

April 2006: The Poisoning of Clean Green New Zealand

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April 2006: "THE POISONING OF 'CLEAN, GREEN' NEW ZEALAND" by Jennifer Mourin, PANAP, Pesticide Action Network Asia Pacific. For Cecinio 'Lo-Long' Pelletero and Ramel Murillo, coming all the way from the tiny village of Kamukhaan, on the Filipino island of Mindanao to the sprawling suburbs of West Auckland, New Zealand has been quite an experience. It has been an experience of great contrasts in terms of weather, food, culture, and of just being in a country that is comparatively considered more advanced socially, economically and environmentally.

But it has also been an experience that has hauntingly brought home to them the tragic similarities of people struggling against the impacts of pesticides on their lives and communities. It has strengthened their support for the people's calls for justice in the midst of denial and apathy by government authorities.

They were in 'clean, green, New Zealand', and Lo-Long's perception had been of, 'a beautiful country, with a lot more cattle than people! A progressive and developed country'. But his and Ramel's participation in the Peoples Inquiry of the Effects of Aerial Spraying of Pesticides, has unfortunately chipped away at the picture-perfect image they have had of the land of the 'Long White Cloud'.

So Many Kamukhaans

'Lo-Long' is a community-based organiser and provides support to the community of Kamukhaan, which has been suffering from decades worth of devastating effects of aerial and ground spraying of pesticides. Born and raised in the village Ramel is a survivor of these pesticides, he walks with a permanent limp due to wounds and effects on his leg that refused to heal. Chemicals such as paraquat, furadan, decis and many others are regularly used to eradicate fungi, weeds, worms and insects that posed a threat to the bananas grown for export on the neighbouring plantation.

But the reality of Kamukhaan is also that of an economically depressed area where people do not have enough to eat, where the poverty is such that a family is doing well if they had one meal a day. It is a reality that has not improved much during the last few years due to pressure from the banana company, and the government's inertia. It is a reality where, as Lo-Long puts it, 'pesticides have become an integral part of the communities' daily lives' due to the continuing aerial and ground spraying.

In the last few years, the interests of the banana company have increased. Using different corporate identities, the company's acreage of bananas has proliferated all across Mindanao. So has the tragedy of exposed and devastated communities like that of Kamukhaan. Adults and children, who previously had very little sickness, have become increasingly vulnerable to all kinds of acute and chronic diseases.

Skin diseases, abnormalities and various types of illnesses had become widespread among the villagers of Kamukhaan. They often suffered fever, and constantly experienced spells of weakness, dizziness, vomiting, diarrhoea and cough. Body aches such as stomach aches, backaches and headaches, were aggravated during the periods of aerial spraying. Ailments like severe asthma, thyroid cancer and other kinds of cancer, goitre, and anaemia were prevalent. Infants were often born unhealthy, with abnormalities including severe skin abnormalities, cleft lip and palate. Children often suffered hindrances to their mental and physical development, and were often behind in their studies and absent from class due to the effects of the spraying.

Of the local and federal government's response, Lo-Long smiles in irony as the community appear to be last on their list of priorities. But Ramel is scathing in his assessment, 'they have totally neglected their duties to the people in my community.' Lo-Long adds, 'they claim to be going around doing their job of providing services, but the reality is, services such as health services have declined, the officials are not interested'.

Pesticides Do Not Differentiate

Coming from such a community, and watching the encroachment and spread of the effects of pesticides across

Mindanao, Lo-Long and Ramel had become so used to thinking that this was a phenomenon endemic to the Philippines. Understandably, the images and perception they had had of clean, green, New Zealand had not prepared them for the litany of appalling health effects, and often heartbreaking socio-economic problems recounted during the People's Inquiry.

A world's first, the People's Inquiry was pushed forward by members of the effected communities, who felt they had to do something about the numerous problems people had experienced. This was especially since they had come up against the "brick wall" of denial and apathy by the authorities in whom they had initially trusted whole-heartedly.

