

# FOCUS

## NGOs and Fundamentalism

by Saleem Samad

In a sleepy village in Feni in south east Bangladesh, 6,436 women nearly half of the listed voters were barred from casting votes on 21 March. They were preparing to vote for the local village council election. The innocent women stayed indoors according to a *Fatwa* (Islamic decree) by the principal of a local *madrasah* (Quranic School).

The decree says that the villages of Mohamaya are predominantly Muslim and must preserve *purdah* (veil). Walking into a voting centre is detrimental to *purdah*. Therefore it is against the practice of Islam. The candidates of the village poll accepted the decree and agreed to refrain from encouraging women to vote. Salma Ali, a lawyer and executive director of Bangladesh Women Lawyers Association, took an exception to it. The association was granted a rule by the High Court challenging the validity of the election on 15 May.

"The achieve sustainable development, it is imperative to practice absolute democracy. The Mullahs are a deterrent to fundamental rights," remarked Salma Ali.

In the two months of February and March, the Mullahs in 15 administrative districts attacked and censured development initiatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in 40 areas in the countryside. Activities like women's development, family planning, credit, non formal education for children and adults, were singled out. "They (Mullahs) are the defeated forces of the liberation war," said Dr Anwar Hossain, a professor of history at Dhaka University who lectures on Islamic revivalism and fundamentalism. "The Mullahs were in agony under a secular society that has aged through historic evolution."

The Mullahs, who advocate Islamic fundamentalism, were opposed to the Bangladesh war of independence in 1971. Thousands of Mullah volunteers took arms opposing the birth of a secular Bangladesh. "After 20 year they are avenging their defeat through their so called Islamic revivalism. Opposing

everything they can," the historian commented. During British colonialism, two hundred years ago, the Mullahs proclaimed that those who learned English or studied in Christian missionary schools would cease to be Muslims. Thus, the Muslims fell far behind in education in India.

The Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB), a coordinating body of development NGOs, has defined the present situation as a "social disaster" and thus prepared "frontline workers."

In six weeks 15,000 NGO workers were trained to organise early warning, resistance and mobilise community to defend the onslaught of the Mullahs. Another 16,500 were trained by BRAC Gono Shahajay Sangstha and Proshika who were the worst affected during the current wave of Islamic revivalism. "We will be in the field, we will be there, even if the government does not support us," said Rasheda K Chowdhury, Director of ADAB.

The director of ADAB also said that when the incidents of the Mullahs began two years before, they placed memoranda to the Prime Minister Khaleda Zia for her intervention. Instead of looking for support of the political parties, the NGOs will work at the grassroots. Rasheda Chowdhury said.

When the NGO leaders met the Finance Minister Saifur Rahman, before he left for the Paris Aid Club meet in April, he instead asked, "Why they (fundamentalists) are angry at NGOs and not at government rural development programmes?" The Paris Consortium urged Bangladesh to bring a halt to the hindrance to rural development caused by the Mullahs.

Nearly 610 NGOs, engaged in changing the quality of life of the rural poor, had spent Tk 5760 million mostly from donors abroad in 1992-93.

The US NGOs in Bangladesh expressed their concern to the Government of Bangladesh. The panicked bilateral and multilateral donors set up a monitoring cell in United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Dhaka office. UNDP maintains close contact with the government and the NGOs. On the other hand, the Church NGOs who were accused of proselytisation are worried about themselves.

The alliance of the fundamentalists took to the streets after they charged novelist Taslima Nasreen for blasphemy. After every Friday prayer, they marched through the streets voicing a ban on NGOs and for hanging Taslima.

On 30 June the alliance of the Mullah's forced shops to keep their shutters down and

put transport off the road in a country-wide "hartal" (general strike). During the day the Mullahs torched two NGOs offices at Zakiganj in the north-east demanding closure of the NGO activities in the area. The lone pro-fundamentalist Islamic Alliance party was elected to parliament.

The Women's Development Forum immediately took to the streets to

protest such religious persecution and repression against fundamental rights. Rokeya Kabir, coordinator of the Forum was threatened by telephone and warned that "you have to be a Muslim to stay in Bangladesh." She said the Mullahs used the demand for "blasphemy law" as a trump card. Today they are driven back to their holes. In a bid to stop red flag with red flag, the Mullahs are organising a strong women's group to counter the voice of those women demanding their basic rights to freedom from oppression.

