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Mexico, Argentina, and Paraguay Join Global Demonstrations against Roundup-maker Monsanto

by Andrés Gaudín
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On the same day, and marching under the same banner, tens of thousands of people gathered in 428 cities across the globe last month to demonstrate against a single multinational corporation: Monsanto, the world’s leading maker of genetically modified food-crop seeds and also a major producer of agricultural chemicals.

And yet, as far reaching as the May 21 protests were, the media mostly ignored them. In fact, none of the seven major international news agencies bothered to report that in 38 countries, in all different languages, people were taking the US biotech company to task for the impact its products and practices have on food sovereignty, human health, and the environment.

Medardo Ávila Vázquez, an Argentine neonatologist who represents an organization called the Red de Médicos de Pueblos Fumigados (Network of Physicians in Fumigated Towns, RMPF), believes the media silence was no coincidence. “It’s hard to publish [this kind] of information because Monsanto spends enormous amounts of money to buy off the media outlets, quiet critical voices, and pay for bogus research showing that genetically modified crops and glyphosate [an herbicide Monsanto sells under the brand name Roundup] are innocuous,” he said.

The complaints put forth by the protest organizers, with support from dozens of foundations and entities like the RMPF, a network of doctors concerned about the effects of glyphosate spraying in Argentina, aren’t apocalyptic exaggerations; they’re backed by real research, including a study that was published in March 2015 by the World Health Organization (WHO) but went largely unreported in the mainstream media.

The study challenged WHO’s previous conclusions and found that Roundup (glyphosate) is “probably carcinogenic to humans.” The research was carried out by WHO’s specialized cancer agency, the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) in Lyon, France, and presented in the prestigious British medical journal The Lancet Oncology. The report said there is “limited evidence of carcinogenicity in humans for non-Hodgkin lymphoma” but “convincing evidence that glyphosate also can cause cancer in laboratory animals.” The IACR decided, it explained in the report, to classify glyphosate as a Group 2A (probably carcinogenic) rather than Group 2B (possibly carcinogenic) substance.

Interestingly, just five days before the worldwide protests, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in the US published a study that appears to favor Monsanto. Researchers found “no substantiating evidence” that genetically engineered (GE) crops have adverse effects on humans. They did admit, however, that more exhaustive research is needed.

Monsanto’s many critics believe the uncertainty alone warrants a moratorium on the company’s products. The organizers of the march argued, “Considering that what’s at stake here is human life, [governments] should use the precautionary principle to prohibit glyphosate spraying and the production and sale of food grown from genetically modified seeds.”
Poor public profile

The most intense focal points of the “March Against Monsanto,” as the coordinated day of action was called, were in Latin America, from Mexico—where activists “joined in a spirit of celebration, because we’ve managed to keep our corn as healthy as when the colonists first came to these lands,” as Sandra Lazo of the Comida Sana, Tierra Sana (Healthy Food, Healthy Land) campaign explained—to Argentina, the world’s third leading producer of genetically modified soy.

In Paraguay, now the world’s fourth leading GE soy exporter and the top consumer, percentage-wise, of glyphosate, thousands of campesinos (agrarian workers) mobilized on May 21. Like their counterparts in other countries, they called for legislation requiring that products containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs), as GE crops are also known, be labeled as such. Labeling rules already exist in the European Union, Bolivia, Brazil, Uruguay, and Ecuador. The Paraguayan protesters also argued that the widespread cultivation of GMOs undermines food sovereignty because of how much viable farmland is used to produce export crops rather than food for domestic consumption.

“The agribusiness model pushed by Monsanto is annihilating food sovereignty, generating high levels of pollution, and not taking into account its impact on human health. That’s because the central focus [of the model] is profit. It turns food into just another commodity,” said Marielle Palau of the organization Base IS. The civil society group estimates that 92% of Paraguay’s active farmland is used for export commodity crops (basically corn and soy) (NotiSur, May 27, 2016).

