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Mr President, DDT will end malaria

Thursday, 8th June, 2006

E-mail article Print article

By **Fiona Kobusingye**

DEAR Mr President, in recent days the business community has written to you and even taken out newspaper ads opposing your carefully considered decision to fight malaria using indoor residual spraying with DDT. We are deeply concerned that this could undo years of hard work, undermine new USAID policies and programs, and result in needless deaths.

These businesses are worried about threats to ban exports from Uganda if traces of DDT are found in food products or flowers. We believe these fears are misplaced. Exports to European and other countries are vital to the nation's future as they bring jobs and revenue to Uganda. However, other considerations are equally important:

- Nothing is more important than protecting our people's lives and health against the impact of malaria is. By contrast, concerns about revenue losses are speculative. They assume the European threats will be carried out and fail to recognise that international support is growing for indoor spraying with DDT, while pressure is building against anyone who threatens actions against life-saving insecticides and anti-malaria programs.

- The stigma and loud condemnation will come not from using DDT but from failing to use it; from putting profits and baseless fears about insecticides like DDT ahead of human lives. The stigma will go to former colonialist powers that are now malaria-free (thanks to DDT and modern housing which only wealthy people can afford), and that now demand environmental purity from poor people who still suffer and die from malaria.

- Indoor residual spraying does not contaminate the environment with DDT. Small amounts are used, by trained specialists, under carefully controlled programs that also safeguard the supplies, transportation and use of the insecticide. Only the walls and eaves of houses are sprayed; the chemical is not sprayed outdoors, the way it was in Europe and the United States years ago. So the chance of any DDT getting onto crops or flowers is almost zero.

- Concerns about DDT being harmful to wildlife or people are also misplaced. Despite decades of studies, no one has ever shown that DDT causes cancer or anything worse than skin rashes on people. Most claims about harm to animals have also been disproven – even when large amounts of DDT were sprayed on trees and fields.

IPast aid agency efforts simply have not worked. Bed nets, education and other "approved" programs have done little to reduce malaria — which is why South Africa, Swaziland, Zambia and now Uganda and Tanzania are turning to DDT and other insecticides, which do work.

- Contrary to what the business ads say, DDT does not attack malaria parasites; it attacks mosquitoes. The parasites do not build up resistance to DDT, though they have to chloroquine. And while mosquitoes can build up resistance to DDT's killer properties, if the insecticide is overused (which would not be the case in IRS programs), they do not build resistance to DDT's amazing repellent properties, which in effect put a long-lasting net over an entire house and all its occupants.

- Businesses would be much better off if their workers and the business executives' own families were not at constant risk from malaria. By using DDT in conjunction with modern ACT drugs, we can eliminate malaria from most parts of our country and population. People could work, attend school, care for their families, have money to spend on things other than anti-malaria medicine, make our country prosperous, and address our energy, transportation and other health



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problems.

Mr. President, I myself have suffered many times from malaria, and now my internal system is totally out of balance. I lost my son, two sisters and three nephews to this vicious disease. In one year, 50 of the 500 orphan children who attended the school that my husband and I help sponsor died from malaria! There is probably not a single family in Uganda, or all of Sub-Saharan Africa, that has not lost loved ones to this disease.

Caring people have been working for years to change policies about the use of DDT. Finally, just a few months ago, USAID decided that the disease and death tolls were unconscionable and intolerable. USAID changed its policies. It is now supporting and paying for indoor spraying with DDT and other chemicals. Other agencies are also thinking seriously about supporting indoor spraying with DDT.

Mr. President, the business community fears losing export markets and money. But we must not lose sight of our single most important objective: protecting the health and lives of our precious, irreplaceable people. I therefore beg you, Mr. President, please ignore the newspaper ads. Listen to us, the people whose lives are in danger. Please don't give us a death sentence. Give us life and good health.

Mr. President, my experience and suffering allowed me to testify in 2004 at a Martin Luther King Day conference in New York and present my statement to a US House of Representatives committee hearing. These actions, and the efforts of many others, have brought many allies to our side. President George Bush and USAID are supporting and paying for DDT. Archbishop Desmond Tutu and hundreds of clergy and doctors have signed a declaration supporting DDT to control malaria. They have been joined by renowned international researchers, civil rights activists, NGO leaders and environmentalists, policy analysts and authors. Mr. President, if we join with them, we will become an unstoppable force.

Organisations that fund health and development programs will follow USAID's wise example, including WHO, World Bank, UNICEF and European Union. Uganda will become like the United States, Europe, Canada, Australia and China – all of which once had malaria but eradicated it using DDT.

Mr. President, I have suffered so much from malaria. Whenever I think about the possibility of a malaria-free Uganda, I am overjoyed by the vision that one day Ugandans could wake up to lives freed from constant fear of disease and death to lives where good health brings prosperity, when we no longer have to spend our hard-earned money on treating this disease and burying its victims. That will be a day when we can compete equally with farmers and businessmen from other nations and take our rightful places in a fair and just world.

With the help of your good government, we have registered as an NGO here locally called CORE Uganda Chapter. We believe that global racial equality is possible, that the same rights enjoyed in other parts of the world should be accessed freely by all, and that God has given our leaders the power and obligation to fulfil this for their people.

Mr. President, I am a woman with a big, but simple wish: That you will hear the voices of people who want to be safe in their homes from mosquitoes that would sentence them to death by malaria. That you will empower your supporters even more strongly, and unite all Ugandans to fight our common enemies – the mosquitoes and the malaria they carry. And that we will all join in using sound science, good health practices and the great power of God to bring a new future to Uganda.

Thank you for considering our views, hearing our pleas and doing so much for all the people of Uganda.
 For God and my country.

The writer is the Regional Coordinator, Great Lakes, and Chairman of CORE Uganda