## "Vote Semolina Pilchards"

by Abdul Hannan

WANT to hear something surreal? Alright then: "Semolina Pilchards climbing up the Eiffel Tower." (From The Beatles' Song 'I am the Walrus'). Now how about something even more surreal? Ready? Here it is: "Democracy in Bangladesh". Weird, huh?

Democratic institutions are like mirrors. Both come in a variety of shapes and sizes and both require people to bring them to life, as it were. Unfortunately for us, that's not where the similarity ends because both democratic institutions and mirrors have an uncanny capacity to reveal who we are in a most unflattering way. Hence, if an ass looks into either, one can scarcely expect an angel to look out. And if, as superstition goes, a broken mirror will bring seven years' bad luck, what fate awaits us if we shatter our fragile democratic institutions?

This newspaper has made commendable efforts to help strike a path towards a judicious resolution to the current political crisis, but as time passes one cannot help but detect the fore of desperation creeping in. Let's face it, selfish individualism and unneighbourly aggression prevail, while hope and commitment are in a pretty poor state of health, losing ground to helplessness and wishful thinking.

Instead of creating a canvass upon which we may illustrate our mores and expectations as a people, we are turning our political culture into a prism through which one may gaze at our deficiencies warped into manic caricatures. Politics has become a means whereby we focus our hatred (well, have you ever seen 'love' inform politics?) of others in our society into a more com-

centrated contempt for those that represent us in parliament.

At it's best, politics has an element of performance about it; that is, theatre, and not the bedlamite circus we are presently being served up. The question remains as to how much more weary revulsion we can express at the intemperate views and gibbering lunacies that are killing the prospects of sober debate. For how much longer must we bear the crushing degradation of our people and the seamless, parasitic apathy of the rich, the vermin that have clambered to the top of society (through the dehumanization of others). What lies behind the skillful, poetic overtures of commitment to the country's welfare but the unaccountable, unforgotten indifference towards injustice, violence and oppression? Are we so sunk in sin and perfidy that we cannot see that it is we who are failing democracy and not vice-versa?

Silly questions, and no doubt inadequate to elicit any sort of understanding of the rules of this game the Great and the Good are playing with our lives. But the feeling of delusion and madness, however surreal the unfolding political scenario may be, is real enough.

At such times, when the real and the surreal cannot be easily distinguished, rational options seem to be limited. You can either take to the pen or take to the gun, or, if you are a Hemingway, both. But for those with a voyeuristic curiosity in the diseased spectator sport that Bangladeshi politics has become, why not elect to join those semolina pilchards up the Eiffel Tower? At least there you will be guaranteed a good view.



## Bangladesh Yet to Sign Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

Bangladesh has not signed and ratified "The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights." The Covenant has entered into force on 23 March 1976 as an international treaty. The Covenant was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 16 December 1966.

Nearly 100 countries have signed and ratified the Covenant while two other States have only signed, according to Reporters Sans Frontiers 1995 Report. Bangladesh, Pakistan and Bhutan are exception among the SAARC nations to have not signed and ratified the covenant. Several developing countries striving in poor economic growth but governments committed to democracy have signed and ratified the Covenant

Article 19 of the Covenant states: 1) Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference. 2) Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through other media of his choice. 3) The exercise of the rights provided for in paragraph 2 of this article carried with it special duties and responsibilities. It may therefore be subject to certain restrictions, but these shall only be such as are provided by law and are necessary: (a) For respect of the rights or reputations of others; (b) For the protection of national security or of public order, or of public health or morals.

## Cigarettes Cost More Than You Think

by Mir Lutful Kabir Saadi

ACCORDING to World Health Organisation (WHO) statistics, more than three million people die every year throughout the world on account of cigarette smoking. This means roughly one death every ten seconds. The rate of death from cancer and heart disease is twice as high among smokers than among nonsmokers. People who smoke two or more packs of cigarettes daily are three or four times more likely to have cancer or heart disease than nonsmokers. Also, the efficiency of the lungs decreases with age much faster in smokers.

Increasing evidence indicates that cigarette smoke also harms nonsmokers. Research shows that nonsmokers who for many years have worked closely with smokers suffer decreased lung efficiency. Studies also indicate that nonsmoking spouses of smokers have higher rates of lung cancer and heart attack than do nonsmoking spouses of nonsmokers. Also, infants under one year of age whose mothers smoke have twice as many lung infections as infants with nonsmoking mothers.

