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Ethiopian scientist named 2009 World Food Prize Laureate Gebisa Ejeta developed drought- and weed-resistant sorghum, enhancing Africa's food supply

(WASHINGTON, D.C., USA) – **Dr. Gebisa Ejeta** of Ethiopia has been named winner of the \$250,000 World Food Prize for his monumental contributions in the production of sorghum, one of the world's five principal cereal grains, which have dramatically enhanced the food supply of hundreds of millions of people in sub-Saharan Africa.

Secretary of State **Hillary Rodham Clinton** was the featured speaker as Dr. Ejeta was announced as the 2009 Laureate at a ceremony at the U.S. State Department on June 11 that also featured Secretary of Agriculture **Tom Vilsack**, World Food Prize President **Ambassador Kenneth M. Quinn**, and World Food Prize Chairman John Ruan III, among others.

Dr. Ejeta's personal journey would lead him from a childhood in a one-room thatched hut in rural Ethiopia to the height of scientific acclaim as a distinguished professor, plant breeder, and geneticist at Purdue University. His work with sorghum, which is a staple in the diet of 500 million people living in sub-Saharan Africa, began in Ethiopia in the 1970s. Working in Sudan in the early 1980s, he developed Hageen Dura-1, the first ever commercial hybrid sorghum in Africa. This hybrid variety was tolerant to drought and out-yielded traditional varieties by up to 150 percent.

Dr. Ejeta next turned his attention to battling the scourge of *Striga*, a deadly parasitic weed which devastates farmers' crops and severely limits food availability. Working with a colleague at Purdue University, he discovered the biochemical basis of *Striga's* relationship with sorghum, and was able to produce many sorghum varieties resistant to both drought and *Striga*. In 1994, eight tons of Dr. Ejeta's drought and *Striga*-resistant sorghum seeds were distributed to Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Rwanda, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. Yield increases were as much as four times the yield of local varieties, even in severe drought areas.

"By ridding Africa of the greatest biological impediment to food production, Dr. Ejeta has put himself in the company of some of the greatest researchers and scientists recognized by this award over the past 23 years," said Vilsack. "The Obama Administration is inspired by the tireless efforts of Dr. Ejeta has demonstrated in the battle to eliminate food insecurity and is committed to employing a comprehensive approach to tackle the scourge of world hunger."

Dr. Ejeta's scientific breakthroughs in breeding drought-tolerant and *Striga*-resistant sorghum have been combined with his persistent efforts to foster economic development and the empowerment of subsistence farmers through the creation of agricultural enterprises in rural Africa. He has led his colleagues in working with national and local authorities and nongovernmental agencies so that smallholder farmers and rural entrepreneurs can catalyze efforts to improve crop productivity, strengthen nutritional security, increase the value of agricultural products, and boost the profitability of agricultural enterprise – thus fostering profound impacts on lives and livelihoods on broader scale across the African continent.

"Dr. Ejeta's accomplishments in improving sorghum illustrate what can be achieved when cutting-edge technology and international cooperation in agriculture are used to uplift and empower the world's most vulnerable people," added **Dr. Norman E. Borlaug**, founder of the World Food Prize. "His life is as an inspiration for young scientists around the world."

The 2009 World Food Prize will be formally presented to Dr. Ejeta at a ceremony at the Iowa State Capitol on October 15, 2009. The ceremony will be held as part of the World Food Prize's [2009 Borlaug Dialogue](#), which focuses on "Food, Agriculture and National Security in a Globalized World." Further information about the Laureate Award Ceremony and Symposium can be found at www.worldfoodprize.org.

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Photos, video B-roll and additional information can be obtained at www.worldfoodprize.org. Media seeking interviews with Dr. Ejeta should contact Justin Cremer of the World Food Prize Foundation at 515-245-3794 or jcremer@worldfoodprize.org.

The World Food Prize was founded in 1986 by Dr. Norman E. Borlaug, recipient of the 1970 Nobel Peace Prize. Since then, The World Food Prize has honored outstanding individuals who have made vital contributions to improving the quality, quantity or availability of food throughout the world. Previous Laureates have been recognized from Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Denmark, India, Mexico, Sierra Leone, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United Nations and the United States. In 1990, Des Moines businessman and philanthropist John Ruan assumed sponsorship of The Prize and established The World Food Prize Foundation, located in Des Moines, Iowa.