

international news

As part of a desperate bid to get a grip on inflation, President Ford is proposing to prune nearly \$5,000 million from federal expenditures during the 1975 fiscal year, which has only seven more months to run. Welfare, health and veterans' benefit bear the brunt of the cuts, but biomedical research, space research and several nuclear power programmes are also in the running for some radical surgery.

Ford's proposals came in three chief parts. First, he asked Congress to take the knife to the Appropriations Bill for the Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW), which was then in the final stages of passage through the Congressional mill. Among the cuts Ford requested was a reduction of \$112 million in the budget for the National Institute of Health (NIH), a move which he said would reduce expenditures on new grants and contracts by 25% and cut continuation grants by 5%.

Such surgery, he maintained, "could be accomplished without seriously altering the momentum in biomedical research achieved by sustained and substantial growth in the National Institutes of Health in recent years", but since the NIH was hit hard by cut-backs in 1973 and received only a modest budget increase this year, few biomedical scientists will agree with that sanguine prediction. Congress, in

Cutting budgets to fight inflation

by Colin Norman, Washington

any case, responded to the request by passing the HEW Appropriations Bill last week with a massive increase of \$256 million in the NIH's budget instead of a decrease of \$112 million, thereby putting the ball firmly back in Ford's court.

The Appropriations Bill would step up spending in every NIH institute, with the National Cancer Institute topping the list with a budget of \$692 million—an increase of \$164 million over last year. The National Heart and Lung Institute would also receive a massive infusion of funds, amounting to \$324 million, and the entire NIH budget would climb to \$2,090 million. The Appropriations Bill additionally provides a pot of money for biomedical training, which the Administration has been trying unsuccessfully to decrease.

Ford, it seems, has two options open if he is determined to press his case over the HEW budget. Either he can veto the Appropriations Bill to try to force Congress to reduce the amounts, or he could sign it and later propose that some of the increases be deferred until next year.

Finally, Ford is recommending that money which Congress has already allocated to some programmes be spent next year instead of this year. Among the programmes he has selected for such a stretch-out are several nuclear power projects, some space research and development, and solar and geothermal energy research supported by the National Science Foundation.

He is suggesting, for example, that \$80 million in the budget of the Atomic Energy Commission be deferred, including \$8 million earmarked for the breeder reactor, \$8 million for controlled thermonuclear fusion, \$4 million for environmental research and safety, \$6.7 million for development of hardware for the high temperature gas cooled reactor, and another \$13 million for equipment needed for the fusion programme. Although Ford maintains that the delays will have little lasting impact on the nuclear power programme, those proposals provide an important indication that the Administration may be losing some of its over-riding enthusiasm for nuclear energy.

As for the space programme, Ford is requesting authority to withhold until next year some \$20 million earmarked for the joint USA-USSR docking mission. He also wants to defer expenditure of \$16 million for several space science and applications projects; and \$36 million from NASA. □

THE six-year-old collaboration arrangement between the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the government of India, involving a research project on genetic control of mosquitoes, is due to expire in June next year. Following a controversy in India (*Nature*, September 20) over the American defence establishment's apparent interest and role in these projects, the Indian government has been rethinking.

It is almost certain that the WHO will ask for an extension of its agreement with India, because some of the project's planned experiments will not have been completed by June 1975. (A big experiment aimed at controlling *aedes aegypti* genetically is scheduled to commence early next year.) Should there be an extension of the project, it will come only after the present agreement with the WHO has been revised with new or amended provisions. Among other things, India will, in all probability, insist that the

Genetic Control of Mosquito Unit (GCMU) be placed under the overall charge of the Director-General of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) and that all project leaders be appointed only with the specific approval of the government of India. The Indian government will also very carefully examine various provisions of the WHO agreement with the United States government, to ensure that all the necessary safeguards are provided in its revised agreement with the WHO—that is, in case it decides to extend the latter's mosquito research project beyond next June.

According to a note prepared by the Union Health Ministry on the GCM project and placed before the Lok Sabha (lower house of the Parliament), a recent joint meeting of the expert committee on virus and arthropod-borne diseases and geneticists from the expert committee on human genetics, immunology and allergy, has fav-

oured the creation of a separate 'monitoring body' with a membership drawn from those not actually engaged in the project. This body, in close co-operation with the concerned GCMU staff, will monitor the effect and impact of all future releases of 'genetically manipulated' mosquitoes at all stages of the release operation. The meeting also recognised that consideration of the possible future lines of development for the ICMR-WHO project was the legitimate responsibility of none other than the GCMU's own project committee.

Meanwhile, at a meeting held last month of the subcommittee set up by the ICMR's governing body to review the administrative and technical control of the GCMU, it was felt that the project leader should be asked by the Director-General (of the ICMR) to submit reports to him every 15 or 30 days about the work done in the unit.

from Narender K. Sehgal