

Transgenic aubergine put on ice

Stiff opposition from activists has persuaded the Indian government to put off commercial release of the country's first genetically modified (GM) food crop, despite clearance from the nation's top biotechnology regulator.

The 14 October ruling by the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) granted permission for Indian farmers to grow a transgenic version of aubergine, or brinjal, that is insect-resistant. But barely 24 hours later, Jairam Ramesh, India's minister of environment and forests, said that permission for its cultivation will be given only after consulting "all stakeholders".

Ramesh says that the ministry will seek public comments until the end of the year and that he "will have a series of consultations with scientists, agriculture

for Cellular and Molecular Biology in Hyderabad, says Ramesh has made the right choice. "The government need not accept every recommendation made by the GEAC," he says. Bhargava was one of the three members of the GEAC, out of a total of 20-odd members, who opposed the introduction of *Bt* brinjal — citing what they called inadequate safety data provided by Mahyco.

Mahyco says that at least 25 environmental-safety and food-safety studies on animals carried out since 2002 show that *Bt* brinjal is "absolutely safe" to eat. But Bhargava and activist groups argue that the GEAC did not get the company data independently analysed. The only other study, by French scientist Gilles-Eric Seralini of the Committee for Independent Research and Information on Genetic Engineering, branded *Bt* brinjal "potentially unsafe for human consumption".

According to Seralini, eating *Bt* brinjal reduced appetite in goats, increased prothrombin time (the time it takes blood to clot) in goats and rabbits, and caused the plants to produce a protein inducing resistance to the antibiotic kanamycin. However, an expert committee dismissed these concerns, saying that the crop "has been extensively tested for its biosafety, and no additional studies/review are necessary". That expert report formed the basis for the GEAC's ruling.

The Coalition for a GM-Free India called the approval a "shame" and alleged that "regulators have put the interests of corporations over that of ordinary citizens". But Rao says the anti-GM lobby is nervous. "They have already lost the battle over *Bt* cotton — the only GM crop grown in India — and they know if they lose over *Bt* brinjal they lose the war," he says. ■

K. S. Jayaraman



P. PARANJPE/REUTERS/CORBIS

India is mooting commercial use of GM aubergines.

experts, farmers' organizations, consumer groups and NGOs" in January and February 2010 before deciding whether to go forward.

The GM brinjal variety was developed by Mahyco Monsanto Biotech, a joint venture between Jalna-based Maharashtra Hybrid Seed Company and US seed giant Monsanto.

The decision to seek further input has angered some crop scientists. "The minister has set a bad precedent by ignoring the recommendation of the GEAC — a statutory body consisting of scientists," says Chavali Kameswara Rao, secretary of the Foundation for Biotechnology Awareness and Education in Bangalore. "The biosafety issue of *Bt* brinjal has been studied by more than 150 scientists, and nothing new will come from fresh consultations."

But GEAC member Pushpa Bhargava, who was founding director of the Centre

Corrections

The News story 'Where the US stimulus money is going' (*Nature* **461**, 856–857; 2009) gave the wrong location for the National Synchrotron Light Source II. It is at the Brookhaven National Laboratory in New York. And in the News Feature 'The disappearing nutrient' (*Nature* **461**, 716–718; 2009), the estimate for the amount of phosphate that could be extracted from the ground should have been 47 billion tonnes not 62 billion. This means that the figures in the pie chart should have read: United States (3.4 Gt), China (10 Gt), Morocco and Western Sahara (21 Gt), South Africa (2.5 Gt) and Rest of the world (10.1 Gt).