

PRESS RELEASE 13 OCTOBER 2001

The World Food Summit in a state of crisis: Berlusconi causes havoc at the United Nations

Non-governmental organisations cancel the NGO Forum but plan other events at the beginning of November to maintain their dialogue with FAO

Three weeks prior to the start of the World Food Summit, the Italian government has still not finalised the agreement, necessary to hold the Summit, with the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO). Over one hundred Heads of State were expected to participate. Because of these uncertainties, FAO is not in a position to meet its promises of financial support for non-governmental organisations' participation, and therefore NGOs have cancelled the NGO Forum, planned for 3-9 November. NGOs around the world have been preparing for these events for the past year.

FAO Director General Jacques Diouf is currently investigating the possibility of a postponement of the summit. CSOs wish to maintain their active dialogue with FAO in the expectation that participation at a later date will be possible.

FAO has been placed in bad light thanks to Berlusconi and his mindless proposed relocation of the Summit. Berlusconi's interference has damaged the already politically weak United Nations. Italy should not be permitted to host UN meetings as long as Berlusconi is Premier. FAO should threaten to move its headquarters to a more reliable, democratic and supportive country.

BACKGROUND

At the beginning of August this year, the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, in an unprecedented manner, snubbed the United Nations: He announced unilaterally that the Summit would not take place as planned in Rome for fear that the riots, which accompanied the G8 meeting in Genoa would spread to Rome He referred to the activities of non-governmental organisations.

Without following agreed procedures and thus violating Italy's obligations as FAO's host country he proposed that the Summit be dumped on Africa. Host countries to UN organisations have no such right; Even the Chinese government held the United Nations Women's Summit in Beijing in 1995 and allowed thousands of Civil Society Organisations to enter the country.

Only later did the Italian government realise the financial consequences of its move. If the Summit were to have been moved from FAO headquarters the Italian government would have been obliged to cover all the extra costs incurred. Two months later, at the beginning of October, the Italian government rescinded on its demand that the Summit be held in Africa and the new Rimini fair complex. Under enormous time pressure, the FAO, government delegations and civil society have been finalising their preparations for the Summit and other planned events.

The FAO Council approved the transfer to Rimini a few days after. However, as the Italian government failed to arrange funds necessary for the transfer to Rimini, Diouf announced yesterday that Berlusconi would agree to transferring the Summit back to Rome.

While Berlusconi made an unbelievable press statement that “security worries have diminished”, a postponement is now under discussion in the FAO Council, particularly in the light of the current security situation. Attendance by the Heads of States as was originally expected can no longer be counted on.

NGOs are also concerned that these changes in plans and venues will impact negatively on the final stages of the negotiations on a Global Seed Treaty (the International Undertaking on Plant Genetic Resources) that the FAO Council will debate in November.

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