

news in brief

UN urged to take lead in studying effects of CO₂: The United Nations Environment Programme can and should take the lead in assessing the global impact of an increase in carbon dioxide on the environment and health and society generally, Mrs Barbara Blum, deputy administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency, told UNEP's governing council in Nairobi last week. She also called for an international meeting of experts to accelerate and coordinate action to improve management of the world's forests. "Tropical forests are the world's richest generic reservoir, a potential source of useful plants and drugs, a modulator of climate, a shield against desertification and soil loss, and a renewable timber-bank", she said. "It is time to highlight this key problem for decision-makers at the highest level of government."

Recent experience in the US, which was now having to clean up the consequences of earlier indiscriminate dumping of toxic wastes, showed that the land was not an infinite sink or sponge which could be used as a dumping ground for residues of industrial activity.

Russian invitation: France has been asked to supply a cosmonaut for a space flight with a Soviet crew. This proposal was made by Mr Brezhnev to President Giscard d'Estaing, during the French leader's visit to Moscow last week. According to Tass, Giscard "responded positively".

TUC gets in on microprocessors: Two weeks after the UK Science Research Council jumped into the technology of microprocessors with proposals for a major research and training programme (19 April), the Trades Union Congress has urged full cooperation between government, management and the unions to avoid the loss of "hundreds of thousands of jobs". Mr Len Murray, TUC general secretary, notes in a report that "in the absence of intervention and planning, the benefits of microelectronics will certainly be unequally distributed". The TUC calls for a 35-hour week, a reduction of systematic overtime, longer holidays and sabbaticals and trade union education in microprocessor technology. But Professor Kristen Nygaard of the Institute of Informatics of the University of Oslo says that the key issue is one of workplace control. He cites the introduction of "data" shop stewards in Norway as a more appropriate demand for trade unions to make. The shop stewards serve on small shop floor committees of four to six persons and they are not permitted to become programmers. The stewards are also required to attend the annual data processing course given by the Norwegian TUC that has been held since 1971. *Employment and Technology. TUC, Great Russell St., London WC1. 40p.*

Cornell ring starts storing electrons: The first circulating beam of electrons has been stored at Cornell University's new Electron Storage Ring, a facility which, when fully operational later this year, will enable stored beams of electrons and positrons to collide at two points in their orbit. The storage ring is mounted in the same tunnel that houses the Cornell electron synchrotron, which will provide the high energy electrons and positrons for injection into the storage ring. Conversion of the synchrotron into a colliding beam facility has been under way since September 1977, and has been funded at an estimated cost of \$20.7 million by the National Science Foundation.

Head of FDA resigns: Dr Donald Kennedy has resigned as director of the US Food and Drug Administration, an agency of the Department of Health, Education and

Welfare, to return to Stanford University in California where he is to become provost and vice-president for academic affairs. Before joining the FDA in March 1977, Dr Kennedy was professor and head of the human biology programme at Stanford. For a time he was also presidential science adviser, acting as one of two senior consultants to the Office of Science and Technology Policy. Announcing his decision to return to academic life, Dr Kennedy said he had intended to stay at FDA through a full academic term, "but the position at Stanford will not wait". He leaves the FDA on June 30—one day before a tough new ethics law restricting the contacts that ex-government employees can have with their previous agencies comes into effect—and starts work at Stanford on August 1.

In his two years at the FDA, Dr Kennedy has been at the centre of a number of controversial issues. He has strongly supported attempts to ban saccharin as a potential carcinogen, and has strongly opposed moves to legalise the medical use of the claimed anti-cancer agent laetrile. Last year he was also behind unsuccessful attempts by the administration to overhaul FDA's drug-regulation system.

New analysis traces consequences of world resource depletion: Worldwatch Institute, a Washington-based non-profit research organisation, has released a study on the economic effects of population growth, which finds that significant per capita declines are occurring in four major resource areas: fisheries, forests, croplands and grasslands. Over-fishing has become the rule rather than the exception. In forestry, demand has exceeded the sustainable yield of the world's forests producing higher costs for lumber and a consequent shortage of housing. Grassland management is characterised by overgrazing on every continent and pressure on beef, milk, wool and leather production. Crops are also strained, and cereal production, which increased 30% from 1950 to 1971, has levelled off.

The study points out that when biology starts to fail, oil tends to be substituted, thus placing a drain on energy reserves. Synthetic fibres now account for a third of the market and synthetic rubber two-thirds. Cardboard and wood are replaced by plastics. In addition, agriculture depletion increases the demand for chemical fertilisers and mechanised agriculture to maintain production. Worldwatch says; "The oil safety valve is starting to stick." The study is critical of supply and demand solutions and sees a need for government intervention in population policy and resource management and increased research into the capacity of the world's biological systems.—*Resource Trends and Population Policy: A Time for Reassessment. Worldwatch Paper 29.*

Sino-Bangla technical cooperation: China and Bangladesh have signed an agreement for the mutual exchange of scientists and technicians to study agricultural production. China will organise study visits for Bangladesh experts in the freshwater fish farming, paddy rice culture, small irrigation projects and agricultural machinery manufacture. Also included will be the processing of green tea and Chinese medicinal herbs and visits to study the use of natural gas for producing chemical fertiliser. Bangladesh will offer study visits on jute manufacture, black tea growing and cultivation of mango saplings. About 50 Bangladeshis will visit China in the first group which will leave in the next two months. Bangladesh has been aligned towards Western technological development but the Chinese agreement may open up opportunities for the transfer of traditional technologies based on local resources.
—from M. Kabir in Dacca.