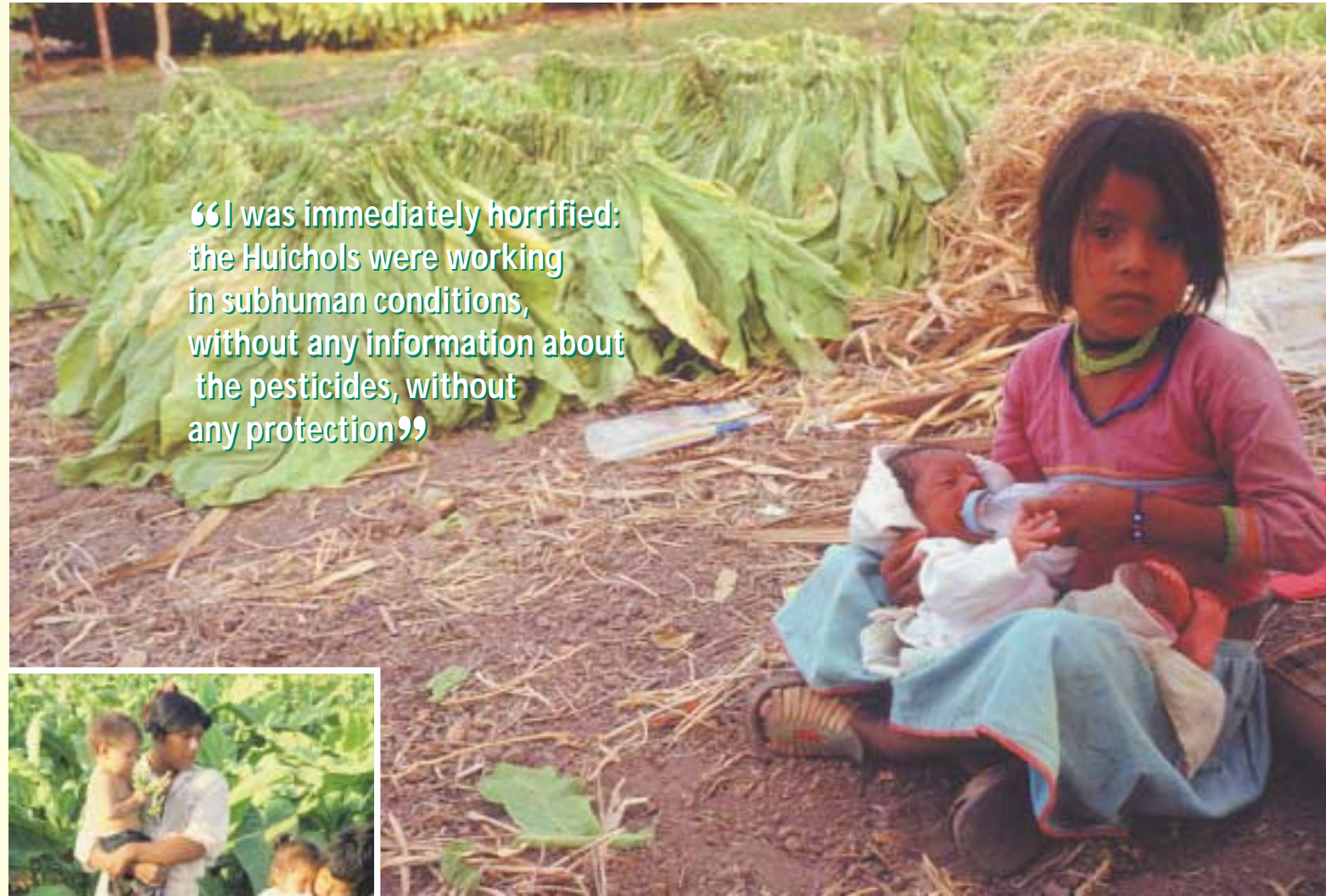


Poisoned Leaves, Imperiled Lives

These days, turning tobacco into cigarettes is a highly mechanized process involving multi-million-dollar rolling and packaging machines, and remarkably few people. In contrast, the harvesting of tobacco leaves remains very labor intensive, much as it has always been. Why does so much of the tobacco in 'American' cigarettes today come from places like Malawi, Zimbabwe, Brazil, Turkey and Mexico? Unfortunately, the answers are all too obvious: cheap labor, child labor and little if any labor protection. The difference between the work of tobacco pickers today and that of their predecessors generations ago is that, in this pesticide-saturated era of agro-business, it's even more harmful than it used to be. Nicotine itself is a powerful natural insecticide, and its absorption through the skin of farm laborers has caused severe cases of so-called 'green tobacco sickness' that have been recorded for centuries. It's estimated that 40% of pickers are struck down with the illness during each harvest. But far more serious are the health effects of the man-made chemicals to which they are exposed. Patricia Diaz-Romo observed this heartbreaking development in her native Mexico, and then produced a video in an effort to raise awareness of the plight of tobacco pickers there, and around the world. Her story, as told to Philippe Boucher, follows.