Experimental, clinical-pathological and epidemiological evidence indicates that cigarette smoking is the main cause of lung cancer in men. Cigarette smoking is also a cause of lung cancer in women, but accounts for fewer cases than men. The risk of developing lung cancer increases with the number of cigarettes smoked per day, and the duration of smoking. But it diminishes with the cessation of smoking. Cigarette smoking appears to be much more important than other factors, such as air pollution, in the causation of lung cancer in the general population. The lung cancer risk for pipe and cigar smokers appears to be only slightly greater than for the nonsmoker, and it is clearly much less than for cigarette smokers.

Cigarette smoke contains thousands of chemical substances, many of which have been linked to the development of diseases. Chemical substances occur in cigarette smoke as gases or as particulates (tiny particles). Gases in cigarette smoke that pose a great threat to health include hydrogen cyanide, nitrogen oxides, and especially, carbon monoxide. Carbon monoxide is a poisonous gas that readily combines with haemoglobin a substance in the blood that transports oxygen to body tissues. Carbon monoxide in the blood prevents oxygen from reaching the brain and the heart and other muscles. Particulates in cigarette

smoke are often referred to as tar. These particulates include a variety of health-damaging substances, of which nicotine is the most hazardous. A thimbleful of nicotine — about 60 milligrams could kill an adult if taken all at once. A typical cigarette contains about 1 milligram of nicotine. The body prevents the accumulation of fatal doses by quickly breaking down the nicotine from each cigarette. However, nicotine raises the blood pressure, increases the heart rate, and contracts blood vessels near the skin. Its effects on the body, along with the effects of carbon monoxide, may contribute to the high rate of heart disease among smokers.

The particulates in tobacco smoke have different effects on lung function depending on how well the cigarette is filtered, how far

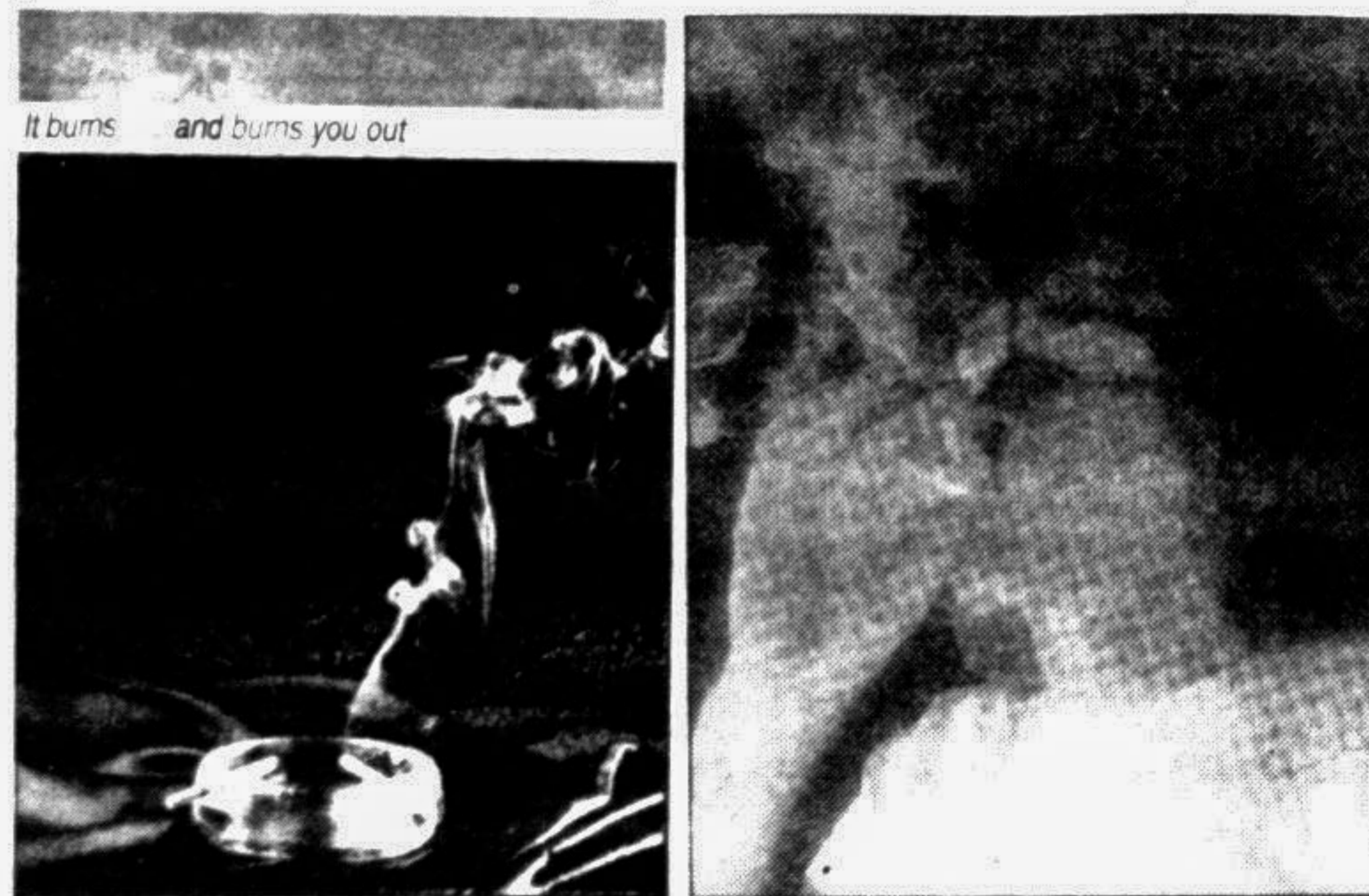
No clearly defined "smoker's personality" has been established. Further more, no personality characteristics is found exclusively in either the smoker or the nonsmoker. Certain personality factors — aiming them extroversion, neuroticism, and increased psychosomatic complaints — have been found to be slightly more common in smokers.

