

Canadian Press (May 19, 2005)

Federal officials refuse to explain why visa denied to African activist

BY DENNIS BUECKERT

OTTAWA (CP) - A respected African environmentalist has been unable to get a visa to enter Canada for negotiations on biodiversity scheduled to take place in Montreal next week.

Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher, Africa's chief negotiator for the UN Convention on Biodiversity, has told his supporters around the world that he has been refused a visa to enter Canada.

A spokeswoman for Citizenship and Immigration declined to comment, citing privacy concerns. She referred queries to the Foreign Affairs Department, which in turn referred calls back to Citizenship.

The secretariat of the Convention on Biodiversity is based in Montreal, and is to be the site of negotiations relating to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, an international agreement to regulate trade in genetically engineered organisms.

A spokesman for the secretariat said he was aware of the case but declined to comment. Beatrice Olivastri, CEO of Friends of the Earth Canada, said that Tewolde has been a key figure in defending African countries' resistance to genetically engineered organisms.

"In effect, Canada is screening out negotiators who stand up to biotech bullies," she said. "This is no way to host international negotiations."

Greenpeace called Canada's denial of a visa "a breathtaking display of political interference."

Tewolde had made it known he would come to Montreal to press for the labelling of genetically modified seeds and food products.

He has been especially outspoken in opposing so-called "terminator" technology, genetically modified seed that becomes sterile at harvest time, requiring farmers to purchase a new supply.

The federal government has opposed the mandatory labelling of genetically modified organisms, and has not ratified the UN biosafety protocol.

Olivastri said that Canada, Argentina and the United States account for up to 90 per cent of the genetically engineered crops in the world.

In an e-mail to supporters, Tewolde said he submitted his passport to the Canadian embassy on May 5 but his passport was returned without a visa May 17.

"I had planned to participate in these negotiations and continue with trying to help finalize the unfinished business of protecting biodiversity and human beings," he said in the message.

Inter Press Service (May 19, 2005)

Environment: Africa's Top Biosafety Envoy Shut Out of Canada Talks

By Stephen Leahy

Africa's chief negotiator for the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety has been denied entry into Canada to attend meetings to finalise key provisions regarding the international movement of genetically engineered organisms.

Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher, the Ethiopian government's chief scientist, had his passport returned without the requested Canadian visa Wednesday despite previous visits to Canada. Tewolde is trying to attend talks starting May 30 in the Canadian city of Montreal.

"I have been to Montreal many times," Tewolde said in an interview from Addis Ababa. "I have never heard of something like this happening before."

While this may be just a case of "exceptional bureaucratic bungling", he said, he wonders if it's a not-so-subtle but effective way of preventing him from participating.

"I have always been on the opposite side of the Canadian delegation especially on biosafety," he said.

The U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) adopted the biosafety protocol in 2000 to address the safe transfer, handling, and use of living genetically modified organisms (GMOs) that could have an adverse effect on biodiversity.

A respected scientist and champion of biodiversity, Tewolde received the Right Livelihood Award (also known as the alternative Nobel prize) from the king of Sweden in 2000. He is considered by some to be the father of the Biosafety Protocol.

Unlike the U.S. and Canadian governments, he firmly believes in the need for strong international regulations for genetically engineered (GE) seeds and crops.

Tewolde had planned to go to Montreal to ensure that GE seeds and food products would be labeled under the agreement. He also wanted to see companies and governments accept liability when their seeds lead to GE contamination.

"Canada doesn't want to see any serious regulations regarding GMOs," Tewolde said.

"They wouldn't want me there because I have been the spokesperson for the African group and other developing countries."

Canadian-based non-governmental organisations that support Tewolde's position blasted the visa denial.

"We're not just upset, we're pissed off about this," said Pat Mooney, executive director of ETC Group.

"I wouldn't have believed it was deliberate but after the CBD meeting in Bangkok I'm not so sure," Mooney told IPS.

In Bangkok last February, he said, the Canadian government used "heavy-handed tactics" to try and lift a de-facto moratorium on the so-called Terminator, a GE technology that makes seeds sterile. Only strong objections from African countries, Austria, Switzerland, Peru, and the Philippines kept the moratorium in place.

The son of a farmer, Tewolde has publicly clashed with Canadian and U.S. representatives at international meetings over issues such as patents on seeds and the risks of GE crops.

The visa denial "is a real embarrassment for Montreal which hopes to be a U.N. city," said Mooney.

The CBD is based in Montreal and holds many of its meetings there.

"We've pulled as many strings as we can to get Dr. Tewolde a visa," said a spokesperson for the CBD Secretariat. "We don't know why this is happening but we're doing our best to get him here."

