

## PRESS RELEASE

### **Government bats for cola companies, discounts public health**

- Health minister rushes to give cola companies a ‘clean chit’
- Expert committee of ministry uses Coca-Cola sponsored UK lab findings to question CSE report on pesticide residues in soft drinks
- The same ministry had, earlier, blocked final standards from being notified
- Minister says standards being formulated – but refuses to set deadline
- History, says CSE, is repeating itself. Discounting our research gives companies the perfect certificate of safety

**New Delhi, August 22, 2006:** Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) responded sharply to the recent statement in Parliament by Anbumani Ramadoss, Union minister of health and family welfare, which questioned the validity of CSE’s findings. “The minister of health is clearly more concerned with industrial health – and not people’s health,” said CSE.

The statement and the report of the ministry’s expert committee, which carefully couches criticism of the CSE laboratory, repeats the allegations made by the Coca-Cola paid UK-based Central Science Laboratory (CSL). “It is very unfortunate that the minister has decided to toe the company line and even use its language *verbatim*. This clearly shows his allegiance to their cause,” says Sunita Narain, director, CSE.

The ‘influence’ is so obvious that it borders on the shameless. Take, for example, the following:

1. The UK lab’s report for Coca-Cola has said that the finding of **heptachlor** by CSE was questionable because it has been banned in India since 1996. The minister parroted this to Parliament: “**Heptachlor** is banned from 1996, hence its presence is unlikely.”

The fact, says CSE, is that heptachlor is a persistent pesticide, with a long half-life. Even though it is banned, it takes more than 20 years to degrade. As a result, heptachlor has been detected in other food samples, which have been analysed by the government itself. The problem is that the UK laboratory does not understand tropical toxicology. The Indian minister repeats this mistake.

2. The Coca-Cola lab report had also questioned the finding of **delta-HCH** by the CSE lab, which it said was “**contrary to normal findings**”. The minister told the Parliament that “delta-HCH, which is rarely encountered, was detected in high concentration in all the samples, which is **contrary to normal findings**”. Ironically, delta-HCH has been detected in other food commodities by the government itself.

3. The Coca-Cola lab had rejected the CSE findings saying that the report does not provide **confirmation of the identity of the pesticides**. The minister -- again -- finds a convenient ally in the UK lab. He has told the Parliament that “there was no conclusive evidence on presence of different pesticides in the concentration reported.” This is an absurd assertion, considering the fact that CSE lab had used GC-MS to confirm pesticide residues in soft drinks.

### **History repeats itself**

History is repeating itself. In 2003, when CSE released its study on soft drinks, the then government issued a statement in Parliament saying that the companies were within safety limits. This ‘clean chit’ was used by the companies to proclaim their safety and persuade state governments to lift bans against their products. This time also, the intention of the minister of health is obvious: discredit the CSE laboratory so that companies can use his statement to get certificates of safety.

Following CSE’s 2003 expose, the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) was set up, not to investigate the companies, but to investigate the CSE laboratory and its findings. The JPC clearly endorsed the CSE laboratory findings after months of detailed research into its methodology, equipment and personnel. This time – once again – the attempt is the same: rubbish the CSE laboratory, convolute the discussion and use the confusion to give the companies a clean chit. This time – once again – it is CSE, which is under the scanner, while the two companies get away scot-free.

But with one small difference: this time, when the ministry uses the allegations provided to it by the companies to disparage CSE, it is also discrediting its own top Parliamentary committee.

### **Ministry blocks standards**

“We are not surprised. This is the same ministry, which had blocked the standards for carbonated beverages – which had been finalised by the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) – from being notified. Even then, the ministry was ‘working’ for the companies’ interest,” says CSE.

It will be recalled that the health secretary – the highest official under the minister – had written a letter dated March 29, 2006, which was delivered within minutes to the meeting of the BIS committee which was finalising the standards. The letter (*see CSE website: [www.cseindia.org](http://www.cseindia.org)*) asked BIS not to finalise the standards, using the pretext of more committees. “The ministry of health and family welfare has been the biggest impediment in finalising standards for regulating soft drinks. It is time we asked why the ministry is more concerned with the companies’ well-being at the expense of public well-being,” says CSE.

The health ministry has specialised in setting up committee after committee, without any outcome. This is clearly prevarication, which suits the companies' interests. Even today, the minister refused to tell the Parliament when his ministry would issue the final standards. This is clearly convenient ruse for industry – but it is inconvenient for us and our health.

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