The Inquiry process provided a space for residents, ranging in age from 85 years to 6 years, affected by aerial spraying to relate their experiences to a panel of national and international Commissioners. The Inquiry heard oral testimony of wide ranging health effects, including irritating and painful burning effects on the eyes and blurred vision; burning sensation in the nose and nose bleeds; and often excruciating itching of the skin, rashes, eczema, and other skin problems. Many people suffered weakness of the body, muscle spasms, persistent fatigue and exhaustion. These symptoms were often attributed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), and the Aer'Aqua health service doctors contracted by MAF, as "generic" or "work related allergies".

From single submissions, to submissions by whole families, the Commissioners were also told of violent coughs dubbed by many residents as the "moth cough", debilitating asthma developed by both adults and children, numerous hospitalisations for breathing problems and effects on the lungs. Residents had suffered diarrhoea, severe stomach pains, bloating of the stomach, and irritable bowel syndrome.

Witnesses also noted suffering severe headaches and migraine. One woman recounted how her local doctor was so concerned about her migraines he suspected she may have had a brain tumour. A teacher, who had become actively involved in protesting the sprays, recounted how she noticed an increase in absenteeism and sick days taken by students. There were many complaints from students of headaches, and other complaints which interfered with their ability to concentrate and learn.

Mothers shared a litany of the same effects on their children. One woman, who was pregnant at the time, recounted her distress when the midwives at the hospital she went to recounted noticing an increase in "spotting" (bleeding) among pregnant women in the area, miscarriages and women delivering their babies prematurely over the course of the spraying.

The spraying had also exacerbated numerous serious health conditions that residents developed during, or just after the spraying, such as motor neuron disease, breast cancer, diseases of the blood such as lymphocytic leukaemia, and other life threatening effects. Several family members recounted how they had lost husbands, wives, fathers and mothers from severe health effects they contracted as a result of the sprays.

The spraying against moths had also caused huge disruption in the lives of families across West Auckland. The Inquiry heard submissions of how, having to relocate to escape the spraying caused many people's loss of income, loss of businesses, and how days taken off work had threatened people's job security. Many had been forced to relocate from Waitakere at great personal cost and often at the last minute, being informed between 3am - 4.30am on spray days that they had to pack up and leave if they wanted to avoid getting sprayed and possibly falling ill.

Submissions also recounted extreme stress to family relationships, strained marriages, broken relationships where partners left sufferers of health effects, and loss of well being. Additionally, costs of medication for repeated and complex medical conditions, and the huge amounts spent by many individuals to treat their ailments, have eaten up into their savings.

The experiences they suffered have also severely shaken any trust, respect and confidence they previously had of doctors and the medical profession, especially the doctors and nurses involved with Aer’Aqua, the health service sub-contracted by MAF. In her submission, one survivor quoted the Aer’Aqua report of June 2005, in which they noted, “highly active and vocal opponents of the (spray) programme”, who had “created misinformation and fear…they fuelled controversy over the perceived health effects through misinformation”. The Inquiry was also informed of how, “the 2005 report quoted studies from the 1980s which suggest that the sort of people who report health complaints are NA of ‘Negative Affect’ types. NA is defined as ‘A unique personality construct with feelings of nervousness and worry, chronic negative mood states, pervasive feelings of discomfort, introspection and a tendency to dwell on the negative aspects of the self and the world’.”

While recognising the very few brave and supportive local general practitioners, many also believe that the Aer’Aqua doctors, and several other doctors, who had treated them with such disrespect—telling them their effects were “psychosomatic”, that they were “exaggerating” or “over-reacting”, or were just being “hysterical” as new mothers and women—were only interested in profits, in retaining their licenses and their jobs with the government. One young boy told the Inquiry how he was often scolded by the nurses and doctor, and accused of making use of the ‘breakfast’ services provided for the people relocated. Worse, he was told he was emotionally disturbed because he kept complaining about the severe rash he developed when he got caught during a spraying run by the plane, while waiting at the bus stop to go to school. Many survivors also called for these ‘doctors’ to be struck off the New Zealand health registry, and for their licenses to be revoked as they were not fit to call themselves doctors.

