

*Opinion Editorial by Dr. Vandana Shiva*

## "SET FARMERS FREE FROM THE BINDS OF 'FREE TRADE.'"

The Bush Administration is convening a ministerial-level Conference on Agricultural Science and Technology in Sacramento, California, June 23-25. The conference is being used as a forum to advance the free trade industrial agriculture model supported by the U.S. government and multinational agribusiness. The Administration needs the agriculture ministers in Sacramento to accept this agenda in order to help ensure its success at the upcoming World Trade Organization (WTO) ministerial in September in Cancun, Mexico. The WTO's treatment of agriculture poses one of the greatest potential stumbling blocks to success at the WTO ministerial and the reason is clear: what is good for multinational agribusiness has proven to be bad for the majority of the world's farmers, consumers and citizens.

Agriculture is still the primary source of livelihood for three-quarters of humanity, and is as much a cultural activity as an economic one. The WTO's Agreement on Agriculture (AOA) imposes an unequal system of global competition on the domestic farm sector, undermining the viability of small farms that are unable to compete with multinational giants and their subsidized cheaper imports. As a result, it is driving millions of small farmers off the land and ensuring that a handful of multinational corporations control agriculture. The AOA is designed to preserve and enhance northern corporate subsidies while withdrawing support to farmers and rural communities.

For example, the WTO requires that nations open their markets to imports from heavily subsidized northern agriculture markets. For example, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, Africa's food import bill almost doubled between 1995 to 2000. For the Far East, the import bill increased by approximately \$4.1 billion, for the Near East, by as much as \$27 billion. These obligations have proven to be crippling for the economies of the developing world. The impact on small domestic farmers has been worse. Families that were once self-sufficient are forced off of their land into over-crowded cities where they become landless, cashless and hungry.

In addition to the AOA, the WTO's "free trade" policies threaten farmers through the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) agreement. This agreement sets enforceable global rules on patents, copyrights, and trademarks, which extend to living resources so that genes, cells, seeds, plants, and animals can now be patented and "owned" as intellectual property. For example, TRIPs gives the patent holder a monopolistic right to prevent others from making, using, or selling seeds. Seed saving by farmers has now been redefined from a sacred duty to a criminal offence of stealing "property." As a result, developing countries are being forced to reorganize their production and consumption patterns to allow monopolies by a handful of so-called "Life Sciences" corporations. The TRIPs agreement provides living proof that the WTO does not reduce protectionism as its supporters always claim; it merely replaces protections for people and nature with protections for corporations. The TRIPs protects the powerful and punishes the victims.

The protection of domestic agriculture must be recognized as a food security imperative. Trade cannot, and must not, be made the primary objective governing food systems. Such a system places trading interests and global corporations that view food as a source of profits, above a system based on life and livelihoods. Because corporate profits can grow only by destroying livelihoods and self-provisioning systems of seed and food production, globalization of trade in agriculture implies genocide. Putting up tariff barriers to genocide is therefore a moral imperative. This model must be opposed in Sacramento, Cancun and every place it emerges until the alternatives that already exist are allowed to thrive in its place. ✎

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