

PRESS CONFERENCE ON WORA

16 March 2007 – Dhaka - Thirty one local journalists attended a press conference at the National Press Club in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 14 March 2007, on the launch of the Week of Rice Action 2007 in Asia.

Addressing the media were Palash Baral, Senior Researcher of UBINIG; Clare Westwood, Campaign Coordinator of Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP); Usha S. of Thanal, network partner of PAN AP in India; Shima Das of UBINIG; and rice farmers; Abdul Jalil and Rupashi Begum.

Clare Westwood explained why PAN AP had organized WORA in 13 countries across Asia, "The rice of Asia is under threat from genetically engineered rice and corporate agriculture. Institutions like the International Rice Research Institute and its affiliates like BIRRI have acted against the interests of farmers in promoting the Green Revolution i.e. the use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, high input and hybrid rice varieties, and now, GE Rice. GE Rice has not been proven safe for consumption and takes ownership of seeds away from the farmers which is their intrinsic right. WORA is Asia collectively saying NO to all these and that we want to Save our Rice. Let all Asians unite on this."

Why was Bangladesh chosen as the country for the launch of WORA? "Bangladesh is a major rice-producing country. Nayakrishni farmers here have been living the five pillars of rice wisdom - rice culture, community wisdom, biodiversity-based ecological agriculture, safe food and food sovereignty. They have managed to save 2,000 rice varieties out from the original 15,000 varieties that existed in Bangladesh 40 years ago. Furthermore, Bangla farmers have strongly resisted the introduction of Golden Rice in the country as GE rice takes away the food sovereignty of farmers," said Palash Baral.

Usha S. shared the experiences of rice farmers in India. "Instead of supporting biodiversity-based ecological agriculture, the government and scientists are busy supporting the corporations who are trying to push genetically engineered seeds into our fields. India had 100,000 rice varieties before the Green Revolution and now, we have lost most of them. Still, farmers through their own efforts, with no support from the government, have retrieved more than 20,000 varieties."

The two farmers present explained how hybrid rice was significantly inferior to traditional local varieties and this was of great interest to the journalists who had been told that hybrid rice was essential for efficient rice production. "How are we going to feed the growing population without hybrid rice?" asked one of them.

"Hybrid rice is not hardy – it cannot withstand dry spells and storms. Also it is more expensive and you need double the amount of seeds per hectare compared with local varieties. The yield is also less and our cows die when they eat hybrid rice straw," lamented Abdul Jalil, a farmer from Coxsbazar district.

"Our health is not good when we eat hybrid rice – you put on weight but are not strong," warned Rupashi Begum, a seed saver who is well-versed with the failures of hybrid rice.

The press conference ended with a plea from PAN AP for every Bangla and every Asian to sign the People's Statement on Saving the Rice of Asia to reach the target of one million signatures across Asia.

The WORA Launch was carried in at least ten major newspapers in Bangladesh including The New Age, The Independent, The Sangbad, and The Amardesh.

Pic caption:

The Press conference on the WORA Launch in Dhaka on 14 March 2007.
(from left to right; Rupashi Begum, Shima, Clare Westwood, Usha S., Palash Baral)