The Poisoning of New Zealand’s Eco-City

For over 29 months, 655,000 litres of Foray 48B were sprayed over about 193,188 people in West Auckland in adherence to the countries Bio-security Act. In fact, due to wind activity and spray drift, many at the Inquiry believe that the numbers of those impacted by the spray may be closer to 200,000.

Since 1996, MAF had undertaken three major million-dollar campaigns to eradicate infiltrations of the white spotted moth, the painted apple moth, and the gypsy moth. The insecticide used in these campaigns was Foray 48B, a formulation which contained the bacterium *Bacillus thuringiensis kurstaki* (BtK). The most prolonged and intensive of the campaigns was the spraying of Auckland for the painted apple moth from January 2002 to May 2004.

And even as the negative health effects were presenting among Auckland residents, the Inquiry was provided evidence of quotes from MAF pamphlets of March 2003, which had been delivered to householders, stating, “There is NO evidence that Foray48B causes problems such as neurological or auto-immune effects or birth defects. Btk does not cause illness through infection and is not toxic to people.”

Waitakere City is well known for being a pioneer city for many reasons: it became New Zealand’s first nuclear free city, the first to institute the Agenda 21 of the Rio Declaration, and prided itself on its Eco-City status. But as pointed out by one of the survivors who was forced into activism on this issue, “even the Waitakere City Council was unable to obtain ingredients of the Spray through an application to the Ombudsmen. After 3 years, the only result is the Di Marco report, which again repeats the psychosomatic theory, and blames “adverse media reports” for the health impacts of Foray48B!!”

As also noted by this survivor, “between 1999 and 2000 MAF spent \$550,000 on the public relations ‘spin’, and between 2003-2004, MAF spent \$5,331,000 on ‘spin’ to convince people the spray was safe. This was to the extent that MP Murray McCully, had commented, ‘This is the Government Propaganda machine on steroids.’”

What Some Scientists Knew

The inquiry was also privy to the submission of several scientists who had raised their concerns at the beginning of the

spray programme.

As noted by Dr. Meriel Watts, coordinator of Pesticides Action Network (PAN) Aotearoa/New Zealand and Steering Council member of PAN Asia Pacific, in her submission, "In order to justify the aerial spraying programme to the West Auckland community, the government commissioned a health risk assessment (HRA) of Foray 48B. The HRA concluded that although there was evidence that some health effects might be "complained of" by some people, the risks to human health were "small". And, "subsequent political interpretation by medical personnel, MAF technical personnel and the Minister of Agriculture led to the expressed view firstly, that any health effects will be "insignificant", and then that the spray has a "proven safety record", has a "clean bill of health", and is "harmless to humans and animals".

Referring to her vast experience of having served on various government bodies relating to pesticides, she stated, "I have found the health risk assessments for the proposed aerial applications of Foray 48B to exhibit a bias in favour of that application. There was a systematic discounting of community reported effects of exposure to Foray 48B. Where toxicological data was lacking, the assumption was made that the effects would not occur, e.g. neurological effects. The risk characterisation, building on its previous assumptions and value judgements, then asserted that the risk is small. This conclusion cannot be justified scientifically. The assessments should say that because data on long-term exposure is lacking, the risks from long term exposure cannot be ascertained".

Also present was Dr. Simon Hales, a PhD in epidemiology with 15 years experience of public health research, specialising in the field of atmospheric environment, including climatic and air pollution effects. In 2004, Dr Hales was the lead author of a report to the New Zealand Ministry of Health, in which he raised concerns that he once again asserted at the Inquiry. These included concerns that, "aerial spraying of Foray 48B produces fine particles of biological matter (bioaerosols) that may be inhaled; that many of the symptoms which members of the community attributed to exposure to the spray, are consistent with the well established short term irritant effects of bioaerosols; that by analogy with exposure to bioaerosols in the workplace, insecticides based on bacteria or bacterial products could cause chronic health effects, especially respiratory diseases; and that studies of workers and human cells in the laboratory have shown that the active ingredients of Foray 48B have measurable physiological effects, particularly on the immune system".

