

**United Nations Statement
Regarding the use of GM Foods as Food Aid
in Southern Africa**

The UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Humanitarian Crisis in Southern Africa, Mr. James T. Morris is releasing the attached joint statement on behalf of the Directors-General of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, Mr. Jacques Diouf, and the World Health Organization, Dr. Gro Harlem Brundtland, respectively, and the World Food Programme at which he serves as Executive Director.

23 August 2002

**UN STATEMENT REGARDING THE USE OF GM FOODS AS FOOD AID
IN SOUTHERN AFRICA**

The United Nations is extremely concerned about the unfolding humanitarian crisis in southern Africa. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Food Programme (WFP) estimate that 13 million people will need food assistance in the coming months to avoid widespread starvation and a dramatic deterioration in health and nutritional status of the population in the affected countries. The World Health Organization (WHO) believes the health of these 13 million people may well be seriously damaged as a result of the current food crisis. Stocks of food in the region fall far short of estimated needs and food aid, along with medical and other assistance, will be critical to avoid a catastrophe.

The World Food Programme has received donations of foods for use in southern Africa, some of which contain GMOs. Several governments in southern Africa have accepted these donated foods without reservation and GM maize varieties are grown in the region. However, other Governments

have expressed reservations on receiving food aid containing GMOs and have sought advice from the United Nations.

There are no existing international agreements yet in force with regard to trade in food or food aid that deal specifically with food containing GMOs. It is UN policy that the decision with regard to the acceptance of GM commodities as part of food aid transactions rests with the recipient countries and that is the case in southern Africa. It is WFP policy that all donated food meet the food safety standards of both the donor and recipient countries and all applicable international standards, guidelines and recommendations.

With respect to GM maize, soy flour and other commodities containing GMOs, FAO and WHO are confident that the principal country of origin has applied its established national food safety risk assessment procedures. FAO and WHO have not undertaken any formal safety assessments of GM foods themselves. Donors to the WFP have fully certified that these foods are safe for human consumption.

Based on national information from a variety of sources and current scientific knowledge, FAO, WHO and WFP hold the view that the consumption of foods containing GMOs now being provided as food aid in southern Africa is not likely to present human health risk. Therefore, these foods may be eaten. The Organizations confirm that to date they are not aware of scientifically documented cases in which the consumption of these foods has had negative human health effects.

Concerns have been expressed in southern Africa about the unintentional introduction of GM maize varieties into the region as a result of plantings or spillage of whole kernel maize provided as food aid. Any potential risks to biological diversity and sustainable agriculture resulting from the inadvertent introduction of living modified organisms used for food, feed or processing have to be judged and managed by countries on a case-by-case basis. Maize is known for its propensity to outcross, but this is less of a concern in southern Africa where there is no large genetic diversity of this crop. In the specific case of maize, processing techniques such as milling or heat treatment may be considered by governments to avoid inadvertent introduction of genetically modified seed. However, it is not UN policy that GM grain used for food, feed, or processing should necessarily require such treatments.

The United Nations agencies involved will seek to establish a long-term policy for food aid involving GM foods or foods derived from biotechnology. The ultimate responsibility and decision regarding the acceptance and distribution of food aid containing GMOs rests with the governments concerned, considering all the factors outlined above. The United Nations believes that in the current crisis governments in southern Africa must consider carefully the severe and immediate consequences of limiting the food aid available for millions so desperately in need.