There have not been any other visa issues for the upcoming meeting, she said.

Canadian officials responsible for issuing visas said Tewolde's statements that his visa has been denied "conflicts with our information" but refused to comment further.

"It's a matter of protecting the privacy of the individual involved," said Cara Prest, spokesperson for Canada's Citizenship and Immigration department.

Tougher rules for those requiring visas to enter Canada have been in place since June 2002. When it comes to granting visas, Prest said, "we're also always researching new developments."

The visa foul-up has also meant that Tewolde missed an African preparatory meeting for upcoming talks on the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture, he said. He also will miss inter-regional negotiations on the biosafety protocol in Oslo, Norway because the Canadian High Commission in Nairobi held on to his diplomatic passport.

"Now that I have been prevented from coming to Montreal, who knows which ones of you will be prevented next time?" Tewolde wrote in an open letter of protest. Now, he said, he is waiting for the Canadian government to respond.

CANADA NEWS WIRE (May 19, 2005)

Canada Denies Visa for Africa's Top Biosafety Negotiator - Montreal's status as UN's biodiversity headquarters is jeopardized

OTTAWA, May 19 /CNW Telbec/ - In a breathtaking display of political interference, the Canadian government has blocked entry of Africa's chief negotiator for the Cartagena (biosafety) Protocol who was scheduled to attend meetings beginning next week in Montreal. The Protocol is the United Nations treaty that governs the international movement of genetically modified (GM) organisms.

Dr. Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher, the Ethiopian government's chief scientist and its representative to the Montreal-based UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) had his passport returned without the requested Canadian visa yesterday, and without explanation.

The renowned scientist submitted his passport to the Canadian embassy on May 5 and had planned to fly to Oslo, Norway for inter-regional negotiations prior to attending the Montreal meetings that begin Wednesday, May 25. Because his passport was returned May 17, Dr. Tewolde was forced to miss the Oslo meeting.

Labeled dangerous?

Officials at Foreign Affairs and Citizenship and Immigration have been unable to offer an explanation for rejecting the negotiator's visa. Dr. Tewolde has been in Canada often over the past decade, participating in intergovernmental negotiations on biodiversity and biosafety. Since the Rio Earth Summit of 1992, Dr. Tewolde has been one of the most well known leaders among African diplomats addressing environmental issues. However, his positions have not been popular with the Canadian government.

During the negotiations on a UN treaty on crop genetic resources adopted in Rome last year, Dr. Tewolde spoke on behalf of all developing countries in demanding the right of farmers to save and exchange seeds and in opposing "life patenting" (intellectual property over biological products and processes). In the negotiations that led up to the Cartagena Protocol, the Ethiopian clashed with his Canadian counterparts, demanding higher standards to prevent GM contamination. At UN meetings in Montreal and around the world, Dr. Tewolde has spoken passionately against Terminator technology (genetically modified seed rendered sterile at harvest time, forcing farmers to buy new seeds each growing season). In February, the Canadian government was prepared to dismantle a de facto moratorium on Terminator at a UN biodiversity meeting in Bangkok. Canada was deeply embarrassed (and highly criticized) when its position became known.

The Ethiopian scientist had made it known that he would be coming to Montreal next week to press for the labeling of genetically modified seeds and food products, and for companies and governments to accept liability when their seeds lead to GM contamination. Canada has thus far failed to ratify the UN biosafety protocol and is known to be opposed to both GM compulsory labeling and liability.

"I had planned to participate in these negotiations and continue with trying to help finalize the unfinished business of protecting biodiversity and human beings," wrote Dr. Tewolde in a letter sent today to colleagues around the world.

Montreal's UN future in doubt: In 1995, the Canadian, Québec, and Montreal governments persuaded the United Nations to locate the Secretariat for the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in Montreal.

One of the critical requirements for hosting a major UN agency is easy access for foreign diplomats to attend intergovernmental discussions.

"In barring Dr. Tewolde from participating in the Montreal meetings, Canada is jeopardizing Montreal's future as a United Nations city," said Eric Darier, a campaigner with Greenpeace in Montreal, "If Ottawa is doing this for its own political purposes, it is making a grave mistake and tarnishing Canada's reputation in the process."

"Dr. Tewolde is one of the most respected scientists in his field," said Pat Mooney, Executive Director of ETC Group in Ottawa, "If the Canadian government can't make sure Dr. Tewolde has his visa for the opening of the meetings, Canada does not deserve to host the Convention on Biological Diversity." ETC Group is a Canadian-based international civil society organization with observer status in the United Nations. Mooney talked with Dr. Tewolde by telephone today.

