

What has Monsanto been doing in Vietnam?

Monsanto, one of the main suppliers of herbicide and Agent Orange to the US military during the Vietnam War has officially come back since 2010. At present, this company is providing genetically modified (GM) seeds and herbicide to Vietnamese farmers.



A strike against Monsanto in Chile in 2015. Photo by AFP

Supplying herbicide and Agent Orange in the Vietnam War

On April 18, an International Tribunal publicly presented their recommendations on accusation against Monsanto, an US-based trans-national company, of crimes against human rights and ecology.

Concerning Monsanto's involvement in supplying Agent Orange to the US military during the Vietnam War and allegations of ecological damage, the International Tribunal, based on provided evidences, could not make conclusions on Monsanto's possibility to complicity in committing war crimes.

The court, however, acknowledged that Monsanto did supply materials to the US army in the Vietnam War with awareness that their products would be used in this country and affect human health and environment. The court assumed that based on the Rome principles of the International Criminal Court, Monsanto's activities in Vietnam could be considered as environmental damage.

The concept of "ecocide" is defined as "causing serious harm or destruction of the environment, genetically modifying on a large scale and in the long run species or ecosystems that a community of people is dependent on". The court held that Monsanto's

actions could constitute ecological crimes since it caused big and long-lasting damage to biodiversity and ecosystems, affecting human life and health.

It was estimated that from 1962 - 1973, there was approx. 75.8 million liters of herbicide poured over an area of 2.6 million ha in Vietnam by the US Army. This type of toxicity has seriously affected health of not only the Vietnamese people but also American soldiers, and those from other countries as well.

Monsanto is among 37 main chemical companies sued by Vietnam Agent Orange victims in the United States from 2004 - 2009 to claim compensation for damage.

Returning to Vietnam with GM seeds

Monsanto's presence in Vietnam since 1995 was under a representative office of Monsanto Thailand. In August 2010, Monsanto officially set up its own branch in Vietnam under the name of Dekalb Vietnam Co. Ltd., which is doing business on corn and vegetable varieties of biotechnological products.

After more than 40 years of operation, in October 2014 Monsanto finally came back to Vietnam with their pledge of VND 1.5 billion of scholarships for outstanding students studying breeding and agricultural biotechnology at the Vietnam National University of Agriculture.

One month later, the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment granted Biosafety Certificates for two GM herbicide-resistant corn varieties to Dekalb Vietnam Co. Ltd. and Syngenta Vietnam Co. Ltd., bringing the total of GM corn varieties granted Biosafety Certificates for these two companies up to 3.

Earlier, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) also recognized 4 GM corn varieties of Syngenta Vietnam and Dekalb Vietnam as eligible for use as food and feed. At that point, the process of introducing GM crops to Vietnam has basically been completed.

Almost one year later, Monsanto was approved to commercialize its two GM corn varieties for feed. Together with Syngenta Vietnam, MARD had also certified Dekalb Company of Monsanto US to popularize sales of GM corn varieties in Vietnam.

Until now, there are 11 big groups and companies doing GM crops business all over the world with the total of 329 varieties, a half of which comes from Monsanto and Syngenta. If the joint ventures between them are included, the number may be much bigger.

Vietnam has officially commercialized planting of GMO crops by introducing GM pest-resistant corns since 2015. It is estimated that by 2020, the GM crops area will remarkably increase, accounting for 30 – 50 percentage. At present, Vietnam imports millions ton of corn, soybean for animal production, most of them are GM varieties.

The decisions of the authorities has been made when the effects of GM crops on human health and environment remain endlessly controversial in the world, and many countries have already said “No” to GM crops and GM food.

Selling herbicide and GM products

On Monsanto's website, it is said that the company is committed to continuing their investment, research and development of solutions that “help feed the increasing world population”. Accordingly, Monsanto has produced a variety of seeds of vegetables, fruits and main crops such as corn, soybean and cotton in order to “help farmers achieve fruitful crops and use natural resources more effectively”.

By the end of 2015, Dekalb Vietnam Co. Ltd. had held an introduction event in Hanoi for marketing its GM technology agricultural products, including its two product lines Dekalb Genuity corn and Maxer herbicide. Accordingly, Agro-pharmaceutical Company HAI was selected to be an official distributor for Maxer 660SC by Dekalb Vietnam.

During the most recent workshop held in March, a Monsanto representative affirmed: "Dekalb Vietnam Co. Ltd. has always been with the farmers over the past 20 years. Monsanto has invested more than one million US Dollar for researches in order to develop varieties suitable to the local climate and cultivation characteristics in Vietnam, and to help farmers improve their productivity".

"In 2015 Monsanto has officially transferred a technology to the Vietnamese farmers, which helps them increase their productivity and minimize food loss during cultivation, which is known as "pest-resistant and herbicide-resistant corn" - he also added.

Practically, there are always two opposing views on GM crops and food. The pro-GMO view keeps insisting that this kind of food is safe for human health and environment, while the anti-GMO views are much concerned about unexpected effects of GM food on consumer's health, and about the economic loss as well.

In the verdict of the International Monsanto Tribunal on April 18, it is also said that Monsanto has affected individual and community food supply, damaged soil, water and environment, and seriously reduced the community's food self-sufficiency.

Meanwhile, the spreading of GM herbicide-resistant seeds has threatened agriculture and forestry, violating the human right to access food.

Furthermore, the use of dangerous substances, such as polychlorinated biphenyl, herbicide and GMO has infringed the community right to health, causing serious physio-psychological health to many people...

Earlier, the book titled "Modified genes - the distorted truth" written by the US lawyer Steven Drucker has drawn public attention by accusing prestigious scientific institutions of hiding health warnings on GMO, and thus allowing GM food to be commercialized since 1992. Drucker also provided evidence of cases of death and disease caused by GM food.

From the economic perspective, the international media used to address the relationship between GM seeds and increasing farmer suicide in India. Earlier, the Government of India was confident about the benefits given by GM food, and ignored its risks. As a result, many farmers living on the farm have fallen into "desperation" as GMO seedlings produced by GM seeds haven't brought out as much productivity as expected in many parts of India. Therefore, they become more dependent on high-priced seeds supplied by multi-national companies, and finally falling into debt.

In case of Vietnam, with the promulgation of the new decision on GMO, Vietnam has become the 29th country in the world applying GM crops. Experts, however, believe that there will be big concerns over the farmer's dependence on seeds monopolized by multi-national companies like what is happening in India.

By Phuong Dung

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