Syngenta

LONDON, Mar 22 (IPS) - Trouble is cooking over the move by Syngenta International to introduce a genetically modified form of potato.

The new strain has been dubbed the 'terminator' because it puts at risk more than 3,000 naturally grown varieties of potato. Indigenous farmers in Peru, the birthplace of the potato, have pleaded with Syngenta to publicly abandon its patent on 'terminator' technology to control sprouting potatoes. This technology could be used to prevent the sprouting of potatoes unless they are treated with chemicals supplied by the patent owner.

More than 40 indigenous leaders from potato producing communities in the Andean region of Peru came together last weekend in the Sacred Valley in Cusco to sign a strongly-worded letter to the company to protest introduction of the new strain.

The indigenous leaders gathered at a meeting called by the Quechua-Aymara Association for Nature and Sustainable Development in Peru and the International Institute for Environment & Development (IIED) in London. The Quechua-Aymara Association for Nature Conservation and Sustainable Development (ANDES) is governed by a general assembly which is largely composed of indigenous people from Andean villages.

But farmers elsewhere who choose not to go for 'terminator' potatoes are also at risk, he said. "For small-scale farmers living in the Andes where potatoes originate, or for organic potato producers in other parts of the world, the risk is that terminator type potatoes will release small amounts of pollen that can genetically contaminate their non-GMO potatoes."

This would hugely increase corporate control over the global food system. Indigenous people fear that it would destroy the sharing of seeds, a centuries-old tradition, and with it their cultural and social way of life.

"Potatoes are like rice is to The Philippines or Thailand for Peruvian farmers and other small farmers living in the Andes countries like Bolivia, Ecuador and Chile," Pimbert told IPS. "They are a hugely important crop for local and national economies." Potato is also a major crop in countries like The Netherlands, France and Britain. Farmers growing natural varieties can consider a legal challenge to genetically modified and patented potatoes, Pimbert said. "A legal challenge could be contemplated by farming communities that developed the original potato germplasm used and patented by biotech companies -- on the grounds that this is a form of institutionalised theft of their knowledge and innovations."

Similarly, he said, "organic or other farmers in Europe or elsewhere whose potato crops are contaminated by gene flow from the terminator potato can decide to sue the corporation."

Pimbert acknowledged, however, that "the playing field is uneven -- with corporations much better endowed with lawyers and legal expertise and funds than farmers -- and the financial costs of prolonged legal battles so high that many farmers and their organizations would have a tough time winning court cases. This is why it is absolutely vital that the moratorium on terminator is upheld."

As a result of biosafety and other concerns, an international moratorium under the Convention on Biological Diversity has stopped the field testing and commercial use of terminator technology since 2000, the IIED said in a statement. Some governments want to relax the United Nations' biosafety regulation, but the main biotech companies have accepted that public concern and environmental risk is too great to press ahead. Alejandro Argumedo, associate director of the Quechua-Aymara Association for Nature and Sustainable Development, said in a statement: We want the big companies like Syngenta to show corporate social and environmental responsibility. The irresponsible attempt by some governments to bust the moratorium is motivated by power and greed at the expense of people, the environment and poverty reduction. Syngenta could prove that they are on the right side by abandoning their patent on the terminator potato."
The Eighth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (COP8) is taking place in Curitiba, Brazil, from March 20 to 31. (END/2006).

Full text of the letter from indigenous leaders to the Chief Executive of Syngenta International (101 KB)

Consenso sobre las Tecnologías de Restricción de Uso Genético (TRUGs o GURT) considerado en las Reuniones del Grupo para la Posición Nacional en Peru

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**Patents**

*Processes for inhibiting and inducing flower formation in plants - US Patent Application 20040078838 - 2004, April 22nd*

*Production of potato plants with suppressed tuber sprouting by genetic modification to reduce sucrose concentration - European Patent Office DE4213444 - October 28th 1993*

*Tissue Specific Promoter for Gene Expression - European Patent Office WO0023597 - April 27th 2000*

*Genetic method for controlling sprouting - US patent 6,700,039 - March 2nd 2004*