

UNIDO biotechnology

Twinned-centre jumps legal gun*New Delhi*

DESPITE legal and other hurdles, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) is trying hard to put its International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) on an operational footing this year. The sixth meeting of the ICGEB preparatory committee held last month in New Delhi has decided to launch the centre's scientific activities without waiting for the ratification of the ICGEB statutes by member countries.

So far, 36 nations have agreed to be members of the first international biotechnology centre, but only Iraq has ratified the statutes. Mr Adolfo Teylhardat of Venezuela, chairman of the preparatory committee, says the statutes must be ratified by at least 24 countries before ICGEB becomes a legal entity.

UNIDO mooted the idea of the centre in 1981 with the aim of bringing the benefits of biotechnology to bear on problems unique to the developing world. By a decision in 1984, ICGEB is to have two components, one located in New Delhi and the other in Trieste, Italy. The host countries have yet to ratify the statutes and finalize the agreements with ICGEB.

These legal hurdles are not expected to hold up the activities of the centre. The New Delhi meeting, attended by 25 countries, decided formally to begin the centre's work with a workshop on plant biotechnology in New Delhi in September. This will be followed by another workshop at Trieste on a topic yet to be decided.

In establishing ICGEB, UNIDO is being guided by an panel of eminent scientific advisers (PSA). One of the panel's suggestions, based on the experience of the Salk Institute in the United States, was to hire between five and ten distinguished scientists to serve as non-resident members of the faculty of the centre. This suggestion, though on the agenda, was not followed up at the New Delhi meeting. Nor was any decision taken on the selection of a director for the centre. Taylhardat said that ICGEB is looking for a single director for its two components who would be "a scientist of world repute with managerial experience". Selection has been deferred until the next meeting of the preparatory committee in Havana in November.

A major recommendation of PSA is that excellence and not nationality should be the basis for selection of the director and other senior staff, who need not necessarily be from member countries. Except for Greece, Italy and Spain, most of the ICGEB members are developing countries with little infrastructure or trained manpower for genetic engineering research. For this reason, most of the staff is initially expected to be from developed nations.

The ICGEB statutes provide certain im-

munity and privileges to internationally recruited staff that will not be available to the locally recruited scientists. This, together with the proposed discriminatory salary packages (\$50,000 and above for international staff) may create problems, Indian scientists fear. India has made it clear that its contributions to the centre in New Delhi would not cover the salaries of such international staff members, the cost of which will be met with funds from Italy.

Although no countries except the hosts have pledged funds, UNIDO says the operation of ICGEB for its first 30 months is assured by offers of a total \$24 million by India and Italy. ICGEB's operational cost for the first five years is estimated at \$47.8 million. It is hoped that the balance will be covered by initial and yearly contributions from members and others. Laboratory facilities are yet to be set up in Trieste or New Delhi. India has allocated \$4.3 million for 1985-86 for permanent facilities on 25 acres of land and temporary laboratory space in the Jawaharlal Nehru University.

US science budget**Deficit-cutting means freeze***Washington*

RESEARCH is unlikely to emerge unscathed from Congress's efforts to reduce the federal budget deficit despite its relatively privileged position in the Reagan administration's list of priorities. The Senate is considering proposals to hold spending on various scientific and space programmes at 1985 levels. The agencies affected include the National Science Foundation (NSF), the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and the Department of Energy. The House of Representatives, for its part, has refused to authorize the administration's proposed 4.4 per cent budget increase for NSF. Earlier this month, the House of Representatives similarly refused to authorize an increase for NASA (see *Nature* 11 April, p.488).

The proposal before the Senate to freeze spending on general scientific and space research, known as function 250, is part of the deficit-reduction package agreed last month between Senate Republican leaders and the White House, which was still being debated last week. Were the package to be adopted by the full Senate, it would become politically almost impossible for Senate committees to authorize budget increases for scientific agencies.

The House action in freezing NSF's budget would keep the authorization at \$1,501.8 million. The \$67.6 million saved would come from research (\$58.3 million) and from the US Antarctic programme (\$9.3 million). The House Science and Technology Committee had earlier recom-

Under existing arrangements, the New Delhi component of ICGEB will conduct research on biotechnology applied to agriculture, human and animal health whereas the Trieste half will focus on industrial microbiology — the conversion of biomass into fuel, bio-recovery of hydrocarbons and protein engineering. Trieste will have full facilities for developing industrially viable technologies based on genetically manufactured organisms, for scaling up technologies developed in New Delhi and a central computer facility.

By the time the centre reaches full operating capacity, each site will have a team of 30 scientists, 20 postdoctoral fellows, 30 technicians and 30 trainees from developing countries. According to Taylhardat, it will serve as an international channel for the flow of information on biotechnology from industrialized to developing nations. A gene bank containing genetic stocks and information is also planned.

Taylhardat said that ICGEB will also be the centre of a network of affiliated regional and national research institutes for biotechnology research. The New Delhi meeting considered requests for affiliation status from ten countries, including Egypt and China.

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mended going along with the President's proposed budget of \$1,569.4 million, but during the debate in the House, committee members offered the cut, which was accepted by a large majority.

The House bill (HR 1210) would also transfer to the director of NSF the authority to appoint assistant directors. In the past, there have been long delays in filling these posts because of the requirements that assistant directors be appointed by the President and then confirmed by the Senate. The bill also enjoins the NSF to place "emphasis" on acid rain research. The Senate has not yet voted on the NSF budget authorization, but the Commerce Committee, one of two Senate committees vying for jurisdiction over the foundation, last week recommended a budget increase broadly in line with the administration's request. The Labor and Human Resources Committee will tackle the NSF budget later this month, after which the Senate will vote; a conference committee to resolve differences with the House is likely.

Arguments in the authorization committee are partly political posturing, as it is the appropriations committees that finally decide what money goes where. The Senate has been unable to pass an NSF authorization bill for the past four years, and few have missed it; if, however, such a bill were passed by both Houses that implied a budget freeze, it would be technically difficult and politically risky for the appropriations committees to fund a budget increase.

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