

Stop unethical advertising of paraquat in Thailand!

Syngenta taken to task over violation of International Code of Conduct on marketing of toxic herbicide in complaint to UN FAO

July 28 (Penang/Malaysia)—The Pesticide Action Network (PAN) Asia and the Pacific has sent a strongly worded letter to the Director General of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, on Syngenta's advertisement drive for its new formulation of paraquat, which contravenes the FAO International Code of Conduct on the Distribution and Use of Pesticides (FAO Code)¹. Ironically, the company supports the Code.

The advertisement is part of Syngenta's 2004 marketing activity in Thailand to promote the new formulation paraquat, marketed under the trade name Gramoxone Gold Cap.² Syngenta has couched the promotion of Gramoxone Gold Cap in the form of a lucky drive competition, where not only Gramoxone jackets and t-shirts, but motorcycles and a truck can be won. Additionally, the advert states that every purchase of Gramoxone will contribute to 'Syngenta's Fund for New Generation Farmers' to support safe food, which constitutes the fourth prize in the competition.

"We are appalled at Syngenta's advertisement drive for Gramoxone in Thailand, and are deeply concerned that it violates the FAO Code, in particular Article 11 which oversees various aspects on advertising", states PAN AP Executive Director, Sarojeni V. Rengam, referring to PAN AP's letter to FAO Director General, Jacques Diouf. *"We are very concerned that this advertisement is part of a 'hard-sell' by the company, and could be a form of dumping of the product into Thailand, in reaction to the ban and phase out of paraquat imposed by the government in neighbouring Malaysia",* she notes, referring to the ground breaking decision by Malaysian authorities in August 2002, to end paraquat use and distribution in Malaysia.³

Groups in Europe, including PAN UK, PAN Germany, and the Swiss NGO Berne Declaration, have supported the letter from PAN AP. *"The revised Code of Conduct was a recognition by governments, industry and public interest groups of the need for greater efforts to combat pesticide hazards in developing countries, and it is disappointing that the important commitment on advertising is being disregarded,"* said Barbara Dinham, Director of PAN UK.

PAN AP and the European groups have noted several violations of the FAO Code within Article 11.

Article 11.2.18 states that *"advertisements and promotional activities should not include inappropriate incentives or gifts to encourage the purchase of pesticides"*. A competition of this nature, which offers prizes like motorcycles and a truck as incentives or gifts to encourage the purchase of pesticides, is inappropriate, particularly in a country like Thailand where poor farmers earn an average of 2,500 Baht (US \$60)⁴ a month. The PAN AP letter argues that, *"A motorcycle and a truck would be considered expensive luxury items that poorer farmers could not afford to readily purchase on this average yearly income—and would therefore be very attractive prizes to try to win"*.

The advertisement could contravene other elements of Article 11 of the FAO Code of Conduct on advertising, by implying the product is safe. It does not draw attention to warning phrases and symbols, or encourage users to read the label.⁵

For François Meienberg of the Berne Declaration, the Syngenta Campaign for paraquat in Thailand shows three different aspects: *"First: It does not seem possible to sell paraquat without inappropriate incentives, therefore the product is perhaps not as good as Syngenta always claims. Second: Syngenta has not taken its responsibilities seriously. It is not enough to adopt a code. It has to be implemented. Third: Corporate Social Responsibility is not something to be put in a booklet for the Annual General Meeting, but to make business accordingly—for the whole year, and worldwide!"*

Michael Pragnell, President of CropLife International⁶ and CEO of Syngenta, has been quoted saying that: "The adoption of this new Code by the member companies of CropLife International demonstrates the industry's commitment to take its responsibilities seriously, reflecting its crucial role in the sustainable development of agriculture."⁷ In its "Guide for Industry on the Implementation of the FAO Code of Conduct on the Distribution and Use of Pesticides", CropLife International has, "indicated to FAO the willingness of its members to abide by the provisions of the new revised version. Just as with the original Code, it is important that the spirit as well as the letter of the revised Code be observed. Management has a clear responsibility to initiate appropriate actions to ensure that the Code is being followed within its own company."

Syngenta is due to report its half-year results on July 29, 2004. Rengam has called on the company to live up to its claim of supporting the FAO Code, which it contradicts in its marketing activities in Thailand. *"We strongly believe that this advertisement and promotion drive by Syngenta go against the letter and spirit of the Code, and misrepresent the hazards of the herbicide paraquat to both farmers and consumers in Thailand"* asserts Rengam in her letter to FAO.

The groups have collectively urged Syngenta to stop the paraquat advertising campaign in Thailand immediately.

Paraquat is one of the most dangerous and controversial herbicides in the world. Internationally, and especially in the South, workers and farmers who are regularly exposed to paraquat experience serious problems with their health. Paraquat is highly acutely toxic. It is a known poison without an antidote.⁸

Acute poisoning and chemical burns to agricultural workers and small-scale farmers are a frequent occurrence. The greatest risk to workers of fatal and serious accidents is during mixing and loading of paraquat. A number of deaths have been recorded from contact with the spray solution. Conditions of use in many developing countries mean it is difficult to follow label instructions and recommendations for use. Recent evidence is indicating new concerns with chronic effects, such as a possible link to Parkinson's Disease.

