCM but a cost effective complimentary opportunity for seizing the emerging issues and working jointly with technical interventions, grassroots participation and political commitment towards meeting our common goal of a Toxics Free Future**”.

During the Session on Sound Management of Chemicals and Poverty Reduction, **Sarojeni Rengam PAN AP Executive Director** presented the NGO (public interest) perspective. Referring to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) goals, she noted that while admirable and their vision clear, “**the approach however is still missing the involvement of a key player—namely the poor, their organisations and their movements. It is not enough that the poor are seen as beneficiaries, but more importantly they should be key players involved in policy formulation and in the implementation of strategies for poverty reduction, including achieving the MDGs. It is crucial that local institutions and processes are set up to ensure that the poor and their organisations participate in the whole process at all levels and their visions, aspirations and their solutions taken seriously**”. She advocated reforms

which included not only land rights to the landless, but also the necessary support to ensure their food and economic security. ***“With right over the land, the peasants will have the right to make decisions on how the land is used, the types of crops, the kind of agriculture that they would choose including sustainable use of land and sustainable agriculture. For the majority of peasants, their lives and their livelihoods are tied to the land. Without control over land, women and men peasants cannot sustainably and efficiently use the land and its resources. They cannot invest in improving the soil, plan the crops that they will grow, and make long-term plans to improve their economic situation. Their access to credit is also limited due to lack of collateral in the form of property or other assets,”*** she stated. ***“Agrarian reform that has been taken up successful in some countries shows that with rights to land ensured, peasants have been able to have livelihood security. Recent research from FAO shows that countries that have equitable, efficient land tenure systems and that have been in the forefront of ensuring property rights for both men and women, have developed faster to achieve higher levels of food security, health and welfare”.*** Making the links between pesticides and poverty she outlined the pervasive and persistent pesticides problems that continue to plague rural communities, she elaborated, ***“Governments in developing countries lack the resources to monitor the impact of these facilities on human health and the environment. Neither do they have the resources or sometimes the capacity to undertake systematic monitoring of pesticides and even to enforce regulations. Health monitoring is very sporadic and almost non existent in least developed countries let alone monitoring of soil, water or food residues is absent or limited. Even when a government takes the action to ban some of these pesticides, they are pressured to continue their use because of economic considerations. The health of workers and peasant farmers are often ignored in the pursuit of national growth and development.”*** She outlined various strategies to reduce pesticides in relation to poverty reduction, and advocated that the major component of poverty reduction should focus on the implementation of alternatives to pesticides, especially ecological agriculture.



Day two of the IFCS Proceedings began with the Session on Applying Precaution in the Context of Chemical Safety. Presenting the principles behind the Community Pesticide Action Monitoring, or CPAM, a programme developed by Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific, **Dr Romeo Quijano** (left) explained how this was a process, ***“to document and create awareness of the impacts of pesticides on human health and the environment. It is based on participatory action research, providing tools for observation and reporting, and it encourages community organising, education and empowerment for positive change. Through self-surveillance, surveys, observations and documentation, communities, agricultural workers, farmers and rural women have been able to take action for change. This includes reducing***

the use of pesticides, adopting ecological agricultural practices, and pressuring governments for the implementation of better pesticide regulations and international conventions relevant to pesticides". Explaining how the principle of precaution is applied in using the CPAM approach, Dr Quijano noted that, **"CPAM approach challenges the dominant forces in the scientific community and regulatory agencies that impose an evaluation system (risk assessment paradigm) that relies heavily on numerical data and on the 'smoking gun' type of evidence of harm that presumes the chemical to be innocuous until proven otherwise. The CPAM relies instead on the collective wisdom of the community in determining whether or not the chemicals they would be exposed to (or are already exposed to without their consent) pose hazards to their health and their environment. They do this through their own system of observation and evaluation of risks developed mainly through the CPAM model"**. He then shared case studies and visual documentation of the CPAM process as undertaken in Malaysia (which highlighted the hazards of paraquat), Kerala, India (which revealed the horrendous effects of endosulfan), and the impacts of aerial spraying and the communities activities in Khamukaan, the Philippines. Concluding his presentation he asserted how **"The case studies of alternatives provide proof that toxic chemicals are not necessary in producing food for communities and it is not necessary to accept 'allowable levels' of exposure to agrochemicals. This is, in fact, the ultimate application of the precautionary principle at the farmers level."** In CPAM, **"applying the precautionary principle, the burden of proof of safety is put squarely on the proponents of pesticide use, requiring them to clearly demonstrate the relative safety of the pesticide, especially to vulnerable groups, showing there is real need for it, thoroughly taking into account various externalities, plausible exposure scenarios, conditions of use, and alternatives, and presenting convincing evidence that benefits far outweigh the risks"**.

During the discussion session that followed, which discussed the tools and application of precaution, Dr. Elsa Nivia, Coordinator of PAN Latin America, Colombia, (right) made an intervention on behalf of PAN International. After sharing various concerns on the realities of pesticides use, she stated, **"PAN International demands the application of the precautionary principle in national and international pesticide**



regulatory mechanisms, including: early preventative action be taken to eliminate harmful pesticides including those that are persistent, accumulative or highly toxic such as WHO Class Ia and Ib and those that cause or are suspected to cause chronic health effects including cancer, reproductive problems, birth defects,

developmental and behavioural impacts, and effects on the immune, endocrine and neurological systems; substitution of harmful pesticides with less harmful alternatives, including agro-ecological methods, and holistic approaches to control pests, weeds, and diseases; regulation on the basis of the most vulnerable groups affected, for example pregnant women, the unborn foetus and the newly-born child; a full data set including long-term effects before pesticides are released into the environment; recognition of the experiences of workers and communities with regard to adverse effects of pesticides; the right of those using or exposed to pesticides to know what it is they are exposed to, and the hazardous properties of the pesticide; the right of popular participation in decision-making regarding pesticide regulation.”



The days highlight was the action by NGOs delegates from various organisations who gathered on the steps of the Budapest Congress and World Trade Centre, venue of the 5th Inter-governmental Forum on Chemical Safety (IFCS), to protest the new promotion of DDT that is the centerpiece of the World Health Organisation's 'Roll Back Malaria Campaign'. Opening of the Press Conference Sarojeni Rengam, Executive Director of the Pesticide Action Network (PAN)

Asia and the Pacific, (left) stated. **“We are gathered here to protest the WHO statement promoting the use of DDT for malaria control.”** Alluding to the arm bands and placards with letters spelling out the question, **‘Why DDT?’**, she introduced various speakers including Dr. Paul Saoko, MD, Executive Director of the Kenya based Physicians for Social Responsibility, who was scathing in his assessment of the new head of the WHO's global malaria program, Dr. Arata Kochi. He commented, **“We take great exception to the announcement by the WHO's head of Malaria Control, to the extent that DDT is safe for humans!** Also present at the Press Conference and protest action was Dr Romeo Quijano, MD, President of PAN Philippines. Describing WHO's recent statement giving DDT a 'clean bill of health' and making it the focus of its Malaria Campaign as **“deplorable”**, Dr Quijano took the WHO to task asserting, **“It practically dismisses the overwhelming evidence accumulated over the years by various scientific bodies, including WHO sponsored technical groups.”** Mr Jayakumar Chelaton, Director of THANAL in India, spoke on behalf of the community of Eloor which has the 'privilege' of hosting one of the two DDT plants in the world and shared their message to the WHO: **“Their demands are very simple—they are asking WHO to take back the gift and clean up the place, including the peoples' blood!”**

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And the **Earth Negotiations Bulletin:** <http://www.iisd.ca/chemical/ifcs5/>