Africa Malaria Day and DDT in Uganda

By ACSH Staff — April 23, 2004

At times it seems as though even scientific journals can morph into fiction. An article appearing in the April 24th issue of the medical journal *The Lancet*, entitled "Uganda considers DDT to protect homes from malaria," is so incredible to anyone interested in public health as to have been written by Asimov or Crichton. Using the impending "celebration" of "Africa Malaria Day" (April 25th) as a rationale, the story describes the current status of malaria-control measures in Uganda, an impoverished land in eastern Africa best known to Americans for AIDS and Idi Amin. Like many of its equatorial African neighbors, Uganda is subject to the scourge of endemic and epidemic malaria, with its frightful toll of death, suffering, and disability.

Here are three salient facts that must be borne in mind:

a-Malaria continues to exact a dreadful toll around the world, but nowhere is it worse than in central Africa. The WHO estimates that malaria kills an African child every thirty seconds. Ugandan children suffer an average of six episodes of malaria each year, and Ugandan families spend on average one tenth of their extremely meager incomes treating malaria.

b-DDT is a cheap, effective chemical whose insecticidal properties are credited with saving over 100 million lives since 1944, mainly from malaria. Its discovery won the Nobel Prize for Dr. Paul Muller, who showed the world how to prevent malaria, typhus, and other insect-borne diseases using DDT. It has no human toxicity of significance.

c-DDT is banned throughout the western world due to its alleged adverse effects on the environment. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) used DDT as the poster child for environmental contamination, and the environmental movement was born.

Western environmental organizations fear its re-introduction to such an extreme that they pressure countries like Uganda which are desperately susceptible to malaria to avoid using it. It has been banned, de facto, from those parts of the world where malaria still does its deadly work.

This is so despite the fact that:

a-DDT is not toxic to humans, animals, or flora when used to prevent malaria by spraying individual homes to keep malarial mosquitoes away or kill them. The possible harm done by DDT in the 1950s and 1960s was due to its massive overuse for agriculture.

b-The NGOs pressuring the impoverished, malarious regions' governments away from DDT are based in areas that are themselves free of malaria, and thus have no direct interest in using it anymore (of course, they all used it in the post-WWII period to eradicate their own mosquitoes, and thus they are safe now).

c-The harm done by DDT, if any, is felt by these comfortable Europeans to be more significant
than the yearly deaths of over 1 million African, Asian, and Latin American humans (mainly children) the WHO estimates that the deadly toll of malaria is between 1 and 3 million each year.

Now let us return to the *Lancet* piece on the DDT debate going on in Uganda. The health minister there, Jim Muhwezi, proposes to use DDT for malaria prevention. Similar use in nearby South Africa reduced the death toll by over 90%. So what's the problem?

The approval for using DDT must come from Uganda's National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA), headed by one Arnold Waiswa. He has thus far refused, citing old fears of DDT, abetted by local and foreign NGO environmental activists.

The spokesperson for the WHO in Uganda, Mr. O. Walker, stated that despite the "noise" expected from the activists, "in all fairness, the damaging effects of DDT have been observed in agricultural use where extremely large areas were sprayed; that will not be the case here."

The environmentalists and NEMA want long delays before using DDT is allowed, delays caused by assessments of environmental impact, lists of all possible risks, and even a public hearing. Meanwhile, how many thousands of Ugandans will feel the deadly bite of the anopheles mosquito?

It is ironic, to say the least, that this debate is proceeding while "Africa Malaria Day," not to mention our own Earth Day, proceed in blissful ignorance of the death and devastation wreaked upon black Ugandans, among millions of others dwelling in poverty, hunger, and filth all of them prevented from being protected against one of mankind's relentless scourges by well-fed, white, so-called "environmentalists" in the EU and even right here in America. Apparently, their concept of protecting the Earth does not include protecting the human beings who inhabit it.

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