

Vandana Shiva on Farmer Suicides, the U.S.-India Nuclear Deal, Wal-Mart in India and More

AMY GOODMAN: Vandana Shiva remains with us, physicist; ecologist; director of the Research Foundation on Science, Technology, and Ecology; in 1993, awarded the Alternative Nobel Peace Prize, the Right Livelihood Award; her latest book, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*. There is an epidemic you write about in India of farmer suicides. Can you explain what's happening and where this is happening?

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VANDANA SHIVA: Indian farmers have never committed suicide on a large scale. It's something totally new. It's linked to the last decade of globalization, trade liberalization under a corporate-driven economy. The seed sector was liberalized to allow corporations like Cargill and Monsanto to sell unregulated, untested seed. They began with hybrids, which can't be saved, and moved on to genetically engineered Bt cotton. The cotton belt is where the suicides are taking place on a very, very large scale. It is the suicide belt of India.

And the high cost of seed is linked to high cost of chemicals, because these seeds need chemicals. In addition, these costly seeds need to be bought every year, because their very design is to make seeds nonrenewable, seed that isn't renewable by its very nature, but whether it's through patenting systems, intellectual property rights or technologically through hybridization, nonrenewable seed is being sold to farmers so they must buy every year.

There's a case going on in the Supreme Court of India right now on the monopoly practices of Monsanto. An antitrust court ruled against Monsanto, because the price is so high, farmers necessarily get into a debt trap, which is why I was talking about credit, for the wrong thing, could actually be a problem and not a solution.

In addition, the price of cotton is collapsing under the huge \$4 billion subsidies given to agribusiness in the United States, which then dumps cotton on a world market with 50% reduction of price artificially. This is what led to the Cancun failure of WTO, but this is what is killing Indian farmers. Just three days ago, farmers were protesting against the low prices of cotton. They went to the government agency, which before globalization used to buy cotton at a fair price. One farmer was shot dead. So we're not just seeing suicides, we're also seeing farmers' protests treated as a new threat to the regime.

AMY GOODMAN: These descriptions of desperation, up to three farmers a day swallow pesticides, hang themselves from trees, drown themselves in rivers, set themselves on fire, or jump down wells, many of them plagued by debt, poor crops and hopelessness?

VANDANA SHIVA: 90% of the farmer suicides—we've studied it. Every year we bring out a report called "Seeds of Suicide." We started the first report in 1997, which was the first suicide in the district of Warangal in Andhra Pradesh. Andhra Pradesh—

AMY GOODMAN: Where is it in India?

VANDANA SHIVA: Andhra Pradesh is kind of southern India. But Andhra Pradesh had a government that responded, and that's the government that took Monsanto to court. Vidarbha in Maharashtra has emerged as the epicenter. This is where the Prime Minister visited, because the suicide issue had become so intense. Unfortunately, the Prime Minister offered exactly the same package, more of the same, as a solution. Included in this package is a 20 billion rupee seed replacement package, which means what seed farmers has gets further destroyed, so they have no renewable seed, no affordable seed. They must buy on the market every year. Farmer suicides in Vidarbha are now eight per day.

A few weeks ago, I was in Punjab. 2,800 widows of farmer suicides who have lost their land, are having to bring up children as landless workers on others' land. And yet, the system does not respond to it, because there's only one response: get Monsanto out of the seed sector—they are part of this genocide—and ensure WTO rules are not bringing down the prices of agricultural produce in the United States, in Canada, in India, and allow trade to be honest. I don't think we need to talk about free trade and fair trade. We need to talk about honest trade. Today's trade system, especially in agriculture, is dishonest, and dishonesty has become a war against farmers. It's become a genocide.

AMY GOODMAN: Can you talk about the water tower protests?

VANDANA SHIVA: In the state of Rajasthan, which is the capital of the production of mustard—and mustard in India is very symbolic. It's the color of our spring. When spring comes, we dress in the yellow of the mustard flower. It's our staple oil, and we love the pungency of it.

1998, Monsanto and Cargill managed to get a ban on indigenous oils in order to create a market for soya oil, something we've never eaten before. We led a movement of women to bring back the mustard. But today, 70% of the oil India is eating, edible oil—and India was the capital of edible oil production—mustard, sesame, linseed, coconut, wonderful healthy oils—today, 70% of our edible oil market is soya oil dumped on us, palm oil dumped on us. And, as you know, today soya is being cultivated in cutting the Amazon, and palm oil is being cultivated cutting the rain forest of Borneo.

