

WHY DDT?

WHO's campaign promoting DDT greeted with condemnation at the IFCS

By Jennifer Mourin, PAN AP

Budapest/Sept 26 -- NGOs delegates from various organisations 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, stated. ***"We are gathered here to protest the WHO statement promoting the use of DDT for malaria control."*** Joining the protestors carrying placards with letters spelling out the question, 'Why DDT?', Sarojeni added, ***"DDT is harmful to humans and the environment! DDT is associated with increasing risks of breast cancer, neurological effects, reproductive disorders and many other health effects. It is totally irresponsible and unacceptable for the WHO to be promoting DDT for malaria control". "This has serious implications on the health of children, women and communities!"*** she concluded.



Representatives of Pesticide Action Network(PAN) International, the International POPs Elimination Network (IPEN), the International Society of Doctors for the Environment gathered to the protest the WHO and called for a new commitment to more effective malaria solutions. Photo: PAN AP

Dr. Paul Saoke, MD, Executive Director of the Kenya based Physicians for Social Responsibility, was scathing in his assessment of the new head of the WHO's global malaria program, Dr. Arata Kochi. ***"We take great exception to the announcement by the WHO's head of Malaria Control, to the extent that DDT is safe for humans! We also take exception to the way the policy was promulgated. It is not the traditional custom of WHO to announce policies through press releases, and also the fact that the statement was released from Washington DC and not Geneva leaves a lot to be desired"*** asserted Dr Saoke. ***"...and you can tell the reasons are very clear, firstly Dr Arata Kochi was avoiding the scrutiny of the WHO headquarters—because his style of leadership has alienated the bulk of the staff he works with, and especially the scientists who are supposed to provide guidance in terms of policy implementation"***. Roughly half of the 'Roll Back Malaria' staff have reportedly resigned since Kochi took over leadership of the program. One of WHO's chief malaria experts, Dr. Allan Schapira, resigned abruptly prior to the announcement promoting DDT use.

“Secondly, Dr Arata Kochi was flanked by a right wing senator in the U.S., and he actually heads the Presidential Malaria Initiative. All these facts tied together point in one direction—that the WHO is becoming politicised by U.S. right-wing policies,” elaborated Dr Saoke.

One other major issue Dr Saoke raised was that, **“the timing of the WHO Statement is coincidental to a recent study showing that DDT has serious neurological problems in children. And just before the release, we understand that there was a meeting at WHO where the study was released showing these neurological impairments in children”**, which he noted was attended by more than 40 staff at WHO. **“We see this statement as a way for WHO to forestall the news of the damaging effects of DDT,”** he added.

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”**. A noted toxicologist, Dr Quijano strongly challenged the basis of the global health organisation’s decision, noting that, **“It completely ignores the devastating community experiences all over the world showing that DDT, in all stages of its persistence, causes incalculable damage to health and the environment. With this statement, the WHO contravenes the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, which clearly stipulated the phase-out of DDT.”** Citing possible vested interests behind WHO’s actions, he added **“We believe that this unfortunate development is the result of corporate and political lobbying which attempts to undermine international agreements on chemical safety and puts vested interests over the protection of health and the environment”**. In his closing salvo, he asserted his condemnation, **“WHO has become a corporate instrument in the ‘triumph of greed over health’”!**



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!”
Photo: PAN AP

Representatives of the PAN International regional centres, the International POPs Elimination Network (IPEN), the International Society of Doctors for the Environment, who gathered for the protest action called for a new commitment to more effective malaria solutions, and called for an investigation into WHO’s controversial press statement, which has led to dissension and resignations within the agency.

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. **“It was given to us in the 1950’s as a gift from WHO to help in DDT production and malaria control. But now we are the in midst of strange problems, I was in the community last year, when I first visited the area. When I got up in the morning to brush my teeth, I took water from the well and it was full of DDT! I could not use the water since I was new to the place. When I spoke to the local community they said they had gotten so used to it so they don’t smell or taste DDT now because for the**

last 50 years they have been exposed to DDT at such a high scale!”

THANAL has undertaken sampling in the last two years of the soil, water, and about 17 food items the community consumes, all of which contain high levels of DDT which are way beyond the permissible levels in developed countries. ***“In 1999 Eloor was declared a global toxic hotspot. And on September 17th this year the local communities gathered for a Conference declaring their rights to live”,*** Chelaton told the crowd. ***“Their demands are very simple—they are asking WHO to take back the gift and clean up the place, where from the water, to land, to food all is contaminated”.*** Chelaton also recounted a recent BBC study showing DDT contamination in the blood of the mothers living there, ***“Their demands are very clear – take back the gift and clean up the place, including the peoples’ blood!”***

Decades of scientific evidence counter the claims of the DDT promoters that its use for malaria control is harmless. Human reproductive disorders associated with DDT are well documented, including undescended testes and poor sperm quality, premature delivery and reduced infant birth weights and reduced breastmilk production. One recent study found clear neurological effects—including developmental delays—among babies and toddlers exposed to DDT in the womb. Researchers in Mexico and South Africa found elevated levels of DDT in the blood of people living where DDT was used to control malaria, and breastfed children in those areas received more DDT than the amount considered “safe” by WHO and FAO. Studies have also linked exposure to increased risk of breast cancer, and the International Agency for Research on Cancer lists DDT as a possible human carcinogen.

WHO’s September 15th press statement described a “new” approach to malaria control with DDT at the centerpiece of an aggressive effort to eradicate the disease. Sources inside the agency, however, report that there has been no reassessment of DDT risk and no official revision of WHO’s policy, which already allowed minimal use of DDT in accordance with the global Stockholm Convention.

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