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NEWS RELEASE

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Who's in Charge of Agent Green in Asia?

While the UN Drugs Program maintains a press blackout on the controversial research, the UN's "technical" advisor backpedals on safety and takes to the air with a political message.

Hamburg and Austin, 5 June 2001 - The United Nations Drugs Program (UNDCP) may have lost control of a controversial project to develop an opium poppy-killing fungus in Asia, according to the Sunshine Project, an international non-profit organization dedicated to stopping biological weapons. The fungus project, and its counterpart in the Americas – research to develop a fungus to kill coca – have been dubbed “Agent Green” by opponents, who compare the fungus plan to the herbicide Agent Orange used during the Vietnam War.

The Tashkent, Uzbekistan-based fungus project's primary targets are opium poppy fields in Afghanistan and Burma. The research is nominally directed by the UN Drugs Agency; but the UN involvement lacks a multilateral mandate and is considered a stalking horse for United States interests. The testing phase of the fungus scheduled for completion in July. Recent developments have crumbled the *façade* of UN support, leaving the project's proponents exposed.

Technical Advisor Talks Politics In mid-May, Dr. Michael Greaves, a part-time technical consultant to the Tashkent project, offered an interview with the BBC World Service in which he strayed from scientific issues. Greaves told the BBC that no country will be forced to use the fungus and that it “*has never and will not be genetically manipulated*”. Greaves recently left a position with the research arm of the UK Ministry of Agriculture and was supported by the United States to become scientific advisor to the (aborted) UNDCP fungus project in Colombia.

The scientist's loquacity on the politics of biological warfare on narcotic crops is not paralleled at UNDCP's headquarters in Vienna. UNDCP's press office is maintaining a news blackout on the fungus, taking weeks or months to reply to queries from journalists it considers potentially unfriendly. Former UNDCP employees additionally allege that some high-level UNDCP staff want to shut down the research in Tashkent; but are under intense US pressure to continue.

Greaves' BBC interview raises fundamental questions about control of the project. While UNDCP itself remains silent, why is a part-time technical advisor with close links to the US coming out as the project's political and scientific spokesman?

“Dr. Greaves' right to voice his opinion on scientific aspects is clear; but it raises serious questions about who controls this research when a part-time technical consultant takes to the air with statements that are the responsibility of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs.” says the Sunshine Project's Edward Hammond, *“Dr. Greaves has financial interests in the fungi and has cast his lot with the USA, which wishes to proceed at virtually any cost. But Greaves is speaking in the name of the United Nations. This is an abuse. The Commission on Narcotic Drugs should intervene if UNDCP won't. Failure to act risks further damage to the Commission's reputation and, if the worst happens, co-responsibility for the actions of maverick scientists working in Asia with US money, dangerous crop diseases, and little supervision.”*

The assertion that fungi will not be applied by force is a political question on which Dr. Greaves has been widely contradicted. A recently resigned senior UNDCP official says that the agency plotted last year to have the Afghan government in exile (in Pakistan) “consent” to use the fungus, despite the objections of the Taliban. The US attempted to coerce Colombia into using anti-coca fungus by withholding a \$1.3 billion aid package (a stipulation that was later waived) until Bogotá went along with the idea.

On genetic engineering, UNDCP’s scientist also appears to be dabbling in politics. As early as the mid-1990s, US government scientists conducted genetic engineering experiments on the anti-drug fungus *Fusarium oxysporum*, attempting to isolate and use hyper-virulent genes to create hyper-aggressive types. The chief Uzbek scientist working with Dr. Greaves on the poppy-killing fungus has unequivocally stated that he plans to genetically engineer the anti-opium poppy fungus (*Pleospora papaveracea*) as necessary to increase its effectiveness.

According to the Sunshine Project’s Jan van Aken, Greaves’ claims are *“Like missile makers speaking on behalf of the US Senate on Star Wars appropriations. The decision on GM ultimately is not Dr. Greaves’ to make. US and Asian fungus researchers already have used or say they will use genetic engineering to make extra-lethal fungi. It appears that UNDCP’s scientist is making a hollow political promise to allay concerns about biosafety.”* In December of last year, a global group of 80 non-profit organizations called on UNDCP to halt the program.

But there’s another interpretation, says van Aken, *“Alternatively, Greaves’ statement could be read as a UNDCP scientific opinion that genetic engineering of the pathogens will make them unacceptably dangerous. The potential confusion should be cleared up immediately. If Greaves admits the project is dangerous, then UNDCP Director Pino Arlacchi would be derelict in his duty if he did not immediately stop the research and advise the public he has done so. If Greaves is talking politics, then he has outgrown his job description as a technical consultant.”*

Backpedaling on Safety The most disturbing of Dr. Greaves’ scientific statements is his indication that UNDCP has retreated from the position that the poppy-killing fungus must be specific, killing opium poppy and nothing else. Now, according to Greaves, UNDCP will try to demonstrate that the agent is “adequately specific”. The retreat comes after leaked UNDCP research documents revealed that the fungus not only kills drug-producing plants; but also relatives, including the corn poppy (Flanders poppy) flower.

According to Susana Pimiento of the Sunshine Project, *“This dangerous attitude is consistent with what we know of UNDCP environmental science. The same UNDCP ‘experts’ who got the fungus work rolling in 1990 also concluded that 2, 4-D - a major ingredient of Agent Orange - has ‘low environmental impact’ when used in crop eradication.”* UNDCP’s experts went on to state that tight regulation of man-made mutants of devastating crop pathogens such as *Fusarium* is “retrograde”. UNDCP also continues to support massive use of broad-spectrum herbicides in biodiversity-rich Colombia. *“Now,”* says Pimiento, *“ with full knowledge that Pleospora papaveracea is not specific to opium poppy, UNDCP wants the world to swallow the idea that crop-killing pathogens only need to be ‘adequately specific’.”*

Pimiento concludes, *“UNDCP’s record of environmental judgment is appalling. It long ago abdicated credibility in assessing environmental impacts of chemical and biological crop eradication. With its record plain to see, any UNDCP assertion that the fungus is safe will not be trusted by responsible governments or civil society.”*

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