



a newsheet for journalists

Weekly N° 34/93

18 - 25 October 1993

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EUROFOCUS

HEALTH: Europe against AIDS

European Commission decides to extend the EC's "Europe against AIDS" programme until the end of next year.

Despite the huge efforts being made in Europe, the AIDS epidemic continues to spread. By March this year, 84,000 cases of AIDS had been officially reported in the 12-nation European Community, while the number of infected by the virus was put at 500,000, although there was no clear indication as to how many of them had already come down with the disease.

Hence the European Commission's decision, taken at the initiative of its Commissioner for Social Affairs, Pádraig Flynn, to extend for another year - i.e. until the end of 1994 - the "Europe against AIDS" programme. Launched in 1991 for a 3-year period, the programme seeks to implement a maximum number of prevention measures. A sum of ECU 9mn.* has been included in the draft EC budget for 1994 and approved by the Commission.

The new proposal puts particular emphasis on tackling such problems as HIV transmission through drug abuse and in prisons, as well as transmission linked to travel and tourism. It also seeks to fight discrimination against those infected.

Another source of grave concern, covered by the Commission's proposal, is the increase in the number of women and children with the disease.

In 1992 some 80 projects received Community funds. In addition to extending the current programme for another year, the Commission is planning to put forward more long-term proposals for the fight against AIDS.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.78 or IRE£0.82

HEALTH: Soon the date on which eggs are packed for sale ...

... will be replaced by the date by which they should be eaten.

All eggs packed for retail sale in the European Community must indicate the packaging date under present regulations. As from next December 1, this date will be replaced by the recommended limit date for consumption, such as "Best before 15 December 1993". A "European law" modifying existing legislation to this effect was adopted by EC ministers at the end of September.

The new "law" also provides for the possibility of advertising on egg packs.

UNEMPLOYMENT: Stable in August ...

... when the unemployment rate stood at 10.4% for the EC as a whole.

The level of unemployment remained unchanged in the European Community this summer: it stood at 10.4% during June, July and August, according to Eurostat, the EC's statistical office, which published its revised figures on October 11. Earlier, Eurostat had put the rate of unemployment in June and July at 10.7% and 10.6% respectively (see Eurofocus 30/93).

If the situation finally is somewhat better, the fact remains that unemployment in the EC is running at a much higher rate than last August, when it stood at 9.4%. It is also much higher than in the United States (6.7% in August) and Japan (2.5% in July).

BANANAS: Neither shortages, nor unusually high prices

An assessment after three months of a border-free European system.

European consumers are unlikely to be faced with a banana shortage, following the introduction of new "European laws" on the import of bananas and their free movement within the 12-nation European Community on July 1. The EC's Commissioner for Agriculture, René Steichen, was able to report to the European Parliament on September 30 that after three months of the new system "the Commission was unaware of any shortages of bananas".

Wholesale prices rose in July in those EC countries which had imposed no restrictions on imports of bananas until then - Ireland, the three Benelux countries, Denmark and Germany. Prices fell at the same time in those EC countries which had protected their markets from imports of Latin American "dollar bananas", so as to encourage domestic producers and growers in their former colonies. Wholesale prices have tended recently to settle at around ECU 0.9* per kilo (or ECU 900 per tonne) in the EC as a whole.

Since July 1 all bananas, including those from non-EC countries, can be shipped freely within the Community's internal frontiers. However, all imported bananas are subject to a customs duty of ECU 100 per tonne, for a total quantity of 2mn. tonnes a year, after which the duty falls to ECU 850 per tonne. These two million tonnes represent the quantity imported annually prior to the introduction of the new system, and it can be increased to meet demand.

Before July 1 "dollar bananas" could be imported duty-free only into Germany. The fact is the Germans are strongly critical of the new system, which their government challenged in the EC Court of Justice. Even so, German wholesale prices have remained comparable to those in force in 1990 and the beginning of 1991, according to Commissioner Steichen. They have only risen in relation to the prices in force at the end of 1991 and 1992, when speculative purchases pushed down prices.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.78 or IRE£0.82

BOOKS: By supporting the translation of contemporary literary works ...
... the EC is also defending its minority languages.

It was in 1989, following a decision of the European Community's cultural affairs ministers on the promotion of books and reading, that a pilot project was launched with the aim of providing financial aid for the translation of modern literature for a 5-year trial period.

The details of this pilot project were drawn up by a cultural affairs committee, and are published each year in the EC's "Official Journal". Under the scheme the EC provides financial aid for the translation of contemporary literary works (novels, short stories, plays, essays and poetry), which are representative of the culture which has produced them and likely to be of interest to a wider European audience.

Priority is given, in descending order, to the translation of (1) works written in one of the Community's minority languages into the more widely spoken EC languages; (2) works written in a minority language into other minority languages; (3) works written in a widely spoken EC language into minority languages and (4) works written in a widely spoken EC language into other widely spoken languages.

Exceptionally, the EC is also prepared to give financial support to works from non-EC countries which have entered into a cultural convention with it. Such works must be of cultural significance for European culture. Incidentally, this fifth priority is not mentioned in the "Official Journal".

As each year, the European Commissioner with responsibility for cultural affairs has named the literary works which will receive financial aid from the EC this year. The European Commission received 289 applications in all. After consulting a panel of independent experts, Commissioner João de Deus Pinheiro selected 76 projects, which will receive funds amounting to ECU 220,304* in all. The projects include 24 translations in the first priority, 6 in the second, 29 in the third, 12 in the fourth and 5 in the fifth.

