

Standing up for consumers

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CONSUMER groups voiced concern over everything from information regulation to malnutrition to breastfeeding at the six-day 11th World Congress of the International Organisation of Consumers Unions in Bangkok attended by 40 countries making it the biggest of its kind ever held.

Eat beans, brown rice and soya beans, urged Dr Chokchuang Chutinaton in a speech called "Malnutrition in the Land of Plenty," at yesterday's programme which focussed on the consumer protection in Thailand.

"Fifty thousand children die from malnutrition every year," said Dr Chokchuang. "According to a 1982 report by the Ministry of Health, about 50 per cent of Thai children are malnourished in various degrees."

With the banner: "Five Billion Consumers Organising For Change" posted all over the big Convention Centre at the Hyatt Central Plaza, the consumer conference entered its fourth day yesterday.

Dr Chokchuang, who was chairman of the Consumers Group of Siam, said that they had so far been successful in making more people aware of better eating habits. Because of their pressure group, he added, more shops in Bangkok today sell brown rice.

"When brown rice is milled into white rice," he said, "76 per cent of B1; 40 per cent of B2; 25 per cent of calcium; 50 per cent of iron; 20 per cent of protein; 60 per cent of fibre and many other vitamins are lost."

CROPS

Farmers should not, he warned, give up growing staple food, vegetables and fruits and replace them with cash crops. Malnutrition can make one age prematurely and "function at sub-optimal level."

Growing crops like wheat, he said further, was better than keeping livestock. On the subject of land use, he argued that "wheat produced seven times more protein than one same acre used to grow food to raise cows."

Protein from soya beans, he argued, cost 10 times less than meat in Thailand. Iron-rich foods from the plant kingdom, he added, can supple-

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ment the shortage of protein intake by millions of Thais.

Another participant in one of yesterday's workshops, Mrs Margeret Kyenkya from Kenya, spearheaded the breastfeeding and babyfood session.

In the '70s, a storm of controversy surrounded the use of the milk-base substitute (cow's milk) when some African peoples who were fed milk-based products became seriously ill as the food substance was alien to their bodies.

They became victims of "gastroenteritis," or allergy to milk products which resulted in vomiting, diarrhoea and sometimes even death. They called it "Chupta-ism," in Swahili (*chupta* meaning bottle). Thus, the term "Bottle-killer," said Mrs Kyenkya.

Mrs Kyenkya is Africa's coordinator of IBFAN (International Baby Food Action Network). A non-government organisation, the IBFAN receives its funds through membership fees and through the selling of their publications and other product-testing services. They also receive the Kenyan government's support and some UNICEF funding.

In their decade-long battles against unsuitable baby food advertising campaigns, the IBFAN has scored credibility by bringing a few corporations to its knees.

Mrs Kyenkya said that in Africa the movement was not directed at the companies or the products themselves but more at the misleading information conveyed in the products' promotion campaigns which were considered "downright dangerous."

They were not saying that baby food or cow's milk were not suitable for a baby's consumption. They were, however, at war with the many misconceptions which advertising had been putting across. For instance, that bottle-feeding was superior to mother's milk.

"It is not true that to bring up a beautiful baby like the one on the

poster or in a TV commercial, you have to give it bottled milk," said Mrs Kyenkya.

They were, at the same time, very expensive for Third World countries. "If mothers in Kenya started using the baby foods," she said, "they may spend up to as much as 70 per cent of their salary to buy it."

Another serious implication of bottlefeeding is that once the mother has started the milk-based feeding, she cannot return to breastfeeding because when she stops weaning, her body will also stop producing milk.

CODE

In the wake of IBFAN's and other breastfeeding advocates' attacks on the baby food campaigns, much good have evolved. In their long tangle with Nestle, which reportedly controls 85 per cent of the baby food market in the developing world, the Swiss-based company has finally conceded this year to abide by the consumer's code of marketing.

Sticking stiffly to a seven-year boycott against Nestle in 1977, the consumer group only very recently lifted its ban after the corporate agreed to change some of its advertising strategies.

There have been times, according to IBFAN leader Alan Chetley, 33, when breastfeeding groups have gone a little bit too far, such as the time when a German group published a pamphlet entitled "Nestle Kills Babies" and was subsequently sued by the company.

Although Nestle won the case in the 1976 incident, Chetley said they had come to realise that a better marketing campaign was needed if they wanted to avoid further expensive lawsuits like the German one.

"We are not discouraging baby food items," he said. "We just want to place them in their proper context." Baby foods were vital, he said, in the cases of orphaned children and where the mother had severe nutrition problems.

The Canadian-born consumer group leader said that after the German court case, a Brazilian executive from the baby food company had testified in a hearing in Washington

accusing the breastfeeding campaign of being "a conspiracy by left-wingers in a world-wide attempt to undermine the free enterprise system."

The truth, of course, is that consumer groups are largely supported by a wide cross section of society, including doctors, church groups and international bodies like UNICEF which are hardly your regular communist types.

Chetley said that Senator Edward Kennedy, who was present at the Washington court case, laughed after hearing the charges and asked the executive: "You don't seriously believe that, do you?"

"Occasionally people will ask me what the hell I am doing, promoting breastfeeding," Chetley chuckled. "Well, sometimes that concerns me as well. As a husband, the man would have to suggest to his wife whether to breastfeed or bottlefeed."

Chetley is married with two children and they were breastfed when they were babies. Mrs Kyenkya has three children who were all breastfed in the beginning.

MYTHS

The consumer group's goal is to break the myths which say, for instance, that breastfeeding is an impediment. On the contrary, said Chetley, it helped to return to the mother her pre-pregnancy weight and to contract the uterus after birth.

At the meeting, the IOCU passed out a handbook on "The Information Society - A Strategy For Consumers" which contains recommendations on how to use new computer technology to combat widespread problems such as "poor quality food, misleading advertising and dangerous products."

The new information technology is not merely a toy, the IOCU says, but it can bring significant advantages to consumers. Among the benefits are that it gives people an easier access to reliable, independent and up-to-date information.

"Consumer organisations have a duty," it says, "to try to maximise the advantages (of the new technology) for consumers and minimise the disadvantages."