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HEALTH: The Community is ready to help developing countries fight AIDS

The European Commission is offering medical aid and scientific cooperation.

The 12-nation European Community is prepared to devote a part of its development aid to the fight against AIDS. In a speech in early February to Parliamentarians from both the European Parliament and the 66 African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries linked to the Community through the Lomé Convention, the European Development Commissioner, Lorenzo Natali, announced the launching of a special programme in this field.

While AIDS has become a world-wide scourge, it has reached dramatic proportions in a number of African and Caribbean countries. In the West it is generally held that the AIDS virus spread from the Caribbean countries to Africa and then to Europe, North America and the rest of the world.

The programme now proposed by the Commission has two parts. The Commission is ready to help ACP countries take preventive measures, including information campaigns, to limit the spread of the disease. It is also ready to promote cooperation between Community and African scientists and laboratories, in order to accelerate the search for remedies.

It is to be hoped that the proposals will be well received. However, many Third World governments refuse to admit they have a problem on their hands.

AGRICULTURE: How to melt the butter mountain

The Community's agricultural ministers take steps to run down stocks.

In two years' time the much-advertised butter mountain should be reduced to the size of a hillock, thanks to the measures adopted by the agricultural ministers of the 12-nation European Community on February 10.

Some 1.03m. tonnes are to be sold off cheaply to (1) non-Community countries; (2) the Community's own consumers; (3) its non-food industry and (4) its farmers, as cattle feed.

The ministers hope in this way to rid the Community of most of its surplus butter, estimated at 1.34m. tonnes at the beginning of the year. The cost to the EC budget will be ECU 3,200m.* But as it is to be spread over the budgets from 1989 to 1992, it should not add to the Community's current financial problems. The fact is that stocking the surplus, and the resulting fall in prices, is proving ruinous to the Community.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.75 or IR£ 0.78.

TECHNOLOGY: A mobile telephone requires a mobile Community

Systems and frequencies must be standardized as soon as possible.

There were fewer than 150,000 mobile telephones in the European Community in 1986, but their number is expected to jump over 2.5 million in 1995. They represent both a market in rapid expansion (ECU 7,000m.* in 1995) and a new tool to make both life and work easier. No longer a luxury, the mobile telephone is becoming a familiar part of our surroundings, even while it is changing our habits.

Even so, the Community must take a number of largely technical decisions before the year is out. The mobile telephone, digital or numerical, must gradually replace the equipment in use at present. But a new system is needed, given that the five currently in use are incompatible with each other and employ three different frequencies.

At present a call can be cut off the moment the car crosses a frontier. Prices are very high and can vary sharply from one country to another, rising from a minimum of ECU 1,800 in Denmark to ECU 6,500 in Germany. Clearly if the market is to expand, mobile telephone must be made compatible and be readily available.

The preparation of common standards and systems remains a problem, but the stakes obviously are too high for one to suppose that the problem has not been understood. It is necessary to act quickly, however, which is why the Commission is (1) asking the member states to reserve the 900 megahertz waveband for mobile telephones throughout the Community and (2) urging governments, the telecommunications authorities and industry to set themselves common goals and a timetable. This should be within the reach of the Community, given that a rather wide consensus has already emerged between the Commission, the telecommunications authorities, industry and the representatives of the European Conference of Postal and Communications Administrations.

The advantages are substantial: the possibility of communicating across frontiers; considerable economies of scale and far lower prices (in 1995 they could range between ECU 450 and ECU 1,600); thanks to the digital system the added possibility of linking mobile telephones to the future wideband telecommunications network, with its multitude of new services, and equipment which is both of better quality and more efficient.

But the matter is one of great urgency - unless, of course, such time-tested methods as smoke signals and talking drums are preferred.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.75 or IR£ 0.78.

A PEOPLE'S EUROPE: Learning more about one's rights

A Belgian radio programme tries to explain Community law to the man in the street.

Europeans hardly know their rights within the European Community, even though they may be vaguely aware of them. What they don't realize is the extent to which Community directives and regulations can help them deal with personal problems, including sometimes the most trivial of them.

Many people in fact don't know that these directives and regulations have the force of law throughout the Community and that the Court of Justice, in Luxembourg, is there to make sure that governments as well as individuals respect them.

Ordinary citizens have successfully defended their rights before the Court in numerous cases, with the result that many problems, both great and small, have been finally settled.

Information obviously plays a key role. This was recognized by Belgian radio which, in collaboration with the European Commission and the body that groups Community savings banks, had begun a series aimed at explaining Community law to the man in the street.