Concerns over pesticide use in Thailand have been noted in recent times. According to the IPM DANIDA project report of December 2003, the use of pesticides in Thailand has increased enormously in the past twenty years. According to the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, pesticides are "a highly lucrative business" worth 9,116 million Baht (US \$225 million) per year. Foreign companies such as Bayer, Monsanto, Syngenta and Dow hold the largest share of the market. According to the report, some of the pesticides that these companies are selling in Thailand are banned in other countries because of the dangers to human health. The report includes case studies of the negative health impacts of pesticides, including the death of a farmer who had extensively sprayed a mixture of paraquat and glyphosate while hired to spray herbicides in the rubber plantations.⁹

"Due to these concerns regarding exposure to paraquat and its adverse health impacts on humans, we wish to register our protest against the advertisement by Syngenta promoting its product paraquat, Gramoxone, in a manner that may widely mislead the citizens of Thailand" concludes Rengam in her letter to the FAO.

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Notes to Editors and Journalists:

1. The FAO International Code of Conduct on the Distribution and Use of Pesticides was initiated in 1985, followed by the London Guidelines for the Exchange and Use of Pesticides in 1987—both of which PAN international contributed to and participated in actively. PAN was actively involved in the revisions to the Code, which was adopted in November 2002. See Revised FAO Code of Conduct at: http://www.fao.org/WAICENT/FAOINFO/AGRICULT/AGP/AGPP/Pesticid/Code/PM_Code.htm

2. See: http://www.syngenta.co.th/pop_mar.asp

3. See PAN AP Website for more on the ban, and the campaign by PAN AP and local partners to uphold it (<http://www.panap.net/highlightsA.cfm?id=20&hilitid=HILITE20> and <http://www.panap.net/campaigns1.cfm?id=4&alertid=Campaign01>).

4. Agriculture: Breaking the Trap of Poverty, Bangkok Post: Mid Year Economic Review 2004; accessed on July 26, 2004. See: <http://www.bangkokpost.net/midyear2004/agriculture01.html>

5. Details to other possible contravention's of the FAO Code:

Article 11.2.8 states that "claims as to safety, including statements such as "safe", "non-poisonous", "harmless", "non-toxic" or "compatible with IPM", are not made without a qualifying phrase such as "when used as directed". Although the advertisement does not overtly state or claim that Gramoxone is safe, it does imply that it is trusted by farmers, and contributes to safe food. Specifically, the company has stated that for the 4th prize, "Every bottle of Gramoxone contributes to the Syngenta Fund for New Generation Farmers to support safe food."

Article 11.2.13 states that the Pesticides industry should ensure that "advertising or promotional material draws attention to the appropriate warning phrases and symbols as laid down in FAO labelling guidelines (3)". Although part of the label indicates the Thai registration status "registered as dangerous material No 2045/2544", we are concerned that the whole tone of the advertisement implies there is no need for concern with warning phrases or symbols.

Article 11.2.17 states that the pesticides industry should ensure that "advertisements encourage purchasers and users to read the label carefully, or have the label read to them if they cannot read." The advertisement does not encourage users to read the label.

6. CropLife International is the global federation representing the agrochemical and life-science industry, and supports a network of regional and national associations in 87 countries. It is led by companies such as BASF, Bayer CropScience, Dow AgroSciences, DuPont, FMC, Monsanto, Sumitomo and Syngenta.

7. CropLife Press Release, Brussels, 3 March 2004, "Plant Science Industry supports new FAO Code of Conduct to Further Improve Responsible Use of Crop Protection Products - CropLife International presents revised Guide for Industry on Implementation of the Code". <http://www.croplife.org/library/attachments/01aebf98-926e-49f5-b6cd-388f206c788f/4/03.%20Press%20Release%20-%20FAO%20code%203%20March%202004.pdf>

8. Paraquat is on PAN's Dirty Dozen list, launched in 1982. It had been the subject of campaign to ban it in countries like Malaysia for more than 20 years! See PAN AP website for the PAN International Position paper on paraquat, PAN Joint Press Release, and a list of PAN international generated information and resources on paraquat, (<http://www.panap.net>). And PAN AP's Monograph on paraquat (<http://www.panap.net/docs/monos/paraquatSep03.pdf>).

9. The report, "Did you take your poison today?", was written, edited, designed and produced by the IPM DANIDA project. The project "Strengthening Farmers' IPM in Pesticide Intensive Areas" (or IPM DANIDA) is a cooperation between the governments of Thailand and Denmark. The overall objective of the project is to promote good agricultural practices in order to improve the environment and the safety of farmers and to protect consumers from the hazardous uses of pesticides. More information on the report can be found at <http://www.ipmthailand.org>. The whole report could be downloaded at: [http://www.ipmthailand.org/documents/Your_poison_today_\(English\).pdf](http://www.ipmthailand.org/documents/Your_poison_today_(English).pdf)