“I was immediately horrified: the Huichols were working in subhuman conditions, without any information about the pesticides, without any protection”



P D-R: I was born in Guadalajara, in the state of Jalisco, Mexico. The Huichol Indians live in the Mexican part of the Sierra Madre Occidental, in the states of Nayarit, Durango, Zacatecas and in the north of Jalisco. They have kept their own forms of social organization and their own religious beliefs. Many Huichol families make seasonal migrations to work as day laborers in the tobacco fields of Nayarit, along the Pacific Coast. That is the main tobacco production area in Mexico.

In 1983, a group of people in Guadalajara founded a nonprofit organization to help the Huichol Indians called the *Asociacion para la Investigacion, Capacitacion y Asistencia Wixarika* (AICAW). The organization helps fund a health clinic for the Huichols, who are very good craftsmen, and with the sale of their

products, are able cover part of the costs themselves. I studied design in Italy so I was put in charge of organizing the craftsmen. We noticed that people started to visit the clinic with diseases that had previously been quite rare among the Huichols: a few cancer cases; children with congenital malformations; etc. At first we were surprised and we could not find an explanation. But it turned out that all of these people were working in the tobacco fields of Nayarit, so we wondered about this coincidence.

Without any prior knowledge of pesticides, I went to visit the tobacco fields. I was immediately horrified: the Huichols were working in subhuman conditions, without any information about the pesticides, without any protection. They slept in a camp close to tobacco leaves saturated in chemicals. They drank water out of irrigation canals full of the pesticides spread by airplanes. I started to collect information from a few people, and from organizations like the Pesticide Action Network in San Francisco. They suggested I make a video to document this terrible situation, and I thought it could be a useful tool with which to testify and protest. ***Huicholes and Pesticides*** was produced in 1994 with the collaboration of Hector Bonilla, a famous Mexican actor, for the Spanish version, and Peter Coyote for the English version. A version in Wixarika, the Huichol language, was made in 1996. The film has been widely shown in Mexico and won awards in film festivals in Spain and Cuba. We have also been contacted by many other organizations working with indigenous people to produce versions in other native languages. Unfortunately the fate of the Huichols is common to all the indigenous agricultural workers obliged to migrate from their land to work on the agro-industrial properties in northeast Mexico and in the USA. I have gradually become more involved. Our small team tries to inform the public about the problems caused by the pesticides and to explain how dangerous these products are to the workers who are exposed to them.

PB: Your 27-minute documentary *Huicholes and Pesticides* was produced in 1994. You were again recently in this part of Mexico. Can you describe the situation now, seven years later? Are the indigenous workers better protected from pesticides in the tobacco fields? Are children still working with their parents and exposed to deadly toxic chemicals?

In the past seven years we have launched, as best we could with our limited means, numerous campaigns to raise awareness of the risks associated with pesticides. The video has now been translated into 12 indigenous lan-



guages, and we have also produced radio spots, but Mexican law prohibits the use of any language other than Spanish! We have started a petition drive to change this regulation. We hope that the new government headed by Vicente Fox will give the indigenous peoples their full rights, including those in the domain of culture and labor.

We have also written fact sheets for journalists and articles that have been published in the Mexican press. We have published calendars with recommendations for the workers and their families. We have participated in many meetings and organized workshops about the rights of the laborers. But we have to be realistic. We are confronting the economic interests of some enormous multinational corporations, the tobacco producers and the pesticide manufacturers.

The government and the tobacco companies have initiated a few limited campaigns, like the "Clean Fields" program to collect the empty cans of pesticides. La Moderna, the Mexican subsidiary of British American Tobacco, claims they have reduced their use of pesticides, but they have not provided any evidence of this. The agricultural corporations and government have



started a program to educate the children of day laborers. The first effort involved 150 children, a very small number considering all the children who work in the tobacco fields. The tobacco companies and the growers' association have started to air radio spots, this time in the indigenous languages, regarding the use of pesticides. These initiatives are important because they are the first taken by the government and the tobacco industry, but they remain very limited compared with the magnitude of the problem.

In the film, little is said about the tobacco companies that buy the crops. I noticed one truck with a Marlboro sign. Is Philip Morris involved in the management of the farms? Are other multinationals involved in the abuse of toxic pesticides and deadly practices?

In the tobacco growing area of Nayarit, there are about 10,000 tobacco growers, and 94% of the land belongs to *ejidatarios*, communal land owners. The tobacco company contracts with the *ejidatarios*, committing to buy their harvest, but in turn imposes its own conditions regarding which pesticides are to be used and in what quantity. The growers hire the day laborers and have to figure out how to cover their expenses.

The tobacco companies also control the sale of pesticides, another sizable source of profit for them. In recent years, after long negotiations,



the growers' association has obtained a guarantee that the tobacco companies will partially pay for the social security of the workers. On average a grower hires six day laborers to tend one hectare, yet the companies will only pay for two workers per hectare.

“We have direct information from public health professionals... that there are pressures to register poisonings due to pesticides under other causes, such as sunburn or epilepsy.”

At one point in the video, you mention the possibility of a lawsuit, but it is immediately dismissed. The number of victims is quite high, more than 1500 deaths in 1993. Do you have more recent statistics? Is there no way to go to court to defend the victims?

