An Open Letter from Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)
To Ambassador Philemon Yang of Cameroon, Chairman
Third Meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee for
the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (ICCP3)
22-26 April 2002
The Hague

Dear Ambassador Yang,

On the eve of the Third Meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (ICCP3), civil society organizations request urgently that the serious threat to biological diversity from genetic contamination in crop centers of origin and/or diversity be placed on the agenda of the ICCP3.

We note that the legally-binding Protocol on Biosafety, now gaining momentum towards its entry into force, aims to ensure the safe transfer, handling and use of living modified organisms resulting from modern biotechnology that may have adverse effects on biological diversity. The Protocol emphasizes the special role and importance of crop centers of origin and/or diversity , and also promotes a precautionary approach as the guiding principle for biosafety. These crucial elements of the Protocol reinforce the need for ICCP3 urgently to consider the issue of genetic contamination and its implications for farmers and food security as well as in-situ, on-farm, and ex-situ conservation of agricultural biodiversity.

In recent months, enormous controversy has erupted over evidence that the Mesoamerican Center of Crop Genetic Diversity has been contaminated with genetically modified (GM) maize material. These findings are alarming, not only because it is illegal to grow GM maize in Mexico, but especially because Mexico is the primary center of maize genetic diversity. Maize varieties developed over millennia by indigenous farmers, as well as maize ancestors, represent one of the world's most vital and indispensable reservoirs of genetic material for future plant breeding and the basis of food security.

In September 2001, Mexico's Ministry of Environment first reported that extensive GM maize contamination had been found in farmers' maize varieties in two states. Earlier this year, Mexico's Environment Ministry re-confirmed that GM contamination of farmers' varieties of maize had been found at contamination rates of up to 35% in remote villages of Oaxaca and Puebla. Recent articles in scientific journals have squabbled over the methodology used to characterize GM contamination in Mexico, but not over the fact that this contamination has occurred. Virtually all scientists agree that this Center of Crop Genetic Diversity has been contaminated with DNA from genetically modified plants.

We wish to emphasize that debate on this issue must not focus on the methodologies of detecting contamination, but on the more urgent matter of how to respond. Genetic contamination in crop centers of origin and/or diversity and its potential impact on farmers, food security and the biological diversity of all countries must be addressed as a matter of priority.

We call upon ICCP3 to:

- Acknowledge that GM contamination poses a potential serious threat to biological diversity in crop centers of origin and/or diversity;

- Propose an immediate moratorium, in accordance with the precautionary approach, on the release of living modified organisms for food, feed and processing (GM seeds and grain) or for research in those countries or regions that form part of the crop centers of origin and/or diversity for that species. Rigorous studies – excluding all trials in the open environment – on the risks and impacts of GM contamination must prove biosafety before this moratorium should be lifted;

- Initiate a process leading to rigorous studies on a crop-by-crop and region-by-region basis to determine what impact GM contamination may have in crop centers of origin and/or diversity supplying the world's food systems.

In addition, we call upon ICCP3 to initiate a process with the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) to:

- Undertake an investigation of how to ensure the integrity of germplasm held under the FAO-CGIAR Trust Agreement and that there are, and will be, no intellectual property claims pertaining to any of the Trust germplasm;

- Incorporate mechanisms in the FAO Code of Conduct on Biotechnology to control the diffusion of GM materials, whether through commercial trade or overseas development assistance, to ecologically and socio-economically vulnerable regions, and to guarantee that the burden of ecosystem restoration and compensating affected farmers and nations rests with the manufacturers and/or patentholders of these products;

- Examine the need to integrate rules and procedures to mitigate and prevent any further GM contamination in the legally-binding International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture.

Signed by: ETC Group (formerly RAFI), Intermediate Technology Development Group (ITDG), Greenpeace, Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), FoodFirst, Econexus, Genetic Engineering Network (GEN), Netherlands Committee for IUCN, Diverse Women for Diversity (DWD) and the Federation of German Scientists... on behalf of the NGO Caucus at the 6th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity