

Press Statement

Week of Preservation of Local Variety Rice, 2009
'Save our farmers and agriculture from harmful technologies'

Organized by: Nayakrishi Andolon and UBINIG, Bangladesh

Date: 9 April, 2009

UBINIG and Nayakrishi Andolon in Bangladesh have been jointly organising the Week of Rice since 2007 focusing the great richness of the varieties of local rice and the need to preserve these varieties. In the context of extensive promotion of harmful technologies, particularly hybrid and genetically engineered rice by the multinational companies through government and NGOs, the local varieties facing the threat of extinction and the farmers producing those local varieties are also threatened to lose their livelihood. This year (2009) the Week of Preservation of Local Variety Rice will be held during 10-15 April, 2009 in Tangail with active participation of the Nayakrishi farmers on the occasion of Chaitra Sangkranti (1415) – the year ending ceremony of Bengali calendar.

Farmers' organizations in different Asian countries have been actively working for conserving the local varieties of rice in the face of the impending threat from hybrid and genetically engineered rice. On the occasion of the 49th anniversary of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in the Philippines it is observed that though IRRI was established in one of the Asian countries, it did not look into the interest of the farmers, rather it had acted as an agent to transfer farmers' seed to the hands of the corporate seed companies. The IRRI is more interested for introduction of corporate agriculture in the name of Green Revolution. The paddy fields have been polluted with chemical fertilizer and pesticides. The soil has been degraded, rice ecosystem has been destroyed, culture of rice has been eroded and ultimately the image of rice as a safe and nutritious food has been down graded.

Agricultural improvement and farmer's welfare were mentioned on priority at the time of introduction of the IRRI rice in the name of Green Revolution. After half a century it is observed that about 56 percent of the population of Bangladesh is now landless and about the same percentages of the population is food hungry. The most significant observation is that a new set of *jamindars* (lords) dealing in water for irrigation, fertilizers, pesticides, diesel, tractor, power tiller, seed, credit and money lending have emerged in the rural areas. The hybrid seeds have been introduced in order to establish the emerging regime on stronger foot hold. In the mean time the vegetable seed market has gone under the grip of the seed companies. Hybrid rice seed import has been initiated in order to occupying the rice seed market. This is a serious indication for erosion of rice genetic resources. The introduction of hybrid rice must be resisted in the interest of agriculture and the farmers of this country.

The Asian Peasant Coalition (APC) and RESIST Network (Resistance and Solidarity against Agrochemical TNCs) jointly protested against the IRRI on 4 April, 2009 on its 49th anniversary. IRRI was originally established with the aim to reduce poverty and hunger, improve the health of rice farmers and consumers, and ensure that rice production is environmentally sustainable, but it has totally failed to fulfill its mandate. On the contrary the indigenous varieties of rice have been eroded due to large scale extension of IRRI varieties. Despite their failure in HYV, the IRRI is now trying to push hybrid and GE rice to serve the interest of the corporations against the farmers. Therefore farmers' organisations in different countries of Asia including the Philippines-China have declared the Year of Rice Action (YORA 2009 – 2010) from April 2009 to protest against hybrid and GE rice. UBINIG and Nayakrishi Andolon express their solidarity with YORA.

In Bangladesh through the week of rice celebration every year farmers are becoming more encouraged for preserving the local varieties. The farmers are demanding very clearly that the introduction of harmful technologies such hybrid rice seed and the genetic engineering in rice must be stopped.

Rain fed practice of agriculture should be prioritized over the present practice of irrigation-based rice production. Traditionally the farmers used to maintain all agricultural inputs in their own hands. They preserved the local variety seeds and did not have to depend on the supply of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and irrigation water. But the farmers have been made dependent on market supply of inputs in the modern system of production. Seed, irrigation, tiller, tractor, fertilizer, pesticides, credit, etc. are dealt by the dealers. The farmers have to pay higher price for each input. In spite of such costly investment, the market price of rice and other crops comes down when the farmers take their produce in the market. The cost of production is becoming higher and the net return to the farmers is lower with external input-dependent rice farming.

The market price of rice is less than the cost of production. The farmer is compelled to sell in the prevailing market price. This is because they have to pay the dues and debts in time. For the time being the farmer forgets about the family need of food grain. Later they have to sell assets to buy food grain for the family. This is a process of pauperization of the farming community.

Recently, Begum Matia Chowdhury, Agriculture Minister has announced in a meeting of the farmers at Nakla, Sherpur (3 April, 2009), the farmers need not worry. The procurement price of *boro* rice will be fixed after harvest. The farmers will get taka 1-2/kilogram more above the cost of production. It is worth mentioning in this regard that the market price of *amon* paddy was Tk. 550/md against the cost of production of Tk. 776/md. With Boro rice, the market price is already lower than the farmers' cost of production which is Tk 375 – Tk 466, while price of rice of Tk. 400 – Tk. 450. Also the government is going to pay only one or two taka more per kilo will not help the farmers very much as the government procurement is much less than what the farmers brings to the market. The Food Minister Dr. Abdur Razzak has said that the self sufficiency in rice production can be achieved with higher boro crop as well as a good Amon crop (if there is no natural disaster). UBINIG and Nayakrishi Andolon have observed that such plans will only work if the government focuses more on the local variety Amon crop which are less affected by natural disasters than the HYV varieties.

Our demands:

1. Effective programs must be taken up for achieving food self-sufficiency keeping the conservation of local varieties of *aus*, *amon* and *boro* paddy in view.
2. The price of rice should be fixed at a rate matching the cost of production, so that farmers have a better return.
3. Undue pressure must not be imposed on the farmers for adoption of hybrid and such other harmful technologies.
4. More research on the productivity of Local varieties of rice should be conducted by the government and efforts should be taken for conservation of rice varieties in different regions of the country.
5. Government efforts towards food production must integrate farmers' livelihood and agriculture. Corporatisation and commercialisation of agriculture will have severe negative impact on the majority of the people of the country.

At the press conference, Farida Akhter Executive Director of UBINIG, Dr. M.A. Sobhan, Consultant Nayakrishi Andolon, Golam Rabbi Badal, Jahangir Alam Jony, Mujahidul Islam Prince, Abdul Jabbar and Rokeya Begum were present.

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