Dr Gordon Hosking, is a forest and biosecurity specialist of 35 years experience, predominantly in the area of contingency planning and incursion response for new forest pests and diseases. He had led the science team for the earlier white-tussock moth (WSTM) response, and in its latter stages was the Chief Forest Officer of the MOF, and subsequently MAF. And as an entomologist and specialist in incursion response, he too made a submission to the Inquiry, "the experience gained from the WSTM programme was rejected and the scientists who were involved were excluded from participation in the painted apple moth (PAM) programme; this experience showed that the most valuable tool science could deliver to allow decisions on strategy and operations was access to a synthetic pheromone to accurately monitor and define the pest population; and that one of the strongest recommendations emerging from a review of the WSTM programme was that the affected community should be involved in analysis and decision making." Of MAF's actions he concluded, "it is my view that the pursuit of personal agendas and lack of competent scientific input, turned an easily managed localised incursion in an industrial area into a programme costing 10s of millions of dollars and affecting thousands of people".

A career scientist of over 38 years experience, John Clearwater's major experience in Biosecurity was with the "Operation Evergreen" team that eradicated the White-spotted tussock moth (WSTM *orgyia thyellina*), and developed and supported a monitoring system using live, unmated female WSTM to identify areas containing surviving WSTM. He had worked in collaboration with the team led by Prof Gerhard Gries of Simon Fraser University in Canada. Upon hearing of the PAM arrival in New Zealand, he had called MAF to offer his services, and that of Prof Gries, but was ignored. All subsequent attempts to work on the problem were fraught with obstructions. As Dr Clearwater told the Inquiry, "Our team had identified the key component of the pheromone that alone is a very potent attractant, within six months of receiving live material. Properly supported we could have had a useful attractant out in the infested area as early as we had achieved for the WSTM project. That this did not happen is entirely due to the actions of MAF who appeared to be doing their utmost to create obstacles and difficulties...I consider that the actions of the PAM project leadership have unnecessarily caused a greater number than originally (approximately 180,000) of Auckland citizens to be sprayed with consequences to their health...".

The People Assert Their Rights

Whether in the shanty filled village of Kamukhaan or among the houses of middle class West Auckland, the injustices facing people have moved a few brave souls to stand up to take action.

In the case of New Zealand, it has been predominantly the women who have given so much of their time and effort to gather data, mobilise among the community and make the issue visible. In spite of the community's studies and reports over the years detailing their concerns, and requests to the government for an official inquiry into the impacts and effects of the aerial spraying, these have been denied. The communities felt that their only option was to hold its own People's Inquiry.

To 'Lo-Long' the interventions and support of national and regional groups such as that of the PAN Asia and the Pacific, 'there has been support for the people struggles, and now people of Kamukhaan are more aware of how pesticides can effects their health and living conditions'but many in the community are afraid to speak out for fear of reprisals of the banana plantation'. This is why being at the People's Inquiry has been a unique and inspiring experience for 'Lo-Long' and Ramel. They both agreed that the Inquiry process had given space to survivors to speak out on the effects to their health, their livelihoods and their relationships, in the face of such indifference, denial and inconsideration by the government. 'But the people must continue to organise for justice', they concluded reflecting on the struggles in both lands.

At the close of the Inquiry on March 28, the people's role was noted by the Commissioners as well. In a joint statement they stated, 'We thank all those who gave oral or written testimony to the Inquiry. We acknowledge your courage in coming forward and speaking publicly about painful experiences'We also thank the organisers for the competence and professionalism they brought to the Inquiry. It should be noted that the Inquiry is extraordinary in having been brought about by the unpaid labour of members of the affected community itself.'

The Commissioners—Professor Romeo Quijano of the Philippines, Dell Wihongi - Te Rarawa, Hokianga of Aotearoa New Zealand, Dr Joanna Goven of Aotearoa New Zealand, and Dr Tom Kerns (USA)—will be considering what was submitted at the inquiry and completing their report by 30 June 2006.

The most poignant way to sum up the whole experience and urgency of the People's Inquiry, is unequivocally the response by a mother of three children. When asked by a Commissioner why she had taken the time to attend the Inquiry, and be willing to relive such painful incidences in her life, she replied: 'because if we don't do it now, then it could happen to our children or our children's children'.

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