

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE 64th WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY ON DESTRUCTION OF SMALLPOX VIRUS STOCKS

The undersigned civil society organizations from around the world call on the Member States of the World Health Organization (WHO), on the occasion of the 64th World Health Assembly, to complete WHO's historic Smallpox Eradication Programme by resolving to promptly destroy, once and for all, remaining stocks of smallpox (variola) virus.

After decades of remarkable international public health cooperation, in 1977 the scourge of smallpox was eliminated from the wild, leaving the last remaining samples of the virus in laboratories. These virus stocks come from all parts of the world. They were turned over to the WHO for safekeeping and are held in WHO Repositories located in Russia and the United States.

Nearly a quarter century ago, in 1986, the WHO's experts first recommended that the viruses be destroyed, so that the risk of a future outbreak would be radically reduced. This recommendation was followed by World Health Assembly resolutions and more expert recommendations to destroy them. Yet these dangerous viruses continue to exist.

These viruses serve no essential public health purpose. Smallpox virus is not needed to respond to an outbreak. Smallpox vaccine is made from vaccinia, a related but far less deadly, virus. While effective diagnostics, vaccines and other means to contain an outbreak exist, for years the US and Russia have used specious scientific arguments to thinly veil their political determination to retain the virus.

The time has come for these stocks to be destroyed once and for all. This may only be accomplished through the will of the World Health Assembly.

Six years ago, civil society and governments united to turn back dangerous attempts to genetically engineer smallpox. That success led to a deeper examination of scientific needs to retain the virus stocks, culminating in a major review of smallpox virus research in 2010 that has been tabled this year. This major review, conducted by WHO experts in public health, concludes that no compelling scientific reason remains to retain the virus samples.

In May 2011, the 64th World Health Assembly will discuss the findings of the major review. While Russia and the United States may be expected to resist a firm decision to destroy the virus samples, they can no longer credibly claim any scientific basis for doing so. Continued retention of smallpox virus samples serves no essential public health purpose, and the possibility of their escape, amplified by the risks of unnecessary research, threatens all countries. Indeed, the last recorded smallpox case, in 1978, was the result of a laboratory accident.

Destroying smallpox virus stocks is not only the last step in the great achievement of eradicating the disease; it is the single most important thing that the international community can do to ensure that it never appears again. By making possession of the virus a crime against humanity, any future attempt to recreate the virus through biotechnology methods would meet international condemnation and sanction.

Hundreds of millions of people have been killed by smallpox in its terrible history. Well into the second half of the 20th Century, before WHO's Eradication Programme met success, millions of people died from smallpox every year and tens of millions were disfigured by the disease. In the absence of any essential public health reason to do so, no country can be allowed to retain stocks of such a horrible disease.

Our call to you, delegates to the 64th World Health Assembly, is for you to unequivocally terminate research with smallpox virus and to fix a prompt and irrevocable date for the destruction of the virus stocks. In doing so, the 64th World Health Assembly can reclaim the lost mantle of WHO's successful 1960s and 70s eradication effort, and set in motion the final chapter in humanity's victory over this most dreadful disease.

1. African Centre for Biosafety (ACB), South Africa
2. All India Drug Action Network
3. COECOCEIBA/Friends of the Earth Costa Rica
4. Community Alliance for Global Justice, USA
5. Consumer Rights for Safe Foods, Philippines
6. Consumers' Association of Penang (CAP), Malaysia
7. Diverse Women for Diversity
8. Doctors for Food & Biosafety, India

9. Ecological Society of the Philippines
10. Ecology Ministry Archdiocese of Manila, Philippines
11. Egyptian Foundation for Health for All, Egypt
12. Environment Studies Institute, Miriam College, Philippines
13. Farmers' Forum, Philippines
14. Freedom from Debt Coalition South Cotabato-Saranggani-General Santos Chapter, Philippines
15. Gene Ethics, Australia
16. General Santos City Water Consumers Network, Philippines
17. Gen-ethical Network, Germany
18. GM Watch, United Kingdom
19. Initiative for Health & Equity in Society, India
20. Institute of Science in Society, United Kingdom
21. International People Health Council (South Asia), India
22. Kalimudan Culture and Arts Center, Philippines
23. Los Alamos Study Group, USA
24. Malaysian Physicians for Social Responsibility
25. Marbel-Justice and Peace, Philippines
26. Mother Earth Foundation, Philippines
27. Navdanya, India
28. Negros Organic Agriculture Movement (NOAM), Philippines
29. Network for a GE Free Latin America (RALLT)
30. Partnership for Clean Air, Philippines
31. People's Health Movement (PHM)
32. Pesticide Action Network (PAN), Uruguay
33. Research Foundation for Science Technology & Ecology (RFSTE), India
34. Sahabat Alam Malaysia (SAM)/Friends of the Earth Malaysia
35. SEARICE, Philippines
36. Sunray Harvesters, India
37. The Edmonds Institute, USA
38. Third World Network
39. Tri-Valley CAREs, USA
40. Un Ponte per, Italy
41. Washington Biotechnology Action Council, USA