

South Africa doubles budget for medical research and AIDS

Cape Town The South African government is to substantially increase its investment in health-related research by doubling both the budget of its Medical Research Council (MRC) and its spending on AIDS vaccine development through the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology.

The MRC budget will rise to 240 million rand (US\$39 million) over the next three years. The government will provide 65 per cent of this, with the rest coming from international private sources.

Research activities within the MRC are being reorganized into six main groups: ethics, HIV vaccine development, bioinformatics and human genomics, telemedicine, public-health research into the prevention of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis, and research into crime, violence and injury.

The president of the MRC, William Makgoba, says the increase "is a sign that the government recognizes the vital link the MRC plays in national socio-economic development", and that the investment

"will improve the quality of life for all South Africans".

Safety at NIH labs to go under the microscope

Washington The US Health and Human Services Office of the Inspector General is to investigate biosafety standards at National Institutes of Health intramural laboratories. The move follows concern expressed by two members of the House of Representatives, Thomas J. Bliley (Republican, Virginia) and Fred Upton (Republican, Michigan).

The two had previously asked the office to move research on avian influenza from the Food and Drug Administration's labs in Rockville, Maryland, because the laboratory is near a shopping mall. The research is no longer being conducted at that location.

Ex-Lockheed boss to head Mars inquiry

Washington The US space agency NASA last week appointed Thomas Young to head the investigation into the Mars Polar Lander and Mars Climate Orbiter spacecraft, which were lost in recent months as they arrived at Mars (see *Nature* **401**, 415 & **402**, 565; 1999).

Young is a retired vice-president of the Lockheed Martin Corporation, which built and operated both spacecraft. He now chairs NASA's outside advisory committee on the international space station. The review panel will consider revisions to NASA's Mars exploration programme.

Earth Observing System takes to the sky at last

Washington The long-awaited Earth Observing System made its debut last week with the launch of NASA's Terra spacecraft into polar orbit. The first in a series of satellites designed to spend at least 15 years gathering data on the global environment, Terra will measure properties such as land cover and surface temperature, snow cover, ocean surface temperature, atmospheric temperature and humidity, and cloud and aerosol properties.

The instruments will be turned on during the first 11 days in orbit, although calibration and other start-up procedures will take about three months. The space shuttle also reached orbit on 19 December, carrying seven astronauts who will fix the ailing Hubble Space Telescope, out of service since last month because of faulty gyroscopes. The astronauts are due to release the repaired Hubble into orbit on Christmas Day.

Helicopter crash hits jinxed French lab

Paris The Institute of Millimetric Radio-astronomy (IRAM) has experienced its second fatal accident this year. Last week, a helicopter transporting five people on a service mission to the radiotelescope observatory crashed. The observatory, which is perched on the 2,550-metre-high Bure plateau in the French Alps, is operated by France's Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Germany's Max Planck Society and Spain's National Geographic Institute.

In June, a cable-car used to reach IRAM came loose and fell, killing all 20 people on board (see *Nature* **400**, 104; 1999). Since the accident, staff have used helicopters to reach the facility. The helicopter last Wednesday was carrying an IRAM technician, three employees of a subcontractor and the pilot. At least three of them are known to have died.

President's son promoted in Chinese academy

Beijing Jiang Mianheng, son of Chinese President Jiang Zemin and former head of the Shanghai Institute of Metallurgy of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (CAS), has been appointed a vice-president at

the academy. Jiang received his PhD from Drexel University, Philadelphia, in 1991.

Jiang has a reputation for successfully transferring technology to industry, an ability much needed by the CAS, which is traditionally dominated by basic research. His companies at the metallurgy institute earn millions of dollars each year in income.

Meanwhile, Xu Zhihong, a prominent physiologist and a CAS vice-president, has been named president of Beijing University.

Seeburg rapped over falsified data

Munich German scientist Peter Seeburg has been formally reprimanded by Hubert Markl, president of the Max Planck Society (MPS), for misrepresenting data in a paper published in *Nature* in 1979 (see *Nature* **399**, 512; 1999). Seeburg, a director of the Max Planck Institute for Medical Research in Heidelberg, had admitted the falsification.

In a lawsuit over patent rights on growth-hormone DNA from the University of California, San Francisco, Seeburg testified that he had taken DNA from the university in 1978 to the US biotechnology company Genentech. The case was settled last month (see *Nature* **402**, 335; 1999).

According to a committee set up by the

MPS last spring, a lack of regulation at UCSF in 1978 made it unclear whether taking the samples was illegal or not. But given his testimony about the 1978 paper — which is challenged by his co-authors — the committee concluded that Seeburg is guilty of scientific misconduct.

The committee said a reprimand was “sufficient and appropriate” as the case dates back 20 years. Seeburg will remain a Max Planck director — and he will also receive US\$17 million as co-owner of UCSF's growth hormone patent.

Extra money for Biosphere 2 provides new lease of life

San Diego Columbia University trustees have approved a \$50 million plan to expand teaching and research facilities at the Biosphere 2 centre outside Tucson, Arizona (see *Nature* **402**, 567; 1999). The domed enclosures at the ‘Columbia West’ campus are used as laboratories for Earth-science research and for teaching up to 350 students.

The plan includes a 10-year agreement between Columbia, in New York, and Texas billionaire Edward Bass. Columbia intends to pump about \$20 million more into the facilities, officials say, while Bass is pledging \$30 million.