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SOUTH AFRICAN PEOPLE'S TRIBUNAL ON AGROTOXINS

22 – 23 MARCH 2025

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The South African People's Tribunal on AgroToxins, an articulation of grassroots justice, will commence on the weekend of Human Rights Day, 21st March, and continue on the 22nd and 23rd of March 2025 in Stellenbosch, Cape Town, one of the main crime scenes.

The Tribunal will be led by the lived experiences of farm workers and dwellers on South Africa's industrial farms, community members affected by the UPL chemical warehouse fire, and expert testimony from academics, researchers, and support organisations.

These testimonies expose the normalisation that underpins not only the use of agrottoxins in South Africa, but also the impacts on farm workers, society, and the environment.

We are honoured to have three deeply respected and esteemed Jurors who have given their time to hear the testimonies of affected peoples, supporting organisations, and experts. We are deeply moved by their commitment to justice for people who often have no voice or power in a system that values profit over people.

Our heartfelt thanks to Judge Navi Pillay, Dr Sophia Kisting-Cairncross, and Human Rights Commissioner Philile Ntuli.

We are further most grateful to the following participating experts:

- Mr Wisdom Basera
- Mr Rico Euripidou
- Prof. Leslie London
- Prof. Rajen Naidoo
- Prof. Saloshni Naidoo
- Prof. Andrea Rother
- Dr Cindy Stephen
- Ms Paola Vigletti

OVERALL PROGRAMME

Saturday, 22 March
9 am to 6 pm

- Opening statement by Special Rapporteur Dr Marcus Orellana (video recording)
- Affected peoples and expert testimonies

Sunday, 23 March
9 am to 1 pm

- Affected peoples and expert testimonies
- Lunch and closing

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South Africa is the largest consumer of agricultural chemicals (agrottoxins) in Africa. There is a regulatory breakdown in the country and a 'free-for-all' in the agrochemical industry, symptomatic of a dismantled and dysfunctional state. This is leading to gross human rights violations and environmental calamity.

Commercial farmers and industry use many agrochemicals that are categorised as highly hazardous pesticides (HHPs), slated for banning by the international community. Government policy committed to this more than 14 years ago, but has largely failed to do so. Information on pesticide registration in South Africa is not publicly available, but it is estimated that at least 192 HHPs are still used in South Africa, over a third of which are banned in the European Union.

Examples include:

- Mevinphos, linked to neurological defects leading to long-term health complications;
- Carbofuran, associated with reproductive and developmental defects; and

- Terbufos, a neurotoxic insecticide recently implicated in the deaths of children in low-resource urban areas. Terbufos is banned in 12 out of 16 countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Farm workers, farm dwellers and their families, who are frontline communities, bear the brutal consequences, paying with their health, their lives, and their children's futures. Our government continues to assert that industrial agriculture is the only route to food production and food security, implicitly sanctioning the sacrifice of farm workers.

Furthermore, these dangerous chemicals do not only affect people on farms – as we learned from a burning chemical warehouse in Cornubia City in KwaZulu-Natal in 2021 that affected the health, livelihoods, and environment in adjacent areas. Dangerous chemicals that are restricted for agricultural use in South Africa also find their way into domestic settings as people buy 'street pesticides' to deal with pest infestations resulting from a lack of service delivery and urban food systems collapse.

These have already taken the lives of several children in urban areas.

As our turbulent world is plunged into greater chaos, there is also great momentum and impetus amongst us in our collective struggles to reclaim our sovereignty and dignity.

"The term 'environmental racism' describes institutionalized discrimination based on race or colour. In pre-1994 South Africa, the distribution of environmental risks and harms disproportionately and often deliberately targeted low-income groups and along racial lines. Today, despite the efforts by the Government in setting up institutions and laws to address this legacy of environmental racism, pervasive air, water, and chemical pollution still imposes a heavy toll, especially on disadvantaged communities. Overcoming it will require significant additional efforts, including structural, legislative, economic, and environmental changes."

Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Toxins, Dr Marcus Orellana. Pretoria, 11 August 2023