France attacks UN research on Mediterranean

Mediterranean countries are to slow cooperative research on pollution, writes **Robert Walgate** from Geneva

FRANCE, assisted by Spain and Italy, has succeeded in cutting three major projects from the United Nations Environment Programme's research effort on pollution in the Mediterranean. Research has been halted on pollutants in the open waters of the Mediterranean (as opposed to the coasts), on transfer of pollutants from the air to the water, and on modelling the Mediterranean ecosystem.

Last week's meeting in Geneva of the 18 countries which signed the 1975 Barcelona convention on Mediterranean pollution was dominated by money problems, in particular shifting payment for the Mediterranean action plan from UNEP—where responsibility has lain until now—to the states themselves. France, as the largest of the 18 countries, was concerned that its contribution should be well spent, and so devoted considerable efforts to analysing the research plans of UNEP's Regional Seas director, the Yugoslav Stjepan Keckes.

Keckes had developed a 13-part programme of research in the Mediterranean known as 'Med Pol' I to XIII. The first seven deal with coastal waters, and were approved by the original Barcelona meeting. It is Med Pol VIII to XIII which were added later and deal largely with open waters that were challenged last week.

The total research costs involved were relatively small—around US \$1 million a year, compared with an estimated cost of some \$5 billion for treating presently untreated Mediterranean sewage effluent so some matter of principle appeared to be at stake. If the countries were serious about dealing with Mediterranean pollution, why should they be bothered by the one part per thousand of the costs that came in the form of research?

The question mark hanging over the whole meeting was precisely what principle was at stake. According to the French delegation, the question was the quality of the research teams that UNEP had put together.

Keckes had, as a matter of principle, drawn together the expertise of existing government-sponsored laboratories

around the Mediterranean coast until he had some 83 participating labs in 16 countries. These varied greatly in quality, but he took the view that governments would respect the conclusions of their own labs more than those of externally imposed teams of 'experts', however good.

Further, by receiving advice and financial support from UNEP, these laboratories could be brought up to an international standard. So far, UNEP has spent some \$1.4 million on equipping these labs, mostly with American equipment (which an independent panel adjudged to be the best).

By Keckes's own admission, not all these laboratories have come up to scratch. In one southern Mediterranean state, for example, UNEP equipment languishes in a filthy laboratory without supplies of water or electricity, in spite of continued assurances that the necessary facilities will be supplied. On the other hand, neighbouring states are superior to some northern countries.

Keckes is undaunted by these setbacks, seeing the treatment of the Mediterranean and the improvement of developing country science in a very long perspective. But at Geneva the French delegation took a different view. They argued that the UNEP team could only cope effectively with local, coastal sources, and that the more complex issues of open-water pollution, air transport and ecological monitoring were beyond them. France already has programmes in these areas, said the delegation, and would make its information open to UNEP.

Keckes, however, thinks that the principle at stake may have been different—and closer to a question of the ownership of sensitive data. In the past he has found French officials "unforthcoming" about pollution of the Rhône river, which is one of the three major pollution sources of the Mediterranean (the others are the rivers Po—Italy—and Ebro—Spain), and he suspects that the same will be true of central Mediterranean data. This data is essential to an assessment of the long-term effects of pollutants, par-

ticularly cadmium and mercury and polychlorinated hydrocarbons (from pesticides).

Further, the air—whose circulation over the Mediterranean is little understood—may be one of the main sources of these pollutants. According to Keckes "the input of airborne pollutants may turn out to be the major unknown parameter needed to assess the state of pollution in the Mediterranean basin". Measurements in the Baltic have shown that between 10% and 90% of heavy metal pollution comes from the air, and in the Adriatic it has been observed that there is some 300 times more heavy metal in the top metre of the sea than in deeper layers. Polychlorinated hydrocarbons affect the reproductive cycle of fish, and so could have a long-term effect on Mediterranean fish-stocks—a matter of more interest to southern nations with a comparatively greater reliance on fisheries, than to industrialised northern states. Nonetheless, the air-sea research programme has been cut.

The French view is that not only is the Mediterranean team of poor quality to undertake such vital work, but the necessary instrumentation and methodology is not yet available to make an accurate assessment. Keckes admits that measurements so far are only accurate to an order of magnitude, but believes that it is necessary for the whole programme to proceed in parallel, so that each part can learn from the others. He hopes that the deleted research can be revived in UNEP's long-term programme for the Mediterranean, which will be agreed in 1981.

The Regional Seas team is not discouraged. On the contrary they had been led to expect far worse. Research is only part of the Mediterranean Action Plan, which includes 'priority action' (inexplicably including development of alternative energy sources) and the 'Blue plan' for coordinated environmental management and development of Mediterranean industry. The balance between these programmes has been maintained.

In the final analysis, the budget for the Mediterranean Action Plan for 1979 and 1980 was put at \$6.4 million. Of this, \$3.3 million will come from the Mediterranean states and \$1.6 million from UNEP. Within this the total budget for Med Pol for two years will be some \$880,000. The rest will be provided by other UN agencies such as the World Health Organisation and the United Nations Development Programme for parts of the programme related to their own interests. □