



The full text of items on this page — and further details and background information about the Unesco/ICSU World Conference on Science, which has been taking place in Budapest this week — can be found on *Nature's* website at <http://www.nature.com>

Academies call for ban on patenting agricultural life forms

The Council of the Third World Academy of Sciences (TWAS), which met in Budapest last Thursday (24 June) before the start of the main conference, endorsed a call for a ban on the patenting of all “agricultural life forms”.

“Agriculture in much of the developing world is the result of the collective experience gained from the sweat and toil of poor peasants over thousands of years,” says TWAS vice-president Muhammad Akhtar, emeritus professor of biochemistry at the University of Southampton in England.

“Recombinant DNA technology is unlikely to alter more than a fraction of one per cent of the existing genomic make-up of edible plants,” he says. “It is hence an affront to the sense of fairness that multinational corporations should be able to claim the ownership, through patenting, of living systems, for such a minuscule contribution.”

Earlier in the week, a meeting of the scientific advisory body to the United Nations biodiversity convention in Montreal had given a lukewarm response to a more farmer-friendly alternative to ‘Terminator’ seeds, the controversial technology in which seeds are genetically modified to become sterile after one season’s planting (see *Nature* 399, 721; 1999 & helix.nature.com/wcs).

The alternative is known as T-Gurt — Trait-specific Genetic Use Restriction Technology. T-Gurt seeds are modified to produce specific traits, such as tolerance to drought. The trait is activated after the seed is sprayed with a proprietary chemical. The seed will still germinate without the chemical, but will not have the modified characteristics. **E.M.**

Debt relief cash ‘should be spent on a fund for science’

The Africa group of countries has agreed on what could be the conference’s most innovative proposal so far: creating a science fund for poor countries from the debt relief that was agreed last month by the G8 nations, meeting in Cologne, for the 40 least developed countries.

The proposal was agreed by science and education ministers from Africa at a meeting on Monday (28 June) in Budapest. It will be put to the conference drafting group by Senegal, which represents Africa on the group.

Under the proposal, countries with heavy burdens of debt will be urged to agree to set up a science fund from money earmarked for debt repayments. The repayments will be waived under the plan agreed by the industrialized countries that met in Cologne.

Support for the idea could also come from the 50-member Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC), whose ministers also met on Monday (see below). At this meeting, Atta ur Rahman, coordinator-general of the OIC’s Ministerial Standing Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation (Comstech), proposed the setting up of a separate intergovernmental fund in which countries would be repayed — for example through the commercialization of research — according to the size of their contributions.

Ministers from Africa also agreed that the draft conference documents need to put additional emphasis on two other issues. The first is “that science is the common heritage of mankind, whose results and benefits should be shared equitably”. The second is the need for a more clearly defined mechanism to follow up implementation of the



Nlend: ‘science must serve all humanity’.

conference resolutions among Unesco’s member countries.

“The idea that some countries are producers of science while others are consumers cannot be allowed to continue,” says Hogbe Nlend, Cameroon’s minister for science.

The fund idea has emerged unexpectedly. Many, if not most, conference delegates had come to Budapest expecting little tangible outcome from the meeting. Indeed, some important developed countries have said that they will resist firmly any calls for funds.

This is partly a result of the experience of the last major United Nations science conference, in Vienna in 1979, where a battle between rich and poor countries over a science-for-development fund ended in stalemate. That experience is also believed to be a reason why there is no mention of funds in any of the draft conference documents.

“The draft agenda only deals with [funding] vaguely,” says Nlend. “But for poor countries, the lack of funds is a critical issue.” This is echoed by Rahman of Comstech who said that “without a fund, nothing will happen”.

Nlend reveals that officials from African and OIC countries studied the lessons from Vienna, one of which was not to push too hard for a fund that relies largely on donations from developed countries, but to explore ways in which developing countries can help themselves. **Ehsan Masood**

Islamic nations set themselves tough target for science budgets

Science and education ministers of the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) endorsed a draft strategy for developing science in the Muslim world on Monday (28 June). The main, and most controversial, recommendation is that governments should allocate a minimum of one per cent of their gross domestic product for scientific and technological development.

But many of the ministers admitted that a goal of one per cent was unrealistic. Delegate after delegate said that such a target would be too difficult for most OIC member countries to achieve.

The strategy document is the work of the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and the OIC’s Ministerial Standing Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation (Comstech).

Atta ur Rahman, Comstech coordinator-general, said that all developing countries had no option but to increase their investment in science if they want to lift themselves above the pile of underdeveloped nations. A pressing priority, he said, is human resource development. A second priority is regional cooperation.

“Forgive me for being blunt,” Rahman, a

chemist, told the ministers. “I am a working scientist, not a diplomat, and am not blessed with the appropriate words with which to decorate this message: too often, meetings like this result in very nice-looking resolutions. But enough has been said, it is time to act.” Rahman will receive this year’s Unesco science prize at a ceremony today.

Abd al Rahman al Awadi, of the Islamic Organization for Medical Sciences in Kuwait, called on the ministers to emphasize the “moral and ethical dimension” to science in their responses to the draft documents of the World Conference on Science. **E.M.**