

Support grows for UNESCO but money remains a problem

London & Washington. Supporters of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) see growing evidence that the US and British governments will rejoin an organization that they left nearly a decade ago after complaining of excessive politicization and chronic mismanagement. But they concede that the cost of membership may be too high a hurdle to clear.

Their optimism is based on statements by government officials that, even though major problems still exist within the organization,

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the end of the Cold War and recent management reforms have largely met the chief ideological and practical objections. In Washington, the US State Department is about to begin a two-month inter-agency review to gauge the potential benefits of rejoining after a nine-year absence.

Frederico Mayor

This follows a report last year from the General Accounting Office and a recent visit to UNESCO's Paris headquarters by a congressional delegation, both of which concluded that the organization has done much to correct previous shortcomings.

Doug Bennet, assistant secretary-designate for the State Department's Bureau of International Organization Affairs and the leading administration figure in reaching an eventual decision, is said to be sympathetic to UNESCO. At the same, its friends in Congress are mustering support for non-binding resolutions calling for the United States to rejoin before its biannual general conference in Paris in October.

The resolution, introduced last week by former UNESCO ambassador Esteban Torres (Democrat, California), has attracted the support of former opponents, including Tom Lantos (Democrat, California). "UNESCO has now cleaned up its act," says Lantos, chairman of a House of Representatives subcommittee on international security, international organizations and human rights. "But when we get back in, we will watch both its politics and its fiscal performance with great care."

In London, Baroness Chalker, the Min-

ister for Overseas Development, is coming under pressure to act from both Houses of Parliament. A resolution calling for Britain to return to an organization that it helped to create in 1946 has so far been signed by 214 (out of 650) Members of Parliament, including 22 Conservatives.

UNESCO's director-general, Spanish biochemist Federico Mayor, was given a relatively sympathetic hearing last week when he outlined some of the body's recent changes to the House of Commons Select Committee on Foreign Affairs. These changes, he said, include a further streamlining of operational programmes and more staff cuts at its Paris headquarters, which last year abolished 74 posts.

Mayor told the parliamentary committee that UNESCO's chief role "is in the transfer and sharing of knowledge" rather than to provide technical assistance or to sponsor research. He also said that plans have been scrapped for an "international communications order" — a controversial proposal that Western democracies saw as an attempt to censor the media.

However, the British government is not as yet convinced that the recent changes are as radical as UNESCO officials claim. Speaking in a parliamentary debate in March, for example, Chalker said there had been little progress in decentralizing activities away from Paris, that UNESCO's programmes were still insufficiently focused and that a decision to increase support for a "participation programme" — in which money is given to poorer member states to spend as they wish — was "quite mad". She also expressed concern that multilateral support in the developing nations is often less effective than bilateral programmes.

Nevertheless, Chalker has also said that her main reservation about applying to rejoin is financial. In the absence of new funding from the Treasury, the costs of membership — estimated at £10 million (US\$15 million) next year — would require cutting back other programmes financed by the Overseas Development Agency.

The United States may also find it difficult to justify an annual fee of \$55 million. Representative George Brown (Democrat, California), who is the chairman of the House Science, Space and Technology Committee, concedes that "developing trends in Congress against spending money and against international cooperation" will work against UNESCO membership. However Brown, who supports re-entry and has signed the Torres resolution, says that he remains "personally optimistic" that the Clinton administration will decide to rejoin before October.

David Dickson & Colin Macilwain

India drops useful forecast of monsoon

New Delhi. The Indian government will not this year issue a forecast of the severity of the summer monsoon, which has an enormous impact on the nation's economy, even though the model it has used for the past five years has been quite accurate. The government defends its decision on scientific grounds, but others see it as an attempt to play down the contribution of an influential scientist who developed the model and who earlier this year retired from government service.

The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) says that the forecast has been halted because data for half of the 16 parameters used in the model are not available in time to be helpful. "Predictions in March or April based on incomplete data can at best be described as intelligent guesses but they are not scientific", says N.Sen Roy, IMD director general.

The model was developed in 1987 by Vasant Gowariker, a chemical engineer who at the time was secretary of the Department of Science and Technology (DST), which controls the meteorological service. In 1991 he became science adviser to the prime minister, but in March he reached the mandatory retirement age of 60.

The Gowariker model uses global and regional weather parameters such as the occurrence of El Niño to predict the amount of rain in the four-month monsoon season that begins in early June. Rain well below the normal 860 mm usually results in a poor harvest, and advance knowledge would greatly affect economic behaviour. In the past five years the forecast, issued in early spring to allow time for preparations either way, has proved to be quite close to the actual rainfall.

There is speculation that the model was abandoned because of persistent resentment in the weather department against Gowariker, who is not a trained meteorologist and who was involved in building rockets for India's space programme before becoming head of DST. It may also be part of a wider problem in India (see *Nature* 362, 387; 1993) of professional jealousy and receiving credit for one's accomplishments.

Gowariker points out that the government was willing for several years to use his model to make such 'guesses' and that it remains a useful tool. Without it, he says, "the country will be exposed to the greater danger of unfounded speculation and unscientific forecasts from all kinds of sources within and outside the country".

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