Thus 8 works have been translated into English and 11 into French, from such languages as Dutch, Portuguese, Greek and Danish. Works written in Greek or Portuguese have been translated into Dutch, and yet others from Dutch into Danish, from Turkish into Greek and from Hungarian into Dutch. In addition, such well known authors as Samuel Beckett and Paul Claudel have been translated, either into the less widely spoken languages such as Greek or Danish or into widely spoken languages, such as English, French or Spanish.

The full detailed list of works, together with the aid given by the EC in every case, has been published by the European Commission's press office.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.78 or IRE0.82.

ENVIRONMENT: Packaging waste

EC ministers edge closer to an agreement.

There was a large measure of agreement among the EC's environment ministers, meeting in Luxembourg, on the best way of dealing with packaging waste, particularly as regards recovery and recycling, with the goal of recovery of 60% of packaging waste and the recycling of 40% of the recovered quantity over a five-year period. The Twelve nevertheless would like to retain their existing national systems for the treatment of packaging waste, to the extent that they are both comparable and compatible with each other. The European directive, to be presented by the Belgian presidency to the Council before this December, should serve therefore only as a general framework for the other, non-compatible, systems.

It will be necessary, therefore, to begin by drawing up a comparative table of the methods currently in use. The European Commission has asked a German institute to do just this before the end of the year. Once this has been done, it will be time to decide when it is better to recycle packaging and when to re-use it.

RESEARCH: Technology can provide a way out of the crisis

European Commission proposes programmes for the next five years.

Even though scientific research is not making headlines in Europe, it nevertheless has an important role to play in leading the European Community out of its current recession. The fact is that the EC as such and its Member States together devote just 2% of their Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to research - as compared to 3% in the United States and Japan.

This point was stressed by the European Commissioner for Research, Antonio Ruberti, when he presented in early October his proposals for specialized programmes for the period from 1994 to 1998. The European Commission has already sent the Twelve a framework programme, covering all the research subsidized by the EC over the next five years. The Commission is seeking a budget of ECU 13,100mn.* for this purpose, representing 4% of the sums invested in research separately by the Twelve. EC ministers could adopt this framework programme in December. However, in order to avoid any break in the EC's research activities, the Commission has now presented the Twelve a series of specialized programmes.

These programmes have been drawn up with the aim of concentrating funds on the most important sectors. They will be implemented mainly through cross-border collaboration between industrial firms, research institutes and universities. Some of the programmes will be carried out in the EC's own Joint Research Centre, which employs some 2,000 people in five countries.

The most important programme, from a financial viewpoint, deals with information and communication technologies: computers, electronic components, multimedia technology and their practical applications, ranging from distance learning and air traffic control to help for the elderly. The European Commission is seeking ECU 3,900mn. for this programme.

The second programme covers industrial technologies. Its aim is to make European industries more competitive, by paving the way for the factory of the future, through the development of new materials and technical standards. The Commission has earmarked ECU 1,800mn. for this programme.

Next come the life sciences and technologies. They cover the fight against cancer and AIDS as well as biotechnology - in order to "invent" new agricultural products, for example. The Commission would like to devote ECU 1,325mn. to this programme.

Energy research would be entitled to ECU 2,000mn., to be spent on three programmes, the first of which would be devoted to clean, effective energy saving technologies; solar and similar forms of energy and non-polluting electricity generation from coal. The second programme would seek to make nuclear installations even safer, while the third would deal with thermonuclear fusion.

Environmental research would receive nearly ECU 1,000mn. It would include the study of the earth, climate change and its influence on human activity. The other programmes proposed by the European Commission cover transport, forecasting and exchanges of scientists, as well as the diffusion and exploitation of the results of Community research, especially for the benefit of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

The European Commission would like to see SMEs take a more active part in coming years in Community research programmes. It wants them to take part in such programmes or, alternatively, join forces and have such programmes carried out by others - research centres, for example. This approach is already being applied as regards technologies intended for use in traditional industries, and the Commission would like to extend it to other sectors.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.78 or IR£0.82

RESEARCH: The fifth EC contest for young scientists ...

... was held in Berlin.

Europe needs researchers, engineers and scientists in as many fields as possible. It is necessary, therefore, to stimulate the creativity and inventiveness of young people in science and technology, and to encourage them to work together.

These in fact are the basic aims of the EC contest for young scientists, which is organized in the framework of the EC programme "Human capital and mobility". Some 10,000 young people, aged between 15 and 21, took part in the national contests (organized in the 12 EC countries as well as in Austria, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland). They presented projects in the natural sciences and technology, either individually or as teams.

Twelve of the 68 finalists were awarded prizes by an international jury of well-known scientists, at a ceremony in Berlin attended by the German President, Dr. Richard von Weizsäcker. The six first prizes are of ECU 5,000 and the six second prizes of ECU 3,000.

The first prize was shared between projects presented by young scientists from Denmark (2), Spain, Ireland, Austria and Norway. Three of them (from Ireland, Denmark and Spain) were also chosen to represent the EC in the United States International Science and Engineering Fair next year. The second prize was shared between three German projects and three projects presented by British, Italian and Belgian scientists.

As the European Research Commissioner, Antonio Ruberti, pointed out, "in encouraging young people to take an interest in science and technology, we are helping prepare future generations of scientists and engineers. Europe will need more and more of them in the years ahead". The sixth EC contest for young scientists will take place next year, from September 26 to 28, in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.78 or IRE0.82