

Labour peer under fire for Nestlé link

Lord Ahmed negotiating paid post with food giant

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A prominent Labour Muslim peer was criticised by baby milk campaigners last night over plans to take a paid post advising Nestlé, the controversial food giant.

Lord Ahmed of Rotherham disclosed he is in negotiations with the Swiss corporation and has made company-sponsored trips to inspect Nestlé's operations in Pakistan, which he subsequently praised.

The conglomerate is the target of a long running boycott over allegations, vehemently denied by executives, that it puts sales ahead of infant health in the developing world and bribed doctors in Pakistan to promote its products.

Lord Ahmed, made a life peer by Tony Blair in 1998, insisted criticism of the multinational was unfounded and was mainly from "white people" unaware of the facts. "I may become an adviser on international affairs," he said, to ensure the highest corporate standards were maintained.

The endorsement of such a high profile Muslim would be a boost for Nestlé which has devoted significant resources to countering claims that it routinely breaches a World Health Organisation international marketing code.

"They have suggested [the advisory role] because of my interest in other countries," said Lord Ahmed.

Labour MEP Richard Howitt, European parliament spokesman on corporate responsibility, urged the peer to reconsider and warned him his independence would be compromised if he accepted an official position with Nestlé.

Nestlé has been accused of promoting unsafe bottle feeding instead of breast feeding in countries such as Pakistan where water supplies are often polluted, resulting in thousands of bottle fed children dying of diarrhoea.

Anti-corporate campaigners argue it fails to abide by an international code banning unethical marketing practices, including inducements to doctors to recommend bottles

and free trial supplies of milk substitutes to mothers.

Critics claim groups in 20 countries support a boycott of Nestlé brands from Nescafé and Quality Street to Gale's honey and Felix cat food.

The peer's support for Nestlé has outraged Baby Milk Action, the Cambridge based network that has harried the conglomerate for more than two decades. Its policy director, Patti Rundall, said Lord Ahmed had voiced support for the group's aims in February 2000 during a Westminster meeting with Aamar Raza, a former Nestlé employee turned whistleblower in Pakistan.

Yet in November of that year the peer attempted to put Nestlé's case to a European parliament hearing into corporate accountability.

When the MEP Mr Howitt refused Lord Ahmed permission to speak at the hearing, the peer invited socialist group MEPs to a meeting with the company.

"Lord Ahmed was very sympathetic, offered to do whatever he could and even proposed to organise a forum in London," said Ms Rundall.

"Then we found he had visited a Nestlé factory in Pakistan and was speaking up for Nestlé. We were very surprised to find he had effectively switched sides."

Nestlé said it rejected Baby Milk Action's allegations of malpractice and it had decided to "facilitate" a trip to Pakistan by Lord Ahmed after the peer decided to investigate the claims himself.

"We have found his input and advice to be very valuable and since then we have entered into discussions with him about him becoming an adviser to Nestlé UK Ltd on developing world issues and in particular issues affecting Islamic matters and Muslim communities in the UK," said a company statement.

Lord Ahmed accepted the visit to Nestlé's Pakistan operations had changed his mind and he believed it had been unfairly singled out for criticism.

He registered the fact the company paid for the trip two years ago, said the peer, who denied receiving any other payment from Nestlé or Weber Shandwick, Nestlé's lobbyists.

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