

# Future of Gabon lab hangs in the balance

Declan Butler

**The choice of a new director for the International Medical Research Centre in Gabon is crucial for the future of an institution which has been criticized as lacking relevance and falling far short of its potential.**

[PARIS] Well-equipped and properly staffed research centres are rare in Africa. It is therefore not surprising that tropical-disease scientists have their eyes firmly fixed on the outcome of a stormy period at the International Medical Research Centre (CIRMF) in the former French colony of Gabon, one of Africa's biggest French research investments.

In particular, the imminent choice of a new director will be crucial to the CIRMF's future. The institute is widely considered to have the potential to rank as an international centre of excellence in infectious diseases, but its ambitions have been hampered by chronic administrative and social strife.

The centre has lacked a director since last July, when it declined to renew the mandate of Alain George, a French scientist who quit the country after disputes with local authorities. According to several scientists familiar with the centre, tension between local management and outside researchers is rife. They claim this is handicapping efforts to create a strong research programme by, for example, prompting the departure of several leading scientists. The climate also appears to deter people; several top scientists, for example, have turned down the directorship.

## Colonial past

The centre's scientific board recently selected Michel Blanchot, a pharmacologist at the military hospital of Val-De-Grâce near Paris, as candidate for the post, and rejected the only other applicant, Robin Ryder, an experienced virologist at Yale University in the United States. The executive board, which consists largely of state officials, is expected to take a final decision during the summer.

Blanchot last week declined to comment on his selection, pointing out that this may yet be rejected by the executive board. He is widely considered to have broad administrative experience and an in-depth knowledge of Africa, although he is no longer active in research.

"A strong and fresh outlook is needed," says one member of the CIRMF scientific board. He argues that the new director will have to combine "meticulous attention to world-class science" with the sensitivity needed to work in an Africa that is strongly



**Under scrutiny: the centre is well equipped but its operation has long been controversial.**

resentful of past colonial attitudes.

In addition to its research activities, CIRMF — which has around 170 staff — has from the outset been subject to strong political influence. It was founded in 1974 at the request of Gabon's president, El Hadj Omar Bongo, largely through the financing of the giant French oil company Elf Aquitaine.

The company, whose financial and political muscle helped bring Bongo to power, and whose revenues make up the bulk of the country's wealth, agreed to create the centre as part of a deal giving France access to Gabon's oil fields.

Luxuriously furnished, with a well-equipped primate centre and a generous fleet of Land Rovers, the centre — which has an annual budget of FF40 million (US\$6.5 million) — is based in Franceville, the president's home town, 1,000 km from the capital and accessible only by light aircraft.

Several scientists claim that there is widespread local nepotism and abuse of power. According to one researcher, "people are vying for power and influence at the centre, and strategy is not based on research excellence, but on political and family connections".

Social tension at CIRMF has been exacerbated by the devaluation of the African French franc. This has substantially reduced the salaries of African staff which were already low compared with those of foreign researchers, who are paid in hard currency.

Although CIRMF has a respectable list of publications in leading journals, particularly in primatology and virology, there is a broad consensus among many tropical-disease researchers that its way of operating prevents it from becoming a leading African and

international research centre.

"The centre has not reached its potential, which is far greater than its current output," agrees Joseph McCormick, a leading virus 'hunter' formerly with the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta and now head of an epidemiology programme at the Institut Pasteur in Paris.

McCormick, who is also a member of the CIRMF scientific board, says the centre is uniquely placed geographically to exploit the "huge" scientific possibilities offered in Africa, the cradle of infectious diseases such as Ebola and HIV. "[The region] is where we are going to understand the origins and ecology of viruses and other disease agents," he says.

## Local difficulties

One member of the CIRMF science board, Tom Nchinda, an African who is a former head of the World Health Organization's capacity-building division, also argues that the training of local scientists must be given much greater priority. This is the key to sustainable development of an African science base, he argues, adding that "CIRMF is not fulfilling its role as an institutional base compared with other centres in Africa".

Criticisms of the centre's organization are vehemently dismissed by Joseph Lansoud Soukate, its interim director. "The centre is doing very well, we do not have problems," he says. "We are not in the process of collapsing as some people would have you believe," he says, referring to president Bongo's support for the centre. Soukate declines to comment on the substance of the criticisms.

Henri Mathieu, chairman of the centre's scientific board and president of the Hôpital Robert Debre in Paris, admits that criticisms of the centre are "not entirely without foundation", but he cautions that these must be seen in the context of the difficulties of working in Africa.

Mathieu also defends the centre's focus on long-term fundamental research rather than on applied research of greater immediate relevance to local public health needs. He argues that studies on the genetic polymorphism of infectious diseases, for example, will ultimately have significant implications for public health.

But he concedes that the centre also needs to make an "extraordinary effort" to improve the local application of its research if it is to persuade the population and politicians of its usefulness.

According to one official at the World Health Organization, many politicians outside the presidential entourage are increasingly critical of what they claim is the centre's lack of relevance to Gabon's public health needs and its relative isolation from the rest of the country's health and university infrastructure. Some are reported to be keen to see oil revenues diverted elsewhere. □