Dr. Tewolde himself is concerned that Canada's actions signal a pattern, "Now that I have been prevented from coming to Montreal, who knows which ones of you will be prevented next time?" he wrote.

Dr. Tewolde is the recipient of a number of awards and honors for his work in defending biodiversity and the environment. In particular, he received the Right Livelihood Award (also known as the Alternative Nobel Prize).

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CBC News (May 25, 2005)
GM foods expert gets visa — late

OTTAWA – A last-minute decision to grant a visa to a prominent African scientist has some accusing Canada of abusing its position as host nation for the UN's Convention on Biological Diversity.

Ethiopia's Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher is the African Union's chief negotiator on biosafety and biodiversity. He is an outspoken critic of genetically modified foods.

In the past, he has taken positions opposed to Canada, the United States, and the biotechnology industry.

This week, Tewolde missed the opening of talks on the biotechnology industry, in Montreal, because Canadian officials did not give him a visa.

He finally received his visa Tuesday morning. He says Canada appears to have abused its role as host nation, to try to exclude opposing views. He now says he hopes to arrive in Montreal for the last day of talks.

Tewolde says Canadian officials told him he left it too late to apply for his visa. He says the application was submitted three weeks ago. He also says he's never had problems visiting Canada in the past.

Canadian officials declined to discuss the case, citing privacy laws. But a government official says her information differs from Tewolde's.

Canadian Press (May 25, 2005)
Call for UN agency to move out of Canada
By DENNIS BUECKERT

OTTAWA (CP) - A United Nations environmental agency should be moved from Montreal if delegates continue to have problems getting Canadian visas to attend meetings, says a top African diplomat.

Tewolde Berhan Gebre Egziabher, official negotiator for the G-77 group of developing countries and China, made his demand in a letter to Klaus Topfer, executive director of the UN Environment Program.

Tewolde appealed for a motion to censure Canada for the difficulty he had in getting a visa and for the continued difficulties he said are being experienced by other delegates to a Montreal conference on biodiversity.

About 800 delegates from around the world are expected to attend negotiations next week on the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, whose central purpose is to prevent genetic contamination from genetically modified organisms.

The visa controversy comes amid a global dispute over genetically engineered foods that pits many poor countries against major crop exporters such as Canada and the U.S.

There have been reports that Canadian GE canola has been found growing around eight Japanese ports despite rules on handling that are supposed to prevent such contamination.

One of the biggest concerns about GE crops is that they will mix with indigenous plants, changing the genetic composition of valued species and producing new unwanted varieties, sometimes referred to as superweeds.

Tewolde received a visa to visit Montreal only after protests from many North American groups including the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and the Council of Canadians.

At least four other would-be participants in the meeting are known to have been refused visas and there are likely others, said Eric Darier, a Greenpeace activist in Montreal.

He said all the delegates who have encountered visa problems are from poor countries and all are critics of Canada's policies promoting the trade in genetically modified foods and crops.

One of the major issues at the Montreal conference will be rules on the labelling of GE products. Many countries are pushing for much tighter regulations, but they are opposed by major exporters, including Canada.

Maude Barlow, head of the Council of Canadians, charged that Ottawa is deliberately excluding people who oppose Canada's position.

"It just seems to us too much of a coincidence that this happened," she said.

"It looks clear to me this is a political decision. Dr. Tewolde is a renowned scientist. There'd be no reason to pick him out, there's no terrorist link, nothing like that."

Others suggest the exclusion of certain delegates could be due to suspicion that people from poor countries may seek to stay in Canada once they arrive.

"If Canada cannot relax its hypervigilance to allow these talks to occur, then it's obvious the talks cannot occur in Canada," said Sarah Dover of the Sierra Club.

Marie-Christine Lilkoff, a spokeswoman for Foreign Affairs, said she could not comment on any case involving a visa application due to privacy concerns.

In his letter to Topfer, Tewolde proposed that "one refusal or delay by the government of Canada in issuing a visa requested . . . shall become sufficient ground for the closure of the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity in Montreal and its transfer to the territory of another party."

Darier of Greenpeace said the escape of GE crops in Japan, documented by Japanese environmental groups through laboratory tests, could endanger Canada's access to a major market.

"Through Canadian exports of canola we are now contaminating one of our major trading partners."

He said Australia, which, like Canada, is a major promoter of biotech crops, has imposed a moratorium of GE canola to prevent contamination of GE crops. He added that it is precisely such contamination that the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety is intended to prevent.

The conference on biosafety officially opens next week, but preliminary discussions have already begun.