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Canada Jeopardizes Biotech Liability Talks *Belated Visa for Africa's Top Diplomat leaves UN's Montreal Biosafety negotiations in suspense*

Ottawa – Dr. Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher of Ethiopia, Africa's chief scientist and negotiator for the Cartagena (biosafety) Protocol, received his Canadian visa late Tuesday evening Ethiopian time. Dr. Tewolde, who is scheduled to be in the crop biotech liability negotiations tomorrow morning, May 25, in Montreal, has his bags packed and is awaiting a revised plane ticket that – even under ideal circumstances – could only get him to Montreal in time for the final day of the controversial set of UN negotiations (May 27). After extended discussions over Canada's Victoria Day holiday on Monday, a visa arrived in Ethiopia from the Canadian High Commission in Nairobi Tuesday.

Dr. Tewolde's delay at the hands of the Canadian government is particularly troubling because the scientist was a key figure in forcing industrialized countries and biotech corporations to agree to discuss liability and redress issues. The unintended spread of genetically modified DNA from biotech crops has caused unwanted genetic contamination in other countries, and is now a major problem for countries like Canada who are being called on to take responsibility for contamination. Canada is the world's third largest producer of GM crops, after the US and Argentina. Not surprisingly, Canada was among the governments opposed to liability negotiations. The issue became a major stumbling block to achieving the biosafety protocol in 2000. Only when Canada and other major biotech countries agreed to Dr. Tewolde's demand that a special meeting on liability be convened soon after the coming into force of the protocol (in late 2003), did governments in developing countries accept the protocol. That meeting on liability, brokered by the Ethiopian scientist, is the one that he will miss two days of this week.

Dr. Tewolde, the Ethiopian government's chief scientist and its representative to the Montreal-based UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) requested a visa from Canada on May 5th and only received it late Tuesday in Addis Ababa. In response to the delay, the Canadian Government has been flooded with protest phone calls and letters from around the world – a reaction similar to that provoked in February when the government tried to promote Terminator technology (sterile seeds) at meetings in Bangkok.

Dr. Tewolde's case is not unique. Late last year a colleague of his at the Environmental Protection Authority of Ethiopia, Mr. Dereje Agonafir, was refused a Canadian visa to participate in a meeting of a CBD Expert Group relating to the Biodiversity of Water, Marine and Coastal Ecosystems. In a telephone conversation earlier today, Dr. Tewolde suggested that the future of Montreal as host to the Secretariat of the CBD should be tied to the Canadian government's ability to provide other government delegates with visas. Civil society from developing countries have also been denied visas for this week's meetings, including Professor Kavulakunpla Ramanna Chowdry and Kaka Ramakrishna, two farmers from India.

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