Stressful situations occurring in an environment favourable to smoking may contribute to the starting of the smoking habit as well as to its continuation. A smoker's dependence on tobacco is scientifically labelled habituation to distinguish it clearly from drug addiction.

According to scientists, the habit of smoking is a condition characterized by (1) a desire but not a compulsion to continue taking the drug; (2) little or no ten-

der 20 per cent of all deaths in developed countries. Out of three million deaths a year worldwide about one-third of them occur in developing countries. If current smoking trends persist, approximately 10 million deaths a year are expected in 30 to 40 years, with about 70 per cent of them in developing countries. WHO statistics shows that at present there are 1.1 billion smokers worldwide and 6000 billion cigarette are smoked every year. In developing countries, 50 per cent of men smoke and 8 per cent of women. In developed countries, 41 per cent of men and 21 per cent of women regularly smoke cigarettes.

The tobacco industry has turned a blind eye to the needless deaths and suffering caused by its products by marketing a substance that has as much potential for



the cigarette is smoked, and how large the particulates are. Cigarette filters remove some nicotine and other particulates from cigarette smoke. But the concentration of particulates in the last three puffs of a cigarette is as much as 67 times greater than the concentration in the first puffs.

Extensive studies based on the prevalence of specific signs and symptoms, show a consistently more frequent occurrence of the manifestations of chronic bronchitis (cough, sputum, or the two combined) in cigarette smokers than in nonsmokers. Breathlessness, often a manifestation of emphysema, is associated with cigarette smoking. Thus the clinical expressions associated with chronic bronchitis and emphysema are closely linked with cigarette smoking.

deney to continue increasing the dose endlessly (3) some degree of psychic dependence, but absence of physical dependence on the drug, and (4) the confinement of detrimental effects to the individual rather than the jeopardizing of society as a whole.

A firm mental resolve on the part of the individual smoker to stop smoking appears to be the essential ingredient in breaking the smoking habit. The methods that deal with psychogenic drives appear to help most the smoker who wants to stop. Methods employed to reinforce determination include group and individual psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, hypnosis, and educational efforts based on fear of the health consequences or on religion.

According to WHO, cigarettes currently cause just

causing dependence as heroin and cocaine. We should be confounded when we notice that a major cigarette manufacturer of the country was awarded the Prime Minister's trophy for 'reserving environment'!

It is curious and baffling that a cigarette company is awarded when its products bring about environmental deterioration, cause death and disease. Can planting a few trees normalise or improve the environmental imbalance? This type of industry destroys the environment we live in, on the one hand, and tries to earn awards and credit by planting a few trees on the other. It is like a Bangla proverb *goru mere juta dan* (presenting shoe by killing a cow). Has the proverb been invented to portray the double standards of the cigarette industry?