The first broadcast was on the morning of Monday, February 2. Hereafter, on the first Monday of each month, listeners can find out more about how Community law works. The European Commissioner for a People's Europe, Carlo Ripa di Meana, in fact has expressed the hope that other countries will follow Belgium's example.

CONSUMERS: Waiter, there's an additive in my beer!

Proposed Community directive would harmonize inspection of foodstuffs.

There is a lot of variety in European cuisine - and in the methods used to check on foodstuffs. Hence the need to harmonize methods as well as general policy throughout the 12-nation European Community as a matter of urgency.

Of course all member states recognize the need to protect consumers through checks on foodstuffs. But in certain EC countries food inspectors can intervene at the time of production and manufacture, while in others they can do so only after checks at the marketing stage have revealed anomalies.

The differences extend also to the regulations regarding food products to be marketed in countries other than the country of manufacture, as well as the division of responsibilities in the matter of inspection and the way in which it is carried out. All of which has led the European Commission to send the EC Council of Ministers the draft of a directive setting out general rules for the inspection of foodstuffs by national authorities.

The directive clearly states that the aim is to ensure respect for the provisions intended to avoid risks to public health and prevent fraud; other checks, as regards conformity to quality standards, for example, are within the competence of national authorities or private bodies. The goal is "total" harmonization, covering products meant also for export to another member state, and this in the context of the completion of the single, internal market.

Inspection must be carried out in regular fashion, although it should be possible to intervene at once if there is the least suspicion of irregularity. It should start with production, although all the successive stages leading up to the sale to the consumer are equally important, given the possibility of irregularities at each of them - and that faults sometimes are more easily detected at later stages in the production chain.

The directive also lists the various operations which are involved, ranging from inspection to the taking of samples and their analysis and an examination of the personnel, of documentary material and of the methods of verification introduced by the company itself.

All products will be subject to inspection, which will extend to the plant, manufacturing processes, labelling, transport, etc. While companies and persons subject to such inspection will have the right of recourse against the inspectors, they will have to cooperate with them. The inspectors, in turn, will be bound by the requirements of confidentiality.

INDUSTRY: Euro-MPs favour a common policy for the motor industry

From a European common market for motor cars to Japanese competition.

The European motor car industry is at the crossroads. A key industry for the European Community, as regards both jobs and the economy as a whole, it is having to face increasingly severe competition from manufacturers in other parts of the world. But the 12 member states are so beset by short term problems that the Community can only take ad hoc measures, according to a report written by the British Euro-MP, Peter Beazley. Both report and the accompanying resolution were approved by the European Parliament end January.

The resolution calls for a genuine European policy for the motor industry, including not only technical standards and motorways but also discussions with Japan and taxes on vehicles. This is not the first time that Parliament has called for such action, but Euro-MPs feel time is now running short.

The Community's motor industry, together with all the related activities, ensures the jobs of millions of workers and the economic well-being of thousands of companies. But if demand for the industry's products is holding up well, production capacity is well in excess of needs - by as much as 40% for trucks and 20% for cars, according to Mr Beazley.

His report underlines the fact the European manufacturers are handicapped in relation to their Japanese competitors by high production costs and a fragmented European market, the result of national regulations and tax systems which vary from one member state to another. Mr Beazley fears that under these conditions the European industry will have to limit its production to the top end of the market for cars.

The resolution adopted by the European Parliament calls for European standards and certification procedures for all Community-made vehicles. European manufacturers could then produce for a large, unified market, and become more profitable and competitive in the process.

Parliament also wants to see national restraints on Japanese cars replaced by Community restraints, pending the opening up by Japan of its home market to European vehicles. The Euro-MPs would also like a control on Japanese investments in the Community, in order to prevent the European industry becoming a subcontractor to the Japanese.

PEOPLE'S EUROPE: Poll shows the public to be well disposed towards it

Europeans say "yes" to the Community flag and their right to stay as long as they like in another member state.

The People's Europe is not simply a subject for speeches by politicians and the European Community's political leaders at their summit meetings. One of the Community's symbols, the European flag, has been rather well received by the public at large, even if it is not all that familiar with the flag itself. And people have reacted favourably to such concrete proposals as the right of nationals of all member states to reside anywhere in the Community for as long as they like.

