UNESCO on trial in Paris

Paris

THE twenty-fifth general conference of UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), now in progress, will be a testing occasion for the organization and for its director-general, Federico Mayor.

The agenda for the month-long (17 October – 16 November) meeting at the Paris headquarters includes Mayor's medium-term plan for 1990–95 and the budget for the next two years. But also in the balance are his efforts over the past two years to carry out reforms designed to persuade the United States, Great Britain and Singapore to rejoin the organization; they left in December 1984 professing unhappiness with UNESCO's effectiveness and political direction.

Since his election two years ago (see *Nature* 329, 659; 1987), Mayor's liberal style has, for many, been a welcome contrast with that of his autocratic predecessor, Amadou Mahtar M'Bow. He has also

RAINFOREST DESTRUCTION

Unions turn green in Australia

Sydney

CONCERN over the fate of South-East Asian rainforest has led Australian labour unions to take an interest in ecology. The Building Workers Industrial Union (BWIU) for the state of Victoria, noting the daily loss of 11 square kilometres of Malaysian forest, has banned the use of imported rainforest timber. According to the BWIU, more than one-third of such wood is used to build forms for concrete-pouring, and then discarded.

Domestic timber should be used instead, the union believes, which would provide more jobs for Australians, save endangered species of Asian trees and help native groups such as the Penan tribe of Malaysia whose traditional forest habitat is only a year away from destruction.

The BWIU ban is supported by the Australian Council of Trade Unions, which has announced its intention to end the importation of timber from threatened rainforest areas. The Waterside Workers Federation and the Seamen's Union have begun a series of 24-hour actions to prevent the unloading of timber from ships docking in Australian ports.

But according to Neil Goldsmith of the Plywood Association of Australia, their actions could be counter-productive. The import of rainforest timber is a \$128-million-a-year industry, and disruptive union action could, says Goldsmith, drive up prices and cause the loss of domestic jobs.

Tania Ewing

proved himself an able diplomat by persuading the Palestine Liberation Organisation to postpone its demand for membership until the next general conference. Without this withdrawal, there would have been no hope that the United States would reconsider its membership.

But within UNESCO, Mayor has been criticized for not going far enough or fast enough in his reforms. And, despite his three meetings with the new US Assistant Secretary of State for International Organisation Affairs, John Bolton, a Congress hearing on UNESCO in September, at which non-governmental organizations and the private sector were invited to testify, made it apparent that Mayor has still not convinced some sectors of the US administration.

At the hearing, Frank Press, former director of the National Science Foundation, Leonard Sussman, author of a recent book on press freedom and Dr Mitchell of the American Council on Education gave testimony on UNESCO which, according to an observer at the hearing, emphasized its potential future role in international cooperation in science. They implied that the United States could no longer afford to stay outside the organization despite its faults. But Bolton, a Bush appointee who came from the hard-nosed Heritage Foundation, maintained that UNESCO still has a long way to go before reforms justify a US return.

It has been difficult for Mayor to achieve real reforms on the questions that were instrumental in the US and British decisions to leave. At the heart of the quarrel was the New World Information and Communications Order (NWICO), M'Bow's attempt to protect developing countries from what was perceived as an unwelcome flood of media attention from industrialized countries. As part of its programme, NWICO effectively endorsed the right of governments to censor critical news reporting.

In his new medium-term plan, Mayor addresses this issue by falling back on the UNESCO constitution, which speaks of the organization's duty to advance the "mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples" by promoting the "free flow of ideas by word and image".

But Africa is UNESCO's main province of concern, and Mayor cannot afford to upset the African delegations; he thus refers to a need for the "balanced dissemination of information", a locution that to sensitive US ears sounds like an echo of NWICO. The way out of this quarrel, says Mayor, is through the notion that the interests of developing countries can best be served by encouraging the development of endogenous communications and media.

Another cause of US irritation was the top-heavy bureaucracy. Deprived of more than a quarter of its regular income by the US walk-out, the organization was forced to cut its staff of 2,800 by 700. But, as Mayor pointed out in his opening address on 16 October, cost-cutting is incompatible with the injection of much-needed new blood. The inability to hire new staff in any quantity means that Mayor has not only had to manage a programme set up by his unpopular predecessor, but has had to do so largely with M'Bow's former staff.

The content of Mayor's medium-term plan has so far met with approval. His "priority of priorities" is to reduce the "unacceptable gap" between the richest and poorest peoples through education programmes. Next year will be International Literacy Year and UNESCO will hold a conference on Education for All in Thailand in March. Other priorities are the promotion of peace through increased cultural exchange and also of "peace with nature" through UNESCO basic science programmes, a plan whose theme is "not to mortgage the very existence of future generations".

But despite Mayor's ambition that UNESCO should "do less, but in greater depth", the organization is faced with severe financial difficulties. Taking account of a shortfall carried over from the last budgetary period, the proposed \$372.5 million regular budget for 1990–91 is effectively a decrease in real terms, and is on a level with spending in the early 1970s. This means that the programme for the next two years will be hotly contested.

Developing countries have already resisted a proposed 2.5 per cent increase in members' contributions, and plans to modernize communications equipment are likely to be postponed.

According to John Fobes, US observer at the conference on behalf of the International Social Science Council, the time is right for the United States to return. Now that the communications issue has quietened down, he says, the value of UNESCO as coordinator of international science, technology and education programmes can be appreciated.

"There will be a lot of important conferences on global issues in the next few years and it would be good if UNESCO became a quiet place for an overall look. In the next ten years, UNESCO will be rebuilt and will become a monitor, instead of a do-all and be-all. The world needs that."

Despite Bolton's luke-warm statement in Congress, some influential groups within the United States are in favour of a return. In Britain, the Foreign Office has assured Mayor that the government will review its position once the conference is over.

Peter Coles