



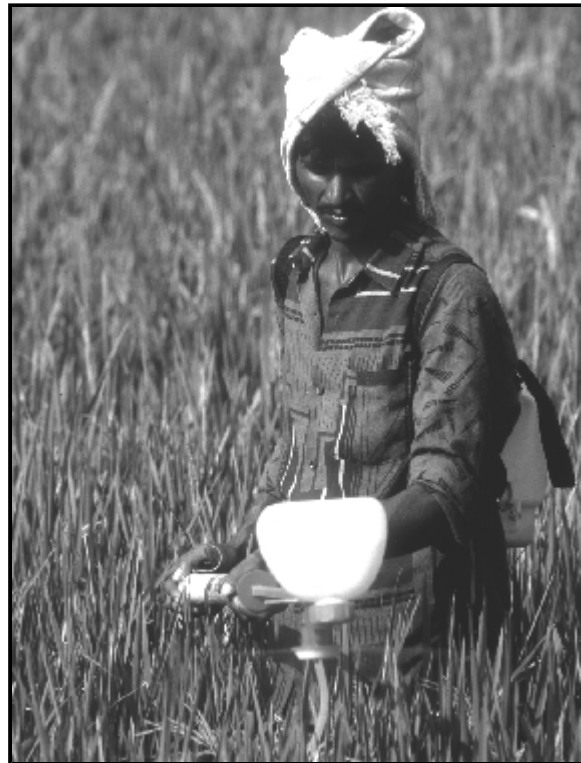
Hazardous pesticides

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In July 2000, sixteen healthy young farmers in Senegal's Kolda region suddenly fell sick and died. All suffered the same symptoms - severe swelling of the face, limbs and abdomen, heart pains and breathing difficulties - and all were dead within a week. A team of government disease and poisoning specialists quickly located the probable cause: two pesticide powders, Granox TBC and Spinox T, which the victims had used to protect newly planted groundnut seeds against fungus and insects.

Eighteen months later, in Geneva, an international panel of experts launched action aimed at alerting governments to the danger. The Interim Chemical Review Committee found Granox TBC and Spinox T to be "severely hazardous" and recommended that both be added to a growing list of agro-chemicals subject to international trade controls. Next year, that recommendation goes for approval to an inter-governmental body responsible for the Rotterdam Convention, a legally binding global agreement that seeks to prevent unwanted imports of dangerous chemicals, particularly in developing countries.

"The Senegal case is a good example of how the Rotterdam Convention is protecting people and the environment", says Bill Murray, of the Convention's FAO/UNEP secretariat. "If the recommendation is approved, Granox and Spinox T will be included in the Convention's Prior Informed Consent [PIC] procedure, along with 27 other chemicals that have already been banned or severely restricted in international trade." Under the PIC procedure, the secretariat provides all participating countries with detailed information on the risks the chemicals pose, allowing them to decide whether to accept future imports. If any country does choose to ban or restrict substances on the PIC list, exporting countries are advised and must immediately inform their exporters, industry and customs departments. "Basically, we are a kind of early warning system on agro-chemicals in trade", says Bill Murray. "The Rotterdam Convention's approach is to stop problems with hazardous chemicals before they start..."



► How big is global trade in these chemicals?

"At present, it is difficult to say. An estimated one to two million different chemical preparations are on sale around the world today. After the automotive sector, the chemicals industry is the world's biggest manufacturer, with annual sales of US\$1.6 trillion. International trade accounts for US\$480,000 million in sales. But due to poor reporting and monitoring, it is very hard to estimate what part of that international trade is in chemicals hazardous to humans and the environment."

► How do you define "hazardous"?

"For the convention, a 'severely hazardous pesticide formulation' is one that produces severe health or environmental effects observable within a short period of time after single or multiple exposure, under conditions of use. In practice, those effects include death, disability and birth defects, and the formulations include chemicals such as DDT, PCBs and mercury compounds. It was deep concern

over the global traffic in such chemicals that has spurred international acceptance of the Rotterdam Convention."

► **How does the Rotterdam Convention address the problem?**

"The convention covers the export and import of hazardous chemicals and, by implication, their use and regulation. Initially it was inspired by a North-South dilemma - wealthier countries that had banned certain life-threatening chemicals continued to sell them abroad. However, in recent years South-South trade has increased between newly emerging economies, where chemicals production is increasing, and poorer countries. In both instances, less-advantaged importing countries often lack the means to manage hazardous chemicals throughout their life cycle, from importation through use and safe disposal."

► **In what ways are these countries unprepared for potentially hazardous chemicals?**

"First, regulatory and crisis infrastructure may be inadequate - for example, most African countries do not have poison control centres. Those using the chemicals may lack the knowledge, equipment and ability to use the products safely, which was the case in Senegal. Many countries also face the problem of huge quantities of unused chemicals, dumped illegally or forgotten in unsafe storage areas, which can contaminate soil, water and air. Effective disposal systems for hazardous chemicals rarely exist."

► **How does the PIC procedure work?**

"The procedure is a means for formally obtaining and disseminating the decisions of importing countries on whether they wish to receive future shipments of a certain chemical, and for ensuring that exporters comply with those decisions. So the aim is to create a shared responsibility between exporting and importing countries. It empowers poorer nations to make

their own decisions by providing them with information on other countries' experiences and on any existing decisions to ban or severely restrict certain toxic chemicals. The Convention also encourages nations to help each other build capacity to manage chemicals throughout their life cycle."

► **What chemicals are covered presently by the Convention?**

"For now, it covers 27 substances, most of them pesticides. In addition to Granox TBC and Spinox T, our chemical review committee has recommended inclusion of monocrotophos, an insecticide that is applied in many developing countries, particularly in Asia, to control insects and spider mites, an insecticide, weedkiller and fungicide called DNOC that is highly toxic to humans, and all forms of asbestos. We anticipate that many more chemicals will be added as more governments learn to use the Convention."

► **What is the Convention's legal status?**

"The Convention text was agreed by governments in Rotterdam in September 1998. It requires 50 ratifications before it will enter into force, and so far 20 governments have done so. In the interim period, prior to its entry into force, the Convention is voluntary and is operated as the 'Interim PIC Procedure'. Despite its voluntary status, adherence is widespread - about 160 governments have already demonstrated their commitment by designating national authorities responsible for implementing the Interim PIC Procedure."