In Mexico, unlike in the U.S., litigation is not a common means of redressing grievances. Besides, most of the victims are indigenous laborers and small farmers who are extremely poor and afraid of possible repression. They can't imagine pursuing justice through the courts, although to a U.S. citizen this may seem like the obvious recourse. Religious and cultural factors also come into play. Many of the workers, especially the Huichols, don't believe their diseases are caused by pesticides. They think they fall ill because they have sinned against their gods, because they have not respected their religious obligations. It is very difficult to convince them that they got sick because of the pesticides.

There are statistics that indicate how many people are poisoned, but these are unreliable and understated. We have direct information from public health professionals working in hospitals within the tobacco growing area that there are pressures to register poisonings

due to pesticides under other causes, such as sunburn or epilepsy. These pressures come from the officials within the public administration and from the representatives of the tobacco companies. Compensation for favorable reports comes in the form of cigars, free meals or even computers.

Many of the pesticides used in Mexico have been banned in the US and other western countries. Are those products still allowed in 2001? Does the World Health Organization have a position on these issues?

I don't think the U.S. is a good example, as we have seen with the Reagan and Bush I administrations (and presumably with Bush II). They reauthorized the use of pesticides that had been prohibited after years of effort.

The pesticide trade is based on two principles: business and hypocrisy. Hypocrisy because most of the countries that produce



pesticides allow the export of dangerous products that are not authorized for use at home. This is the case in the U.S., Japan, Germany, Holland, France, the U.K. and Switzerland: the big producers. With such a policy, it is not surprising that while the industrialized countries use 80% of the world's pesticides, they only suffer 1% of the deaths attributed to these chemicals. Meanwhile, the less industrialized countries use 20% of the world's pesticides but suffer 99% of the deadly cases officially registered, and many more that are not registered.

In Mexico, lots of pesticides are officially authorized. Others that are officially regulated can be bought without any type of control. The few that are banned can be smuggled into the country and used with little risk of accountability. A commission created in 1987 to regulate pesticide use has unfortunately been completely ineffective and has neither the staff nor the budget required to enforce the law. If you add in the extensive corruption, there is, in effect, a broad deregulation of the use of pesticides and widespread abuse.

The World Health Organization is not involved in the control of pesticides as far as tobacco growing is concerned. They are exclusively

concerned with food products. So you wouldn't expect them to be effective in this area.

We read about protests organized during the annual shareholder meetings of tobacco corporations. Have the issues of the chemical poisoning of tobacco farmers been raised at such meetings? What about the chemical, and often pharmaceutical companies that manufacture those pesticides? Have you received support from more industrialized countries?

I don't have any concrete information, but I believe that the anti-tobacco groups, while they care about the health problems caused by tobacco, are hardly concerned with the health problems caused by pesticides among the



people working in the tobacco fields. Last year we came to speak about the pesticide problems during the 11th World Conference on Tobacco or Health, in Chicago. We were the only ones among thousands of participants (with the exception of the Brazilian sociologist Angela Cordero) to say there was a problem. She spoke about green tobacco sickness. Many of its symptoms can be mistaken with those linked to pesticides. That makes it more difficult to identify and substantiate the harm inflicted upon workers by pesticides.

We have received some moral and financial support from Medico International, a German organization, as well as from PANNA (Pesticide Action Network North America) and a few other North American foundations, like the Global Greengrants Fund. The Tobacco Free Coalition, a local program in San Francisco, helped us attend the conference in Chicago and used part of our video for TV spots in California to raise

awareness about the health problems of migrant workers. We were also recently contacted by the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids, who wanted to use some of our pictures of children working in the tobacco fields to inform young smokers.

Most of our funding for this project comes from Mexican non-governmental organizations like the Mexican Association for Art and Popular Culture and an association for the health of indigenous infants in Mexico. We have been able to sustain this program thanks to many volunteers, and with the help of the Miguel Agustin Pro Juarez Center for Human Rights and the ITESO University in Guadalajara, Jalisco.

The International Labor Rights Fund of Washington DC has asked for our collaboration to produce a documentary that will include a short segment about the Huichol children working in the tobacco fields.

I believe that the tobacco industry and the pesticide industry have done nothing to prevent the poisoning of millions of people and the thousands of deaths caused each year by their toxic products. They are the ones responsible, though they claim on the

labels of their bottles of pesticides that they cannot be held responsible for the damage their products may cause, suggesting instead that the victim is to blame.

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

I want to emphasize the situation of the children of the migrant workers' families in the tobacco fields. They are the most vulnerable to the pesticides, and the most affected.

This interview was reprinted with the kind permission of Patricia Diaz-Romo and cyber-journalist Philippe Boucher. Philippe's "Rendez-vous" archive, featuring over 100 tobacco control activists, can be found at <http://smokescreen.org/?rendezvous>.

HOW YOU CAN HELP:
If you would like to purchase the **Huicholes and Pesticides** video, or otherwise contribute to the efforts of PANNA, please refer to www.panna.org/shop/shop.html.