TIME LIMITED EXEMPTIONS AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT ARE CRITICAL TO SUSTAINABLE REDUCTIONS IN THE USE OF DDT

"A universal ban on DDT now must include time-limited exemptions for its production and use in malaria control. Otherwise, we might see increased death rates and suffering as a result of malaria," states David Nabarro, Project Manager for Roll Back Malaria in the World Health Organization (WHO). (1)

The announcement comes on the eve of the Fourth Meeting of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee on Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs), organized by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in Bonn, Germany from 20-25 March 2000. The talks will lead to a legally binding Treaty to combat the threat of 12 POPs, including DDT, to the environment and public health. (2)

The Treaty aims to see a significant reduction in the use of DDT, if not its virtual elimination. The current draft of the Treaty includes exemptions which would allow countries to continue using the pesticide for public health purposes, as well as provisions for technical and financial support to DDT dependent countries to help them reduce their reliance on this persistent organic pollutant.

WHO believes that these exemptions and provisions are essential to reaching the ultimate goal. Nabarro adds: "A premature shift to less effective or more costly alternatives to DDT is likely to be unsustainable. Countries need time and resources to evaluate and select alternatives that are locally appropriate and sustainable. In the meantime, they require the reassurance that DDT can be used, if needed, to protect human lives. This is simply good planning, and good planning needs time and cash."

Provisions related to the reduction and or elimination of DDT are among the key issues to be discussed in Bonn this week.

Extensive use of DDT for agricultural purposes has resulted in serious damage to the global environment. Although the pesticide is now banned from agricultural use, it continues to be used in limited quantities for public health purposes. WHO projections suggest that the amounts of DDT needed for malaria control are a small fraction of what has been used for agricultural purposes.

Further reductions are possible. Environmentally safer alternatives to DDT do exist and more are under development. At present these alternatives are either significantly more expensive, or are useful only in more limited circumstances than DDT.

For many malaria-affected countries, responsible DDT use is a vital strategy in situations where alternatives are not available and where the potential loss of human life associated with unstable malaria transmission and epidemics is greatest.

"At present, issues around the continued use of DDT are emotive and complex," states Nabarro. "Countries affected by malaria are asking for help in making informed decisions towards reducing their use of DDT. They will try to eliminate its use, but to do this they want help to ensure that there are minimal adverse health consequences as a result of their decisions."

WHO emphasizes the need for negotiators in Bonn to consider the available information on current public health uses of DDT and existing and potential alternatives, and has been working in collaboration with UNEP to ensure that this information is available. (3)

WHO and UNEP have also been working in partnership to ensure wide consultation and participation in POPs discussions at the country, regional and global levels.

"From our consultations with WHO member states and regional experts, it is clear that one of the highest priorities is the need for solid scientific and programme based information on the costs, effectiveness and safety of potential alternatives to DDT. This will require significant new investment by the global community in..."
research and capacity building. This is one of the key reasons for supporting a time limited exemption on DDT use. To obtain this critical information will take several years," Nabarro says.

Notes to Editors:

1. The Roll Back Malaria Partnership Secretariat (RBM) has been designated by WHO as the focal point for assistance to countries which are attempting to reduce reliance on DDT for malaria control. RBM has been working with malaria endemic countries since 1998 in an effort to halve the global malaria burden by the year 2010 and as such is in a unique position to help countries integrate action to reduce reliance on DDT for vector control into their ongoing efforts to improve malaria control and strengthen health systems.

2. The meeting in Bonn is formally known as the Fourth Session of the Intergovernmental Negotiating Committee (INC-4) for an International Legally Binding Instrument for Implementing International Action on Certain Persistent Organic Pollutants. The Fifth session (INC-5) is scheduled to take place in South Africa in December 2000.

3. RBM/WHO has planned a pre-meeting DDT briefing for delegates and reporters on Sunday 19th March at 12 noon in Conference Room A, Bundeshaus.

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