

UN technical development

Licence to spend

Washington

The General Assembly of the United Nations has agreed on a new financing system which came into operation at the beginning of the year, aimed at supporting efforts by developing nations to build up their scientific and technological capabilities.

In effect the resolution prolongs for one more year the interim arrangements for carrying out an ambitious plan of action agreed at the UN Conference on Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD), held in Vienna in 1979. However, the form of the final arrangements is still under discussion.

The money so far received for the plan of action remains far below target. While it was agreed in Vienna, for example, to set up an interim fund under the auspices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to attract voluntary contributions of at least \$250 million during 1980 and 1981, less than \$40 million has been formally pledged.

The new resolution talks of setting up a financing system which would raise an annual \$200 million over 1983-85. Several UN observers feel that this, too, is wildly optimistic, pointing out that Congress has even deleted the \$10 million the United States was to have contributed to the fund from the foreign aid bill signed by President Reagan in November.

Perhaps more significant than the financial targets, however, has been the outcome of a dispute running since before the Vienna conference over who should control the distribution of the funds.

At UNCSTD the interim fund was established under UNDP, but at the same time a new Center for Science and Technology was created within the United Nations, under a new assistant director-general, whose principal responsibility was to provide secretariat services for an Intergovernmental Committee, open to all UN member states. The committee has had broad responsibility for the policy directions taken by the fund, but despite the strong efforts of some of the more militant developing countries, it was not given direct control of the fund.

During recent negotiations in New York on the resolution to set up a financing system that could be approved by the General Assembly, several of the more advanced developing nations again pressed for the Center for Science and Technology to be given greater responsibility for distributing funds.

Other countries opposed this move, however, on the grounds that if the management of the fund became too much an instrument of the more militant members of the Group of 77, this would further reduce the chances of the fund receiving significant resources from the

developed nations.

Eventually, the latter view prevailed. The financing system approved by the General Assembly will have transferred to it the projects and personnel that now make up the interim fund, with the Intergovernmental Committee involved primarily through a small subgroup which will negotiate with potential donors. The resolution does not mention the centre.

It is hoped in New York that during the first year of these arrangements, definite procedures can be devised for raising donations from both developed and oil-producing countries along the lines endorsed by 20 developing nations at a meeting in Caracas in early October.

Observers in Washington remain sceptical. Although the State Department has offered moral support for the new initiative, Congress eliminated from the foreign aid bill \$38 million which was to have gone to another special fund, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, on the grounds that much of the promised OPEC contribution had failed to materialize. In New York there is more optimism that a pragmatic compromise between political demands and technical needs can eventually be found.

David Dickson

Biotechnology

Going Dutch

Brussels

Dutch biotechnology researchers are awaiting with keen interest a report due early this year which is to define areas deserving future investment. A government-sponsored committee was set up last May under the chairmanship of Professor Schilplood of the University of Leiden with the aim of coordinating research in the Netherlands and increasing its emphasis on commercial applications.

The committee, which brings together experts from industry, the governmental applied research organization (TNO) and universities, is a by-product of the Dutch government's drive to stimulate innovation which was launched on the basis of a 1979 white paper which recommended that the government invest in new technologies.

A sum of 4 million guilders (£870,000) a year has been set aside for the biotechnology committee to allocate to selected projects. This is already being spent, with researchers at the University of Groningen the first to benefit. The committee is expected to make recommendations on priority areas for funding which will include not only commercially viable projects but also related needs for developing, testing and producing genetically engineered microorganisms on a commercial scale.

The construction of a laboratory for work at P3 containment level is in progress under the aegis of TNO, and work should be completed in 1983. Whether the new laboratory will be used as soon as it is ready

Cold comfort

Bombay

India has launched its first scientific expedition to Antarctica. A group of 20 scientists left Goa last month aboard the *Polar Circle*, a 600-tonne ship chartered from Norway. The cruise to Antarctica and back is to last 80 days and should include a total of 15 days actually on the ice doing experiments.

The Indian expedition is being led by Dr S.Z. Qasim, secretary to the Department of Environment and former director of the National Institute of Oceanography in Goa.

The Antarctic expedition, which will cost approximately £1.3 million, is one of several major projects of the newly created Department of Ocean Development, directly under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. The expedition team consists of scientists from ten organizations including the National Institute of Oceanography, the Indian Meteorological Department, the Geological Survey of India and the Indian Institute of Geomagnetism. Two Norwegian scientists are with the expedition to assist in the operation of specialized equipment from Norway.

As well as collecting oceanographic and weather data, the expedition team will be looking for samples containing evidence that India was part of Antarctica before it broke away some 100 million years ago. During the cruise the ship will survey the ocean bed for nodules.

India becomes the third developing country after Chile and Argentina to reach Antarctica — shortly to be followed by China, which is planning to send its first expedition this year. So far there are no plans for a permanent Indian research station in Antarctica.

K.S. Jayaraman

depends on advice from another committee set up last May — the Committee on the Ethical Implications of Genetic Engineering. This panel includes theologians, a professor of ethics, scientists and doctors, and is chaired by a former politician, Mr Oele.

At present the committee is undecided whether to go ahead with a separate report on research at P3 level followed by a general report or to leave the first issue to the final report even though it may mean the laboratory is unused for a while. Research at P1 and P2 levels is currently subject to authorization by municipal authorities but P3 research will be agreed on at national level. Industry in the Netherlands is at present battling against some decisions by municipal authorities which are alleged to be overcautious and restrictive. As an official of the government's science policy department confessed, "in Holland the whole issue is a political can of worms". Jasper Becker