AN international ruling which could give hormone-injected meat from the United States access to European markets has enraged the European Union and caused alarm among consumer groups — putting the spotlight on a little-known United Nations body.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission, the UN organisation responsible for international food standards, recently ruled that use of growth-promoting hormones in food production causes no harm to consumers.

At a meeting in Rome, its members voted by secret ballot to accept a standard which would allow the use of hormones such as testosterone and progesterone to speed the growth of livestock intended for the world's dinner tables.

Consumers International, a London-based organisation representing 203 consumer groups in more than 80 countries, maintains there is insufficient data to determine the long-term consequences of hormone use and consumption.

"As far as we know there's no evidence to show that it's not safe, but we're not convinced it is safe...they should have followed the precautionary principle and that is: if there's any doubt, take caution and don't go ahead," says group spokesperson Diane McCrear.

The consumer group is also angry that the decision was made without any input from the public. They charge the commission is more responsive to the food industry than to consumers.

"We don't feel that the benefit of the doubt is given to consumers," says Sharon Dee of Consumers International. "It is given to international trade."

Another Consumers International official, Alina Tugend, says that the organisation's request to participate as an observer at Codex executive meetings was denied on the grounds that increased membership would slow down the whole process.

Codex's endorsement of growth-promoting hormones in meat technically ends scientific debate and means the US — which allows the use of hormones in food — can now challenge the European Union (EU) ban on imports of hormone-treated meat.

Given the sharp US EU rivalry in agriculture, the decision shows the difficulties facing Codex in its efforts to stick to with scientific issues and leave out political considerations. "Codex is not supposed to be a political organisation," says World Trade Organisation (WTO) counsellor Gretchen Stanton. "The role of Codex is to protect

## Codex Struggles to Keep Politics out of Food

by Nancy Hart

A little-known UN organisation has found itself at the centre of a major trade dispute between the US and West Europe. And now that the organisation's standards are to be used by the new World Trade Organisation to settle disputes, reports Gemini News Service, it is likely to find itself increasingly in the firing line.

## Rules for food

**Codex Alimentarius Commission**

- Founded 1963 to facilitate trade in foods, establish international quality and safety standards and fair trading practices
- By mid-1990s, it consisted of government-appointed delegates from over 130 nations, though main trading nations—principally the US, Japan, and European Union dominate
- Committees set standards for specific commodities such as processed fruit and vegetables
- Other committees deal with food-labelling, additives, pesticide residues and food hygiene
- Recommendations are advisory: it is up to governments to turn them into law
- CODEX has produced over 200 standards and 40 codes and guidelines for good manufacturing practice

human health and facilitate fair trade.

But it is hard to keep politics out of a global trade that is worth more than \$200 billion a year.

Codex was established in 1963 by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO). "The fact that it exists at all is something of a miracle," according to Kevin Hammer, an Australian agricultural scientist and former Codex vice chairman. "It is one of the most important food exercises that has happened in the history of man."

Codex has set 237 standards for commodities and residue limits for approximately 3,000 combinations of pesticides and foods.

The standard for the canned tomato is six pages long and covers everything from pesticides in the fields to liquid in the cans.

Although efforts are underway to speed up the process, it can take years for Codex experts to finalise one food standard. And all are subject to constant review.

Its standards will be used as a benchmark by the newly-established World Trade Organisation in settling food trade disputes. Some countries, for example, use standards to protect local producers against imports. An exporting country that feels standards are being misused in this way can appeal to the WTO.

Codex standards can also be used to secure protection from substandard imports. Often, an exporter whose shipment has been rejected by a country with high standards will try to dump the goods on a country with weak regulations.

"The Codex Commission is the point at which science has its interface with consumer policy, trade policy and food policy," says senior Codex officer Dr Alan Rendell.

Food grown and processed according to Codex standards is deemed safe for the population of the country in which it is grown and acceptable for international trade. Codex also provides developing countries with scientific infrastructure for designing a complete food control system.

Thailand asked FAO's help in the 1980s because its exports were constantly being rejected by other countries. FAO, along with the UN Development Programme, used Codex standards to set up a pilot programme. They designed an inspection system, and trained inspectors and chemists.

Partly as a result of this work, Thailand's food exports almost doubled between 1985 and 1989, from \$2,500 million to \$4,800 million.