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Dispute marks start of UN biosafety conference

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Bonn - A UN conference on risks relating to genetic engineering in the agricultural sector opened in the former West German capital of Bonn on Monday amid differences among the delegates.

The world's leading gene technology companies want a voluntary agreement instead of internationally binding rules on liability and redress in respect of damage resulting from the handling and use of living modified organisms, non-governmental organizations at the meeting said.

Some 2,000 representatives from governments and non-governmental organizations are attending the five-day conference, the outcome of which was unclear in view of the divergent positions.

Protesters from 80 agricultural and environmental organizations demonstrated against hunger, species extinction and genetic engineering outside the hotel where the conference is taking place.

The meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety is seeking to work out a system of rules on protection rights and liability relating to the cross-border movement of genetically modified organisms such as rice, corn or soya.

The regulations are intended to protect humans and the environment from possible dangers arising from the use of gene technology in crop fields or forests.

There are no legally defined redress and liability elements in the Cartagena Protocol, making it difficult to determine who can claim and who has to pay for economic, health or environmental damage.

Some 147 countries are signatories to the protocol, but the United States, Canada and Argentina - major agricultural producers with substantial genetic engineering operations - have not signed.

Critics accused six major biotechnology concerns of seeking to obtain non-binding regulations for liability and compensation. They include Germany's Bayer CropScience and the US multinational Monsanto.

"Their goal is to privatize international law-making," said Christine von Weizsaecker, president of the environmental institute Ecoropa.

Parallel to the conference, environmental and farmers' organizations from 90 countries are holding their own alternative gathering called Planet Diversity.

The Bonn conference comes a week before the mammoth convention of the body that implements the UN's Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

Some 5,000 representatives from 190 countries are participating in the conference, among them German Chancellor Angela Merkel, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

The agenda includes the destruction of indigenous forests and the plundering of the sea, as well as how to counter the resulting loss of biodiversity. (dpa)