When the farmers can't sell their mustard—nobody's buying it—they've had protests. Twelve farmers were killed in Central India. And there was a farmer who climbed onto the water tower a few months ago, mimicking a Bollywood film, but basically saying he would jump to suicide if the farmer's mustard was not bought. This hijacking of the market for agriculture by a handful of agribusiness, which is what the rules of WTO are—the Agreement on Agriculture is basically putting all of agriculture into the hands of ADM, ConAgra and Cargill, and all the seed sector into the hands of Monsanto—it must necessarily destroy more and more farms, more and more farming, and push more farmers to suicide for a while, unless we get a change.

We work for the change, and our work in Navdanya shows that farmers can double their incomes by using their own seeds, doing organic farming. All they need is a joining of hands with urban consumers and definitely a change in the rules of trade, which have treated the rights of Cargill as fundamental rights.

And something Americans don't know much about, the nuclear deal with India has a twin agreement, and that twin agreement is on agriculture. It's called the Knowledge Initiative on Agriculture, and on the board of this agreement are Monsanto, ADM and Wal-Mart. So a grab of the seed sector by Monsanto, of the trade sector by the giant agribusiness, and the retail sector, which is 400 million people in India, by Wal-Mart. These are issues that are preoccupying us for about democracy in India right now.

AMY GOODMAN: Vandana Shiva, I want to go back to that deal that just was announced this weekend, surprised some. The US will send nuclear fuel shipments for civilian use, critics saying it will allow India to use its existing nuclear fuel to build up to 50 nuclear weapons. And then I want to ask you to expand on this corollary that we definitely didn't know about.

VANDANA SHIVA: You know, the nuclear deal with India, in fact, shows the double standards of US nuclear policy, because for the same things that Iran does—Iran is axis of evil—but India here, through this nuclear agreement, is being told, we will separate civilian use and military use. Military use will be India's sovereign decision. I don't think it will be India's sovereign decision, because I think in this deal is a strategic use of India for Asia, for a containment for China. But in addition to that, there is turning India into a nuclear market: a sale of nuclear technologies, of nuclear fuel.

And I think we need to contextualize this in the context of the climate debates. Climate change has made us recognize that we can't keep messing up the atmosphere and pumping more carbon dioxide. But nuclear doesn't become clean automatically just because carbon dioxide has destabilized the climate. Nuclear is being offered as a clean development mechanism. And not only will it spread nuclear risks and hazards in India, it will also allow corporations, like General Electric and others who pollute with carbon dioxide, as well as them, get quotas through emissions trading and

markets for nuclear technology.

You know, I was a nuclear physicist. I left my career in 1972. I was training to be a nuclear physicist in India's atomic energy program in the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, and I left because I realized very clearly nuclear power, as much as nuclear war, are systems where you cannot have democracy. They're inconsistent with democracy. And I love democracy too much. So I went on to do theoretical physics.

AMY GOODMAN: So explain further this corollary that involves these other large multinational corporations. And why is it part of the nuclear deal?

VANDANA SHIVA: Well, two days ago the US representative—I think it's Mr. Burns who announced that the nuclear deal is the cutting edge, but what the United States is really seeking is agricultural markets and real estate markets, the land of the poor in India. And if you look at cities like Bombay, you look at cities like Delhi, you look at cities like Bangalore, they're exploding because there's this global hungry finance moving in to take over the land of people, not through a market mechanism, but using the state and an old colonial law of land acquisition to grab the land by force everywhere where this is happening. There is a war going on, outside Delhi in Dadri, outside Calcutta in Singur, everywhere. Peasants are being shot and killed in order to take away the last resort and the last asset of the poor.

The agreements, nuclear and agricultural agreements, came out of a July visit of our prime minister in 2005, were then moved forward in the March visit of President Bush to India, which saw huge protests, by the way—I'm sure it wasn't covered—but huge protests, where these deals, as well as the Iraq war, were the issue in India. And the two are twin programs. They are twin programs about a market grab and a security alignment.

AMY GOODMAN: You mentioned Wal-Mart. They have just announced they're going to be opening 500 stores in India, the first to open in August of 2007.

VANDANA SHIVA: We've been organizing the unorganized retail sector of India. The retail sector of India, to me, is the ultimate practice of democracy. When you go into a tiny vegetable market, the women put out their mats, they've brought the tomatoes they've grown outside the city, put it down, maybe five kilos of tomatoes, sell it for the day, go back home, feed their children. It's a community market. 400 people dependent on retail, 14 million people dependent on little hawking, you know, a tiny moveable cart, which goes door-to-door. 90% of our vegetables come to our doorstep. We don't have to go anywhere.

Wal-Mart's entry into India, 500 stores, cannot go hand-in-hand with the giant retail economy of India, which is giant not by being one big store, but by having millions of small sellers. And that is what has created the vibrance of India's markets, the democracy in India's markets.

AMY GOODMAN: We're going to have to leave it there. I want to thank you very much, Vandana Shiva, for joining us. Her new book is *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*.

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