Unesco 'worse than I imagined,' says new director

London

The new director of Unesco, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, has given a damning report on the organization in his first diagnosis since taking office three months ago.

Addressing Unesco's executive board last month, Koichiro Matsuura said that the top-heaviness of Unesco's secretariat was "alarming", that there was a "severe mismatching of skills to actual needs", that the structure of the organization defied "all management principles and even logic". Staff morale, he said, was worryingly low. He added that existing management practices were often questionable, lines of authority were unclear and transparency was applied "very unevenly".

He also warned that Unesco was likely to overrun on staff costs by \$11 million over the next two years. He blamed the projected costs on the large number of appointments and promotions made by director Federico Mayor shortly before leaving the organization.

Only one of Mayor's 50 appointments and 55 reclassifications and personal promotions — mainly to director level — conformed to staff rules and regulations.

When he took over, Matsuura placed a freeze on these 'eleventh-hour promotions' and established a task force to examine each appointment. Many staff were offended by this. In January two members of staff went on a ten-day hunger strike in the entrance hall of Unesco's Paris headquarters (pictured, right).

Countries like the United States and Singapore, which are no longer Unesco members, will be watching events closely to see if Matsuura can, as he says, cut costs and improve the management of the organization. This could justify their re-entry.

The US State department called Matsuura's address significant: "We told Matsuura that it's important he create an atmosphere in which the rules are followed, the trains run on time, and there is clear transparency in personnel appointments and management practices". But at the same time, the US is not eager to see blame heaped on Matsuura's predecessor.

"We would not want this regrettable confusion and debate about eleventh-hour promotions to cloud the remarkable political turnabout Mayor brought about."

Desperate move: hunger striker Brinda Runghen.

Some commentators say Mayor is admired for his transformation of Unesco and his commitment to democratic values and freedom of information.

In 1993 the US General Accounting Office reviewed the management of Unesco and said that the organization had a culture of management reform. They found that significant progress had been made in the improving administration procedures.

John Fobes, chairman of Americans for the Universality of Unesco, says that Matsuura comes with only limited experience of Unesco through the World Heritage Program and will need time to find his way. Fobes' group has been reporting on the organisation since the demise of the US National Commission for Unesco in 1984.

Fobes says his group agrees that, even with the management problems facing Matsuura, it would be best for the US to work inside Unesco as soon as possible. He also hopes that additional specific project partnerships will be sought between US entities and Unesco.

In outlining his plans for reform, Matsuura remarked that "we have a house to live in and repair at the same time. Some of the repairs cannot wait. The leaking plumbing and faulty wiring has to be mended straight away."

"I must admit the real situation has turned out to be much worse than I imagined," added Matsuura, who also warned that the culture of Unesco as a whole needed to be changed.

Natasha Loder

China looks to west for economic growth

Beijing

Scientists are to play a leading role in a campaign launched by China to develop its economically disadvantaged western region. The region, covering an area of 5.4 million square kilometres, includes the Tibetan and Loess plateaux, and is home to many of China's poorest people. It also includes Shaanxi, which was the centre of ancient Chinese civilization in the Tang dynasty a thousand years ago.

The science ministry has been allocated 50 million yuan (US\$6.1 million) to spend in the western region over the coming year. It plans to build laboratories and engineering centres in local universities, to create an early warning system for monitoring ecological and environmental changes in key parts of the region, to set up an agricultural information network, and to conduct demonstration projects for boosting new technologies in environmental protection.

The Chinese Academy of Sciences will also invest 250 million yuan in its own development plan for the region to complement a training programme for PhD students it launched four years ago. Funds for that programme will be almost doubled.

The academy's new programme will study the mechanism of environmental deterioration in western China and establish pilot projects for sustainable development. The academy will also select practical technologies, such as water saving and clean energy technologies, to be used in the region, says Li Rui, deputy director of the academy's Institute of Water Conservation near Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi.

The State Council, China's central government, has set up a special committee chaired by the prime minister, Zhu Rongji, to guide a government-wide campaign to build up infrastructure in western China. Funding will come from the issue of 100 billion yuan

in long-term treasury bonds, announced on 5 March.

But the committee faces a daunting task. Although Shaanxi has China's third highest density of universities and research institutes, young scientists prefer to move east, where salaries and working conditions are better.

"Strong in science does not necessarily mean strong in economy," says Li. "We need to find ways of applying scientific results, and using science to guide economic development." Technology transfer is particularly difficult in the western provinces, where industries are mostly state-run and tend to be burdened with debt, he says.

However, Li remains optimistic that some of the problems will be solved. "We will give incentives to encourage researchers from eastern institutes to take part in research projects in the west, and western researchers are also encouraged to conduct exchanges with their eastern colleagues."

Tian Xuewen