

# The Ten Issues for 2004

## Genetically Modified Organisms

In July 2004, it emerged that the crop laboratory at the Office for Agricultural Research Development, Khon Kaen, had created a genetically modified papaya, and that the papaya was already being grown by farmers and sold at the market. This news quickly led to protests against the Department of Agriculture, demanding that the Department destroy existing plants before they spread outside the original area. However, not until September did the government accept that the papaya had been disseminated to farmers. Papaya growers were adversely affected because consumer resistance made genetically modified (GM) papaya difficult to sell. The European Union refused to allow the import of canned fruit salad from Thailand. On 20 August it appeared that the government would allow GM plants to be field tested and would allow the import of GM products. This contradicted the Cabinet Resolution on 3 April 2002, which prohibited field trials of GM plants, and led to widespread protests. On 31 August 2004 the government announced it would not support field trials.

## The Thirty Baht Health Insurance Scheme in Its Third Year

The 'Thirty Baht, Treat All Illnesses' Scheme still was not providing universal coverage, as more than three million Thais had not yet received cards. Coverage was particularly low among the tens of thousands of people in minority groups waiting to be granted Thai nationality. People in these groups had previously been given cards, but had been forced to return them. According to the interpretation of the Royal Decree Committee, the scheme only covered Thai citizens. In addition, Thais whose names were not on household registration forms still had not obtained Thirty Baht cards. The problem of budget limitations for the Thirty Baht Scheme remained, and many hospitals exceeded their budgets. The largest expenditures were for difficult deliveries; the next most expensive category was road accidents. Complaints about service increased from 4,566 in 2003 to 14,105 in 2004.



## Obesity

Research showed that obesity and over-nutrition increased among children of all ages, reflecting the increasing seriousness of the problem. Conditions linked to obesity, such as diabetes, high cholesterol, and hypertension, which had previously been confined to adults, were becoming more common among children. At present, the eating habits of Thai children are no different from those of Western children. Moreover, eating disorders such as anorexia were becoming more common among youth. Many young people tried to lose weight through exercise, but others turned to weight-loss products.

## Police Torture

In 2004 there were two notorious incidents involving police. The first was the 'testicle shock' case in Ayutthaya. Police officers tortured young men suspected of stealing goods. They inflicted electric shocks and burns all over the suspects' bodies, including the testes, to extract confessions. The second incident was the 'left in the cells' case at the Lumpini Police Station in Bangkok. A couple suspected of stealing were left for three months without being charged. The couple had a young child, though the child was not incarcerated with them. Both the 'testicle shock' case and the 'left in the cells' case both violated Thai law, and shocked society. Officials in both cases appeared before police tribunals, in addition to criminal investigations. In the 'left in the cells' case the responsible officer was relieved of his duties during the investigation. The Law Society of Thailand assisted the couple, and the Department for Civil Liberties in the Ministry of Justice applied the witness protection law to them. This was the first time this law has been used in Thailand. The families of the suspects in 'testicle shock' case took the case to court, and 20 police officers were identified.

## Foreign Objects in Food

The discovery of a human finger in some fermented pork received enormous publicity in 2004. The finger was found by a customer in a convenience store. At first the factory owners denied responsibility, claiming that discovery was a fraud. But when DNA tests showed that the lost finger belonged to one of the workers, the factory was closed down. Not long afterwards a centipede and then a leech were found in sweet rice snacks. This led to many more cases being reported, such as a tooth in dried watermelon seeds, an injection needle in fish sauce, and so on. The government had launched a 'safe food, good taste' campaign in 2003, requiring food manufacturers to achieve the Good Manufacturing Practices standard. Food vendors and restaurants were required to pass hygiene tests and were subject to inspections by officials from the Ministry of Public Health. Vendors in food markets were required to work together to improve hygiene. Regular inspections were held. However, there are too many food producers compared to the number of inspectors. This means that responsibility for maintaining standards remains with the producers, and it is up to the consumers to make their own decisions on whether to buy.

## The Impact of Industries on Health and Environment

Many factories or mines claim that they have a system for controlling pollution, but in reality many of them emit dangerous polluted water and fumes into the environment. In 2004 cadmium was found in the soil and water of eight villages in Mae Sot District, Tak Province, and also in rice and garlic. If cadmium accumulates in the body it damages the liver, kidneys, and circulatory system. Local people called on the government to take action, and force the mining company to take responsibility for its actions. Similar problems were experienced in many other places, such as the accumulation of lead in Thong Pha Phum, Kanchanaburi, and leakages of chemicals from orange farms in Chiang Mai in late 2003 and early 2004.



## Thailand Hosted the International AIDS Conference

Twenty thousand people attended the 15th International AIDS Conference in July 2004. Many important personalities came, including Nelson Mandela and Sonya Gandhi. The United Nations held up Thailand as an example of how to deal with HIV/AIDS. UNAIDS stated that Thailand's approach to giving out anti-retroviral medicines was an example to the world, and Thailand announced that it would provide anti-retrovirals equitably. The conference discussed control measures such as campaigns to promote abstinence or faithfulness, condoms, and products used before sex to kill the virus. Thailand signed an agreement with Nigeria, the Ukraine, China, Russia and Brazil to develop anti-retroviral drugs, vaccines, and products to prevent infection. Non-governmental organizations working in the field of HIV/AIDS demanded that the government keep the promises, and that it refuse to sign a patent agreement under the FTA with the United States.

## The Green Tea Craze

Japanese green tea for has become highly popular in Thailand, because of its ability to reduce hypertension, prevent heart disease, and protect against tooth decay. Many products now contain green tea, such as snacks, cosmetics, soap, toothpaste, and shampoo. Some sanitary pads even contain green tea to reduce odors. The green tea caterpillar used in the logo of one green tea company has become a collectible. Teenagers are an important target market for advertisers. In 2003, a single company spent 226 million baht on advertising green tea drinks; in the period from January to October 2004, the company increased its expenditure to 410 million. It is not clear what colorings, flavorings, and sweeteners are contained in bottled green drinks, and how their health benefits compare to those of ordinary hot green tea. But in reality people do not buy green tea because of its health benefits, but rather because of advertising.

## Accidents among Children

In 2004, there were many stories of accidents among children, including accidents with toys and climbing frames at school, the death of a child when hit by a falling swing, dog attacks, gun accidents, electric shock, and adults reversing cars on to children. Recently a two-year-old boy was killed when he fell into a cooking pot. According to the Center for Research on Promoting Child Safety and Preventing Injuries at Ramathibodi Hospital, during the period 1999-2002 a total of 13,140 children died from accidents, or an average of 3,352 per year. The leading cause of death was drowning; altogether 6,301 children died in this way. Other causes included electrocution, suffocation, burning, falls, and animal bites.



## Human Trafficking in Thailand

The world regards Thailand as a major origin and destination for human trafficking, and as a transiting point for Chinese traveling to the United States, Europe and Australia. There has been research describing human trafficking to the sex industry, as well as forced labor, and begging gangs. A noteworthy problem in 2004 was the abduction of newborn babies from hospitals, leaving no chance of tracing the lost babies. Baby kidnapping gangs, which have become highly proficient, have created great concern, and hospitals have to quickly find ways to prevent trafficking in babies. There were also cases of orphans abducted and sent overseas after the tsunami.