According to the latest "Eurobarometer", the Community-wide poll conducted regularly on behalf of the European Commission, one-fifth of the population of the 12-nation Community "often" think of themselves as citizens, not only of their own country but also Europe. This feeling is most widespread in France, Luxembourg and Greece, but is largely foreign to the majority of British and Irish.

Just over half the Community's population regard the Community flag as "a good thing". This is especially true of the Italians and Portuguese; but most Danes view the flag with a jaundiced eye. In any case, the blue flag with its twelve gold stars is not especially well known; only two out of five of those polled could pick it out when shown the flags of four European organizations.

The People's Europe would make a quantum jump if all 12 member states recognized the right of a national of any one of them to settle, without hindrance, anywhere in the Community. Some three-quarters of all Europeans welcome the idea, which is backed by a majority of those polled in each of the 12 member states. Its most enthusiastic supporters are the Irish, Spaniards and Portuguese.

The right to vote in local elections in one's country of residence received somewhat less support, although nearly two-thirds of those polled were in favour of it; in fact the proportion was over two-thirds in Ireland and the four southern members of the Community.

However, in both Denmark and Luxembourg those opposed outnumbered those in favour. Although the nationals of other EC countries resident in Denmark can vote in local elections, not everyone is happy about it. In Luxembourg, nearly a quarter of the population consists of nationals of other member states.

EDUCATION: COMETT takes off

The European project which brings together universities and industry is launched.

Training for the new technologies should become both more European and more effective, thanks to COMETT. This is the European Community's programme for cooperation between university and industry in providing training for technology, in order to meet the need for qualified manpower. The European Commission has just launched the initial phase of this programme, by inviting all interested bodies to make themselves known.

Prepared by the Commission and adopted by the EC Council of Ministers last July, COMETT has two closely related aims: (1) develop initial and continuing education and training for the new technologies and (2) meet the needs of industry for specialists.

COMETT is based on the idea that training influences economic development, that in order to be effective it requires cooperation between university and industry and must acquire a European dimension as from now, in view of the large, single market foreseen for 1992.

COMETT's initial phase will run from 1987 to 1989 and will promote transnational cooperation between universities and other institutions of higher education and manufacturing and other businesses. Projects, to be submitted to the European Commission, must fall within one of COMETT's four major strands. Priority will be given, however, to projects related to more than one of them.

The four strands are: development of university-business training partnerships; transnational exchange of students and personnel between universities and companies; the design and testing of joint university-business projects in the field of continuing education in new technologies and multimedia training systems for the new technologies.

For the transnational exchanges the Community's financial backing will take the form of a flat-rate contribution per person. For the other strands, the Community will contribute up to 50% of the total project costs. Applications will be received in two rounds this year. The deadline for the first is 31 March, for the second 1 July.

UNEMPLOYMENT: Still rising in 1986

16.4m. out of work at the end of the year.

There was a rise in unemployment in the 12-nation European Community during 1986 as compared to the previous year. Some 16.4m. were unemployed at the end of last December, an increase of 257,000 over the previous month and a record for the month of December, according to the Community's statistical services, Eurostat.

The rise in December was due almost entirely to seasonal factors. This unfortunately was not the case as regards the rise in the average for the year, which in 1986 reached a record level, with 16.1m. unemployed, an increase of 1.3% over 1985.

While male unemployment fell by 0.7%, female unemployment rose by 5.2%. A large number of women who had been unemployed for some time registered themselves at unemployment exchanges, either for the first time or once again, in the belief they stood a better chance this time, according to the European Commission.

Unlike previous years, unemployment among the under-25s declined in 1986*, by 110,000 in fact. The Commission has attributed this to declining population growth rates, which reduces the proportion of young people in the total population, and the success of the measures taken by several member states.

* Excludes Portugal.

INFLATION: The best results since 1961 in the fight against inflation

Up only 2.8% in 1986.

Last year the consumer price index rose by 2.8% for the 12-nation European Community. This was the lowest recorded increase in 25 years, according to the Community's statistical services, Eurostat. Even so, both the United States and Japan did better: prices rose by 1.5% in the U.S., in Japan they fell by 0.2%.

The rise was 0.2% in December for the Community as a whole. Only Portugal and Greece recorded substantial price increases in December. They were also the only two member states in which inflation exceeded 10% last year.

Elsewhere in the Community prices rose by 8% in Spain, over 4% in Denmark and Italy, 3.7% in the U.K., 3.2% in Ireland and 2.1% in France. The rise was limited to 0.6% in Belgium and 0.2% in the Netherlands. In both Germany and Luxembourg prices fell by over 1% in 1986.