► However, Mann is unapologetic. The consternation he has stirred up at NIH is “appropriate”, he says. “I continue to fail to see the kind of clear, milestone-driven process [at NIH] that includes not only the opinions of basic scientists, but the knowledge and experience of people who have developed vaccines.”

His critics include Gregg Gonsalves, a spokesman for Treatment Action Group, a national AIDS research advocacy organization, who calls Mann’s speech “outrageous and irresponsible”. “There is this notion that there are these big bad NIH scientists standing in the way of phase III development of an effective HIV vaccine,” says Gonsalves. “The real story is that we don’t have an acceptable candidate to put into phase III trials right now.”

Varmus declines to comment on Mann’s

statements. But Fauci, whose institute carries out most of NIH’s AIDS work, called the statements “untrue” and said it was “inappropriate” for Mann “to personally attack Harold Varmus and David Baltimore”.

In 1994, Fauci decided that NIH should not back phase III trials of two gp120 vaccines (see *Nature* 369, 593; 1994). No other candidate has since been moved into such trials by NIH. But in January, VaxGen, a biotechnology company in South San Francisco, announced that it had gained the approval of the Food and Drug Administration to launch this year a privately funded phase III trial of gp120 vaccine in the United States and Thailand (see *Nature* 391, 220; 1998).

As chair of the NIH’s 15-month-old AIDS Vaccine Research Committee, Baltimore has been meeting scientists, studying candidate

vaccines, and developing and awarding ‘innovation’ grants to encourage scientists to work in areas that are not being adequately explored. “There’s a very extensive programme designed to understand and produce a vaccine,” he says.

Baltimore says that progress on the vaccine is not being limited by NIH’s unwillingness to test new candidates, “but by the limited number of opportunities being presented by the scientific community”. He adds: “It’s not necessarily anybody’s fault. It’s a very difficult problem.”

Gonsalves rejects the advisory council’s proposal that control of AIDS vaccine development be moved to the White House: “It’s a scientific problem. Our best resources, our best talent are at the NIH. And that’s where the job should be done.” **Meredith Wadman**

New Chinese premier takes on the reins of scientific reform

[TOKYO] China’s new and outspoken premier, Zhu Rongji, seems likely to champion science and technology. He has already taken personal charge of making increased support for science a reality, a measure promised by his government.

In his first press conference after his appointment at the end of last month, Zhu lambasted the waste of government money in what he called an “excessive” number of government bodies and projects, and complained that this has been depriving science and technology of necessary funds.

Zhu, a tough and talented reformer, is believed to be the principal architect of recent reforms that have reduced the number of state ministries and commissions from 40 to 29, and have also resulted in the State Science and Technology Commission being converted into a ministry (see *Nature* 392, 220; 1998).

Furthermore, he will chair a powerful, newly reconstituted committee for science, technology and education — its forerunner was restricted to science and technology alone — in the State Council, the highest body for the day-to-day running of the country, which is headed by Zhu himself.

A senior member of the Chinese Academy of Sciences says he “applauds” the determination and drive of the new premier, and predicts that Zhu’s committee will play a “crucial” role in implementing policy and revitalizing China through science and technology.

He is also optimistic that Zhu will push forward a promised government programme to pump 2.5 billion yuan (US\$300 million) into basic research over the next five years, although he points out that the definition of “basic research” remains “somewhat controversial” in China.

The new government has already said that it plans to increase spending on science

Zhu Rongji: the premier’s committee will be crucial for implementing science policy.

this year by 12.6 per cent, to a total of 12.5 billion yuan. But the head of the newly formed Ministry of Science and Technology, Zhu Lilan, a polymer chemist, seems likely to emphasize development more than basic research.

In an interview with the *People’s Daily* newspaper on 30 March, she pointed out that in developed countries expenditure on basic research compared with development and commercialization falls into the ratio of 1:10:100. But in China the ratio is about 1:0.5:100.

“We need to look closely at the conditions and environment that slow down the transfer of scientific and technical results to industry,” the newspaper quotes Zhu Lilan as saying. She added: “As a developing country, we need to concentrate our resources in order to make strategic breakthroughs. We can’t afford to scatter our investments thoughtlessly.”

But the new science minister also calls for more creativity and innovation. “We need to create an environment in which young people can step forward from the crowd and sing their own song.”

It remains unclear what effect the conversion of the State Science and

Technology Commission to a ministry will have. On paper, stepping down from the State Council reduces its status. But it is expected to continue to play a leading role in setting science and technology policy, and as a ministry it will be able to fund its own research, rather than channelling funding through other ministries.

However, Western observers in Beijing point out that changes in central government alone will be insufficient to bring about drastic reform, as in China considerable power and budgets are wielded by provincial governments. Changes mirroring the reform of central government are not expected in the provinces until next year, and it remains to be seen whether they will fully implement the reforms desired by leaders in the central government.

Furthermore, one of the biggest problems facing China’s research system is the lack of coordination between different branches of the government, both central and provincial. One factor holding back the development of the Internet for scientific use in China, for example, is the lack of good connections between the network of the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the computer network for the universities.

Meanwhile, the revamped Ministry of Science and Technology has appointed its former vice-minister, Huang Qitao, previously director of the State Bureau for Nuclear Safety under the State Science and Technology Commission, to head its investment arm, China Venturetech Investment Corporation.

Officials quoted in the *South China Morning Post* newspaper say that although the appointment of a former vice-minister did not necessarily mean an upgrade for China Venturetech, the move was likely to sharpen the company’s teeth in the long run.

David Swinbanks