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## Organic Exporters in DDT Scare

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### NEWS

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Nairobi

Barely three weeks since spraying of the controversial insecticide DDT to control malaria started in Uganda, the dispute between the government and exporters of organic products is re-emerging, this time over "irregularities" in executing the exercise.

A consortium of exporters of organic products is preparing to file a lawsuit against the government, accusing it of non-adherence to World Health Organisation guidelines on indoor residual spraying in the endemic districts of Oyam and Moyo in the north.

The exporters contend that the manner in which the spraying is being done could contaminate the food chain, reviving fears that Uganda's organic exports, worth about \$500 million annually, will be rejected in American and European markets in their entirety if traces of DDT are found in any consignment.

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USAid country director Margot Ellis said, "USAid appreciates the sensitivity of bringing DDT into a country like Uganda with an important organic agriculture sector. For this reason, USAid spent over a year developing strict protocols for its use by our implementing partner. This includes adherence to WHO and Nema specifications.

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"Our partner, Research Triangle Institute (RTI) - a global organisation contracted by USAid - is meeting the National Environmental Management Authority (Nema) conditions in their programme in Oyam and Apac. While USAid is strictly monitoring use of the chemical, farmers can also take simple steps to protect their produce by storing it adequately (away from sprayed surfaces)."

USAid, which gave RTI \$150 million for the Africa programme, of which about \$8.5 million is being spent on Uganda, is at the same time paying organic product companies such as Kyagalanyi Coffee to promote their products through projects like tree replanting.

Ms Ellis said, "USAid supports development of the agriculture sector, and does not see a conflict between DDT and organic farming. Since 2006, other pesticides have been used for indoor residual spraying that did not contaminate organic produce. DDT spraying is being done with even more monitoring and supervision. The likelihood of contamination of organic produce by DDT is low."

Likewise, the Ministry of Health has denied the claims, saying they spent three years preparing to reintroduce DDT in fighting the epidemic that kills 320 people every day in Uganda.

But a source at the Mini-stry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, a prime stakeholder, told The EastAfrican that they were aware of the "allegations," which they are investigating.

However, the government's credibility could be watered down by the revelation that the

composition of a joint monitoring committee meant to oversee the administering of DDT excluded participants from the private sector, particularly associations of exporters of organic products. Additionally, default members of that committee from line ministries and government departments could not say what their terms of reference were, when they last met and what their budget was.

Jacque Schrier, chairman of the Uganda Flowers Exporters Association, said, "Since we were told that we are part of the committee, we have received no other communication."

Phillip Borrel, chairman of the Uganda Fish Processors and Exporters Association, said his association was supposed to be part of the committee as well, and nominated a representative who has, however, not received any appointment notification or terms of reference.

Prior to approving the reintroduction of the chemical to fight malaria, the dispute between the protagonists was over exploring available options first, before resorting to DDT.

However, health concerns triumphed over economic fears early last year when Nema approved reintroduction of DDT, but on certain conditions, notably that its importation and application to be done in line with WHO guidelines, with a multisectoral committee to oversee implementation and sensitisation three months before indoor residual spraying began.

Dr Emmanuel Otiam Otala, Junior Minister for Health, said, "We spent three years ensuring that we reintroduce DDT using the right procedures and made the relevant environmental impact study. So we are following all the guidelines."

Indeed, Dr Otala was applauded by legislators when he updated them on the malaria control programme last week.

However, the consortium, which includes the coffee traders' federation, the flower exporters association, the fish processors and exporters association, British American Tobacco Uganda, and the horticultural exporters body - the same group that came under criticism by health activists in 2006 when they attempted to block the use of DDT altogether - are accusing the government of breaching all three conditions.

Marck van Esch, manager of Bo Weevil, an exporter of organic cotton, told The EastAfrican that the spraying has been improperly done, and the chemical will inevitably spill over into the environment, and consequently into organic produce.

"We have visual evidence from Oyam and Apac districts already with our lawyers. It shows the spray on the walls and roofs of the grass-thatched mud houses, as well as on farm-tools, bicycles and the produce as well, in the same room. Under such conditions, we shall definitely have contaminated produce," Mr Esch said.

He said the investment in the area is worth about \$4 million, with some 27,000 farmer households focused on production of value-added cotton, sesame and dried chilli. "We now cannot take produce from Oyam and Apac for the next season, because we know it is contaminated. We have started to invest in Ethiopia, because the investment climate in Uganda is a great disappointment," Mr Esch added.

Although there is no empirical proof to link DDT to any disease, it is understood that markets in America and Europe, where Uganda exports most, could refuse produce that has traces of DDT over a certain level.

Given that Uganda's revenue from organic exports account for over 60 per cent of total export revenue annually, making it one of the biggest exporters of organic products in Africa, a blockage of these sales would be a severe blow to its economy.

Its effects would be comparable with those of the ban on Uganda's fish exports to Europe in the 1990s after the illegal use of chemicals to kill the fish was exposed.

A project manager at Kyagalanyi Coffee, one of the leading coffee exporters, said, "We have written to the relevant authorities inquiring whether our produce will be accepted after reintroduction of DDT in Uganda, and they have strongly warned that it could be banned."

Indeed, some districts have formally objected to the government's attempt to use DDT in their

locality because they thrive on organic produce for export. For instance, local leaders in Bundibugyo district, which grows cocoa, have told government not to spray DDT in their locality due to agricultural interests.

Bright Rwamirama, Junior Agriculture Minister, said he was aware of the complaints from the exporters. "We have heard those allegations; I have set up a committee to investigate the matter, and will be able to give you our informed position next week," he said.

The claims could be helped by the possibility that the monitoring committee was not all-inclusive as intended, and that it was not functional. According to Nema's guidelines, the multisectoral committee is supposed to comprise Nema, the Ministries of Agriculture, Trade, Water and Environment, the private sector and any other stakeholders.

Mr Otala said, "The multisectoral monitoring committee is in place, and those associations are represented, it is only that the committee cannot have every one who wants to be apart of it."

Nema also said it has a representative on the monitoring committee whose reports do not show any complaint of non-adherence to the set guidelines.

The Uganda Export Promotions Board shared this view, but indicated that they were obliged to promote government policy, which in this case is to spray DDT for the control of malaria.

Uganda is the only country in East Africa using DDT in the fight against malaria. The Ministry of Health says the chemical is 50 per cent cheaper than the alternative - Icon, a pyrethroid insecticide with much lower toxicity to humans - that exporters were pushing for.

While DDT has been successfully used to control malaria in some African countries such as South Africa, Zambia and Ethiopia, opponents of the chemical in Uganda, however, point out that there it is sprayed in townships, where there is no agricultural activity, and where water is piped, lessening the risk of contaminating the food chain, unlike in Uganda, where its is being sprayed in villages.

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