

Rauchzeichen! c/o Blue 21 e.V. • Gneisenaustr. 2a • 10961 Berlin • info@unfairtobacco.org
Presse-Handy: 01577 - 259 22 47 • Telefon: 030 - 694 61 01 • Fax: 030 - 692 65 90

Rauchzeichen!



Kampagne gegen Ausbeutung und Umweltzerstörung durch Tabakkonzerne

www.unfairtobacco.org

17 APRIL 2009 - Press Conference held at Information Centre, Capital City, Lilongwe, Malawi:

Presentation of the petition for basic rights of tobacco tenants and workers in Malawi

Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

thank you very much for your coming.

I am representing Blue 21, a Germany-based NGO. Before I give more information about the petition, I will explain the background of my organisation.

Blue 21 is the Berlin Working Group on Environment and Development and was founded in 1995 with the aim to serve low-income countries by lobbying for their issues in Germany and Europe. Since then, we are lobbying for debt relief for developing countries, for fair world market systems and for sustainable development. We scrutinize Western development assistance policies (like IMF and World Bank Structural Adjustment Programmes) for their possible negative impacts on countries in which they are implemented.

In 2003, we started working on issues related to tobacco growing, because we came to hear about exploitation of farmers and workers by tobacco companies and destruction of environment in tobacco growing regions. In 2004, we initiated the campaign "Rauchzeichen!" - which means "smoke signal!" - to raise awareness among the general public in Europe and to pressure international tobacco companies which have their headquarters in Europe and the US. We found reports that international leaf buyers are paying low prices at auction in Malawi, so that many farmers had to sell their tobacco for less than what they had invested in the crop.

But digging deeper, we found that those who really suffer are the farm workers and tenants. I don't have to repeat here what was already said. Low prices at auction might be one of the reasons for this situation, but even in 2008, when Malawian farmers got record prices for the major export earner, tenants and workers were still living in very desperate conditions. Low prices at auction might be one explanation, but cannot justify how Malawians treat their own people, who are the backbone of the economy by generating 70 % of foreign exchange earnings. Many landlords are reaping profits

by exploiting tenants. In years of low prices, they just pass on their loss, leaving tenants indebted. There is need for a structural solution so that tenants and workers do not have to depend on the good will of their landlord. A law is such a structural regulatory measure and possibly the best when it comes to basic rights.

In 2008, we invited the General Secretary of the Tobacco Tenants and Allied Workers Union of Malawi, Mr Raphael Sandramu on a lecture tour to Germany. Together with him we toured 10 cities and gave lectures about the plight of tenants in Malawi and tobacco farmers worldwide. We also went to the headquarters of Philip Morris Germany to confront them once again with the working conditions on the ground. It was not the first time that we informed them, and they were also informed by others. The company profits consciously from exploited labourers in Malawi.

TOTAWUM explained to us that they are in dire need of support to achieve basic rights for their people. Mr Sandramu informed us about the 1995 drafted Tenancy Labour Bill which is still not sent to Parliament. So, together with TOTAWUM, Blue 21 came to the decision to initiate this petition, for whose presentation we are gathered here.

I am going to read the whole of it:

"Dear Honorable Henry Duncan Phoya,

In Malawi, tobacco is the leading cash crop worth several million of dollars to multinational cigarette corporations that package and sell it in Europe and elsewhere. Tobacco is also an arena of exploitation and deprivation for the over 300,000 tenant farmers in Malawi who make less than US\$1.00 a day and are trapped in debt by landlords, lack enforceable labor contracts, and have little or no access to basic necessities: safe drinking water, adequate housing, and sufficient food.

The trade union representing these tenant farmers reports that their living conditions are worse today than when reform legislation was drafted in 1995. Thirteen years later, the Tenancy Labour Bill, still held by the Ministry of Justice, has yet to be discussed in Parliament. In the interest of basic justice, we believe the legislation should be considered without further delay. The tenant farmers need:

- Written, legally enforceable labor contracts
- A living wage and adequate food, safe drinking water, medicine, and proper housing
- Interest-free loans for agricultural inputs and food
- Transportation to home villages, at no cost, after the growing season

Therefore, we urge you to: (1) immediately create a Parliamentary sub-committee to review the Tenancy Labour Bill and send it to Parliament for debate; and (2) ensure that the Tobacco Tenants

and Allied Workers Union of Malawi (TOTAWUM), tobacco landlord associations, and tobacco companies begin collective bargaining. For the sake of the tenants and of Malawi as a whole, we also encourage you to collaborate with TOTAWUM to find alternative crops and livelihoods for tobacco tenants and workers.

Respectfully,

The Undersigned"

The petition was signed by 689 people from all over the world, many of them high officials in NGOs or academics. It is also supported by tobacco control advocates internationally as well as nationally (meaning Malawian). Mr Nelson Zakeyu from Drug Fight Malawi, Mr Andrew Ussi from Link for Education and Governance and Mr Kondwani Munthali from Youth Alliance in Social and Economic Development are showing their solidarity with tobacco workers by witnessing the delivery of this petition.

As a researcher representing an organisation that is mainly giving expertise, I want to re-emphasize: We strongly encourage Malawi to go for diversification and to shift away from tobacco in the long run. Global demand will decline due to a strong anti-smoking lobby. But moreover, the high dependency on one cash crop causes economic instability and threatens economic sustainability. Tobacco growing, due to heavy workload and land allocation, threatens food security. Many costs associated with the growing are externalised, i.e. never appear on the calculation of the prices. For example, due to the high workload, farmers and tenants rely on the assistance of their children, thus preventing them from getting a decent education and preventing the country from poverty eradication. Also, many smallholder farmers dry the crop in their own houses because they lack drying sheds. This practice is hazardous to their own health and to the health of their family, especially the children.

Of course, diversification is not made in one day. For that, you have to start planning now. Malawi can get support by the international tobacco control community if the country signs the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, which with Article 17 pledges to assist finding viable alternatives for farmers and workers.

I want to conclude with some rather personal remarks: The plight of tobacco tenants and the rampant child labour in tobacco estates in Malawi is already known in many countries of the world. This does not draw a positive picture of this beautiful country which really deserves to be called "The Warm Heart of Africa". Malawi loses its positive image. I loved this country right from the first moment that I dropped from the airplane at my first visit in August 2008 and this love has only

increased during my all in all 5 months of stay. But what I found in tobacco estates makes me very sad. This is modern slavery. I call on you, please change this situation so that Malawi can be proud of its beauty and can be a guiding principle to others.

Zikomo kwambiri.