

# Chilean farmworker poisonings

*Pesticide poisonings have marred the image of Chile's flourishing agroexport sector in the past [see PN 37 p8]. Despite recent efforts of global supply chains to guarantee food safety for consumers, worker health and safety remains a low priority for agribusiness and the government. Maria Elena Rozas reports on two mass poisoning incidents which have re-fuelled the debate.*

Chile takes great pains to maintain a good international image with respect to its agricultural and timber exports yet the health and welfare of the thousands of workers, on whom the export sector depends, appear to be of less concern. This is illustrated by the case of 22 seasonal farm workers made ill via exposure to pesticides when they were harvesting broad beans on 22 October 2004. The incident took place on El Descanso farm in Maule region, about 300km south of the capital, Santiago. The workers, mainly women, suffered severe burning and lesions on their skin and several were hospitalised. TV images of two of the women's injuries caused consternation throughout Chile. Several women continue to suffer severe chronic dermatitis over much of their body and are unable to work in the field.

The health authorities undertook an investigation into the circumstances and in August 2005 delivered their verdict that the injuries were, indeed, caused by exposure to pesticides applied to the bean crop and not by allergic reaction to wild plants or prolonged exposure to sun, as claimed by the farm's owner, who denied having treated the crop. The pesticide responsible could not be identified as samples were taken too late but the authorities concluded from the symptoms presented and workers' descriptions of powerful odours and soaking wet foliage in the field the morning of the incident that other possible causes could be eliminated.

The farmer, Antonio del Carmen Navarrete Rojas, and the labour contractor, Manuel Esparza Berrios, were fined the equivalent of US\$6,165 and US\$1,541 respectively for non-compliance with several articles of the Health Ministry's 1999 regulation on minimum hygiene and safety conditions in workplaces. In particular they had violated the employer's requirement to 'maintain in the workplace sanitary and environmental conditions necessary to protect worker life and health' whether employed directly or by third parties. It was found that the workers had not been provided with any personal protective equipment or any training in its use and were expected to work in the fields and travel in open trucks without any form of protection from the weather.

A coalition has been set up of civil society organisations working in health, envi-

ronment, women's rights and rural livelihoods issues to press for better protection for farm workers. Members include PAN-Chile, the National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women (ANAMURI), the Centre for Women's Development Studies, the Latin American Environmental Conflicts Observatory and the Foundation for Alternative Agriculture Research. While welcoming the Ministry's verdict and fines imposed, the coalition is demanding government compensation for the physical and psychological harm suffered by the women workers affected and loss of earnings for those unable to return to work. According to Alicia Muñoz, director of ANAMURI, the workers have not been able to receive follow-up medical treatment or rehabilitation therapy as they cannot even afford the bus fare to the main town and many of the women are in extreme hardship, without the income to buy food. The local agricultural workers' union is also demanding compensation for them as a basic human right. Two of the most seriously affected women are unlikely ever to be able to work again in agriculture, in effect denying them a livelihood as there are few other job opportunities in Maule.

PAN Chile is calling for prohibition of the most harmful pesticides used in the country, starting with WHO Class Ia and Ib but also considering chronic effects, and tougher legislation to protect workers' health. Two Members of the Chilean parliament have now backed these demands: MP Adriana Muñoz stated 'It's shameful to admit that such conditions exist in Chile in the 21st century. Today an apple or a kiwi fruit is valued more than the workers who produce them.' She has called for the government to set up a centre for treatment and rehabilitation for the victims of pesticide poisoning. MP Juan Pablo Letelier highlighted 279 cases of poisoning recorded in Maule region alone in 2004. Ministry figures show 198 cases nationally of acute poisonings in the first nine months of that year, 69% of which were women.

The urgency of the coalition's demands has been underlined by yet another poisoning incident on 14 November 2005, at the start of the current farming season. At least 73 workers, 60 of which are women, suffered medium severity symptoms when they

were thinning fruit in an apple orchard belonging to the company Agrícola y Comercial Santa Elena in the Angol region. After receiving medical treatment in the local hospital, the workers were sent home to recover for two days. The authorities have begun an investigation and confirmed that the trees had been treated with the insecticide chlorpyrifos and a foliar fertiliser. The Angol incident is one of the largest mass poisoning events recorded in the country and demonstrates serious problems with the registration, labelling and use of pesticides in Chile. The chlorpyrifos product involved, Lorsban 75 WG, was classified by the authorities as of 'minor hazard' in acute toxicity terms yet WHO and US EPA both classify the active ingredient as 'moderately hazardous'<sup>1</sup>. The US severely restricted chlorpyrifos in 2000, because of possible effects on the nervous system, especially for children<sup>2</sup>. Some studies also suggest that long-term exposure to chlorpyrifos products may cause leukaemia, congenital malformations and alter the immune system<sup>3</sup>.

In the light of this incident, the coalition is calling for:

- risk warnings about chronic effects to be included on pesticide labels
- chronic effects to be taken into account on decisions to withdraw or restrict specific pesticides
- rigorous implementation of pesticide control measures and enforcement of re-entry periods by the ministries of labour, health and agriculture, especially in the peak agriculture season
- tough sanctions and fines for those who violate health and safety laws
- ratification by the government of the International Labour Organisation's Convention 184 on health and safety in agriculture
- Chile's agriculture policy to stimulate pesticide-free farming methods to protect health and environment

The circumstances surrounding these mass poisonings reveal the inhuman conditions under which Chilean casual farm workers are employed. Each season around half a million people, more than half of whom are women, are obliged to earn a living without a labour contract, subject to the double exploitation of agribusiness companies and gangmasters, exposed to all kinds of abuse and at grave risk to their immediate and long-term health. It is time for Chile's farm workers, who form the backbone of the profitable agroexport sector, to be granted full respect for their human rights, as well as their employment and health rights.

1. PAN North America database, [www.pesticideinfo.org](http://www.pesticideinfo.org)

2. Chlorpyrifos faces severe restriction, *Pesticides News* 49 p.16, 2000

3. Chlorpyrifos fact sheet, PAN UK, *Pesticides News* 41 18-19, 1998

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