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Bush ha paura di Josè Bovè

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NEW YORK -- Activists criticized the U.S. government on Thursday for stopping a French farmer - a key figure in the anti-globalization movement - from entering the country to voice his opposition to genetically engineered food.

Jose Bove, best known for ransacking a McDonald's restaurant in France, was detained at John F. Kennedy International Airport upon arrival for an international conference on globalization and labor organized by Cornell University. His supporters were furious.

"Evidently, the Bush administration is behind this decision," said George Naylor, president of the Washington-based National Family Farm Coalition. "No one would think of fearing Jose's presence in this country except multinational corporations with a profit motive."

Bove arrived in the United States under a visa waiver program that allows citizens of certain countries, including France, to travel here for tourism or business for up to 90 days without a visa.

Janet Rapaport, a New York spokeswoman for U.S. Customs and Border Protection, said Bove was refused admission on Wednesday for reasons she said she could not discuss.

In a telephone interview from his farm in southern France, Bove told The Associated Press that when he arrived at the Queens airport U.S. officials "knew exactly who I was. And they told me, 'You have to get out.'"

He said he had visited the United States last year, speaking at Yale University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"The fact that they don't want me to come in now is a new way for the Bush administration to build coalitions against us," the 52-year-old farmer said.

He noted that his trip on Wednesday coincided with a World Trade Organization ruling against European Union curbs on imports of genetically modified foods.

A key topic of the New York conference was "how people can fight (U.S. agriculture giant) Monsanto. This is an international struggle," Bove said. "The American government is fed up with this fight because such companies are losing a lot of money."

Monsanto, a St. Louis-based agriculture giant, grows genetically modified soy, a key ingredient in many packaged foods. The United States accounts for more than half of all biotech crops grown worldwide _ mostly soy and corn.

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns said recently that agricultural biotechnology "provides tremendous benefits to farmers and rural communities."

Monsanto spokesman Chris Horner said farmers buy the company's seeds because "they provide real, tangible benefits _ reduced costs, reduced pesticide use with insect-protected crops and more yield."

Bovè had planned to attend the Manhattan gathering of farmers, labor advocates and academics from around the world on Thursday and Friday, participating in forums titled "Fighting the Commodification of Food" and "The Struggle Against Monsanto in Europe." The conference was sponsored by Cornell's School of Labor and Industrial Relations in upstate Ithaca, N.Y., where Bovè planned to address students and visit farmers.

He said he would speak to the Manhattan gathering from France via speaker phone on Friday.

"I'm going to talk about what the struggle of farmers all over the world for seeds," he told the AP. "Big companies like Monsanto have patents on genetically modified seeds, and you have to buy those seeds each year _ you can't keep the ones you have. That's how they control food in the world, by controlling what farmers put in the soil."

Bovè, who raises sheep and produces cheese, shot to fame in 1999 after leading protesters who dismantled a McDonald's restaurant under construction in Millau, near his farm in southern France.

He also participated in protests during the World Trade Organization meetings held in December in Hong Kong, where he was briefly detained but eventually allowed to enter.

A month earlier, he was sentenced to four months in prison for destroying a field of genetically modified corn planted by an American seed company in southern France.

Associated Press Writer Tim McCahill contributed to this report.

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