Miguel Lo Bianco, a Paraguayan researcher and the director of Ñamoseke Monsanto, meaning “go away Monsanto” in Guarani (a native and official language in Paraguay alongside Spanish), argued during the protests that the multinational “is getting stronger business-wise but losing power with regards to worldwide public opinion.” Two days later, the German pharmaceutical giant Bayer made a bid to buy Monsanto for US$62 billion. The US company rejected the offer as “inadequate” and “insufficient” but seemed particularly put off by comments from Bayer’s CEO, Werner Baumann, who, coincidentally, echoed Lo Bianco’s argument by suggesting Monsanto has a “bad reputation.”

With its takeover bid, Bayer was prepared, it seems, to risk its own reputation, especially in Germany, where there is widespread opposition to GMOs and glyphosate. Currently, the company is well regarded by the German people, who prefer to ignore its past as part of the IG Farben conglomerate (together with BASF, Hoechst, and AGFA) and its complicity with the Nazi regime, a key factor behind its rapid growth during World War II. Like other members of the IG Farben group, Bayer benefited from the use of imprisoned Jews as slave labor. Germans also tend to forget about claims made in the latter part of the 20th century by anti-war groups, which accused Bayer of developing and producing chemical weapons that the US used during the war in Vietnam.

A cancer “epidemic”

One of the other hotspots in the March Against Monsanto, along with Mexico and Paraguay, was Argentina. There, alternative news sources—in stark contrast to the silent major media outlets—played a role by revisiting information presented last November during a gathering organized by the RMPF and the Red Universitaria de Ambiente y Salud, another association of scientists and health workers. Then, as now, doctors and researchers spoke out about the estimated 12 million
people who live in proximity to the country’s 21 million hectares of soy plantations and are exposed, as a result, to about 50 farm chemical sprayings per year—nearly one a week.

“In those areas, one out of every three deaths is caused by cancer,” said the neonatologist Ávila Vázquez. “In some towns the ratio is higher still, to the point that even though it isn’t scientifically correct to say so, one could talk about this as being a real epidemic… The authorities ought to take it upon themselves to bring this information to the cities and to the academic world.”

The doctor went on to cite epidemiological data and “at least 13 reports published by researchers from CONICET” (the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas)—an autonomous institution committed to promoting science and technology—that he said proved glyphosate affects cell structure in humans and other animals.

Research has shown, Vázquez added, that the rate of death by cancer in Argentina—roughly one in five on the national level—rises to one in three in communities close to areas that are sprayed. “In extreme cases, such as in the northern part of Santa Fe province, the rate is one in two,” he said. The use of agrotoxins, nevertheless, continues to rise in Argentina (NotiSur, Nov. 22, 2013). “Unlike counties that have established limits of three liters per hectare, in Argentina people use up to 12 [liters],” the neonatologist said. “In total, some 200 million liters of glyphosate are sprayed every year. That works out to roughly five liters per person.”

The art world has also turned its attention of late to the Monsanto controversy. In Buenos Aires, the Argentine capital, the Festival Internacional del Cine Ambiental (FICA), an environmental film festival, opened June 1 and screened 56 movies on topics such as human rights in relation to climate change, food sovereignty, and access to drinking water and healthy food. One of the featured documentaries was “The World According to Monsanto,” by French filmmaker and journalist Marie-Monique Robin. The film is several years old—it was originally released in 2008—but served, nevertheless, to again spark a debate over the issue of GMOs.

On June 13, the US cable network HBO Latin America aired a Colombian documentary called “Guerras Ajenas” (Distant Wars), directed by Carlos Moreno. The film, which is also available for streaming on computer or mobile devices, describes how aerial glyphosate spraying has been a key part of the US strategy for tackling drug trafficking in Colombia (NotiSur, Aug. 26, 2005). The failed approach focused on destroying coca and poppy plantations but resulted in an exponential number of cancer cases and in the displacement of campesinos and indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands.

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