

REFERENCES TO OTHER TOPICS

World Bank

Tibet Investigation

A controversial project to resettle 57,750 Chinese farmers in traditionally Tibetan land in Qinghai in western China, backed by a \$160m World Bank loan approved in June 1999, caused a storm of controversy among pro-Tibetan and environmental groups. The International Campaign for Tibet (ICT) requested an inspection panel and the board of the World Bank agreed that it would not proceed without an official bank investigation. This will determine if Bank staff had followed its own rules and procedures in designing the scheme.

The ICT, based in the United States, says it takes no position on Tibetan independence but worries that the movement of more Chinese into the region will further dilute the native Tibetan and Mongolian cultures.

When the Bank voted to approve the loan (over the objections of the US and Germany), the ICT request for an inspection had already been received. The Bank's President announced at that time that China had agreed to an investigation and would allow "complete transparency," welcoming into the region the inspectors, diplomats, journalists and government officials, where they could have "extensive contacts with local people unattended by Chinese officials." "We are in favour of transparency," Beijing said in an official statement.

In the first week of September 1999, Beijing contended that the investigation had been triggered by "a politically contaminated request" and the Bank's Chinese executive director wrote to James Wolfensohn, stating that the ICT was not an independent organisation, but "a political body directly linked to and controlled by the Tibetan govern-

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ment in exile..." He said that China would agree to the investigation but the inspection panel "must take immediate corrective action, so as to ensure that any acceptance of any request, if so occurs, should be established on sound basis."

Two independent researchers, visited the area last month, only to be arrested and interrogated by Chinese security officials. Both were released but one was severely injured after "falling from a window during questioning." □

Caribbean

Fish Deaths Cause Concern

During September and October, hundreds of thousands of fish have been washed up on Caribbean beaches, but scientists and government officials have so far been unable to determine the cause, even after detailed studies of the water in the region.

The effect stretches from the coast of South America up the eastern Caribbean archipelago. Dead fish were first seen in August and consumers in several countries have been warned not to eat any fish they suspect of having died in the incident.

One theory put forward by the regional fisheries office of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), is that the change in sea temperatures in the Caribbean, which have risen about one degree in the past month, could cause stress and infection in the fish. The FAO does not think that pollution is a factor, as mainly the shallow reef species have been affected, suggesting that it is something relative to the shallow reef.

Other suggested explanations include dumping at sea of waste by cruise ships, and a pathogen transported into the Caribbean by the Orinoco River in South America.

However, there is growing support for suggestions that the incident is the result of a "red tide" – a phenomenon produced by the growth and accumulation of microscopic algae called phytoplankton. Phytoplankton produce toxins that are among the most potent known to man and that are a threat to marine ecosystems.

A spokesman for Grenada's health ministry said that an ultra-violet analysis indicated the presence of an unusual organic substance in the water, but the substance had not yet been identified. The island's agriculture minister said that from the samples of dead and dying fish collected, it was diagnosed that the problem is pervasive and ongoing, extending in a southward direction and advancing outward into deeper waters, affecting larger species.

A theory being put forward by the chief fisheries officer in Barbados, is the possibility that the incident is related to events in St. Vincent, Grenada and Tobago.

Most of the fish caught around the Caribbean islands are processed for export or sold to local hotels and the incident is threatening the fishing industry of several islands. It also coincides with a report from the FAO suggesting that the Caribbean is facing a shortage of fish. The demand for fish in the region was exceeding supplies also as a result of expanding population and increasing disposable income.

According to FAO, total fish landings in the western central Atlantic region, which includes the Caribbean, peaked in 1984 at about 2.5m tonnes, then declined to 1.8m tonnes in 1997 and have since stabilised. □

FAO

Agriculture and Trade

A Conference in mid-September in Maastricht on the "multifunctional" character of agriculture and land, Cultivating our Futures, was dominated by trade issues.

The Conference was jointly organised by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the government of the Netherlands, and was to highlight the contribution agriculture makes to employment and rural economies, and to consider its links with the environment.

However, the US and several countries belonging to the Cairns group of food exporters were suspicious that European countries might use the concept of agriculture's multifunctional character as an excuse for the continued use of production and export subsidies.

In effect, in the words of one participant, "the Conference was hijacked by the upcoming World Trade Organisation ministerial meeting in Seattle in November. It dissolved into a wrangle about possible trade advantages or distortions in trade. This may well be a precursor of what we will see in the next round of trade negotiations."

In spite of the concentration on trade, Gustavo Best of the FAO felt the meeting had established the concept of the multifunctional character of agriculture and land as a useful tool in pursuing sustainable agricultural development. □

UNCTAD

Plan to Redress Trade Imbalance

The annual trade and development report of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) says that protectionism in rich countries has hindered the exports of poor ones and forced them to rely excessively on footloose short-term capital to finance growing trade deficits.

Rubens Ricupero, UNCTAD's Secretary-General, said that over-dependence on volatile "hot money" was the cause of the Asian crisis and its spillover into Russia and Latin America – yet nothing of substance had been done to avoid the same thing happening again.

He described the experience as "a crisis of development and a crisis of globalisation," noting that developed countries were barely touched and even benefited – for instance, from falling oil prices. Meanwhile, the development model based on rapid integration into the world economy had been called into question.

The report notes that unless the industrialised world acts to increase imports from developing countries, the Asian financial crisis will be followed by others just as costly and destructive. While successive trade rounds and pressure from the international financial institutions have obliged developing countries to reduce their import barriers, they have been unable to earn enough through exports to pay for the extra imports.

UNCTAD calculates that developing countries could earn an extra \$700bn a year from low-tech manufactures such as textiles if trade barriers were dismantled, four times annual private capital flows in the 1990s. □

UN

Africa: Facing Food Crisis

The United Nations, in a study released to mark World Food Day, has warned that Africa faces an escalating food crisis, which could make 60 per cent of its population go hungry in 25 years.

The study predicts that continuing soil degradation will bring about starvation and poverty on an unprecedented scale. The problem will be compounded by an expected increase in population to 1 billion by 2025.

Sub-Saharan Africa is the last remaining region of the world to face widespread food shortages as a result of deteriorating soil conditions and falling food production per person. In the past 30 years, the number of chronically malnourished people in the region has doubled to nearly 200 million, of the total 550 million population. □

OECD

GM Food Safety

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is to hold a major international scientific conference in Edinburgh early in 2000, with a view to taking forward the scientific debate on food safety aspects of biotechnology and genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

The conference, which will be hosted and funded by the Government of the United Kingdom, will take place from 28 February – 1 March, under the title: "Assessing the safety of GM Food – the OECD Edinburgh Conference on the scientific and health aspects of genetically modified foods." It is being held as part of a programme of work at the OECD to review aspects of biotechnology and food safety in response to mandates from OECD Ministers and a request from leaders of the Group of Eight industrial countries.

The conference will bring together leading experts from OECD Governments, consumer and other interest groups, industry, international organisations and developing countries to debate the scientific and human health issues surrounding GM food. Although the primary focus of the meeting will be the science of GM food, there will be an opportunity to address related issues such as public perception and consumer confidence, consumer information and choice and environmental concerns.

An OECD Steering Group that will include independent scientists, the chairs of relevant OECD working groups and members of the OECD Secretariat, will prepare the meeting. To determine the exact scope of the conference, the Group will shortly launch a four-week consultation process to enable OECD Governments and other interested groups to submit their comments on the scientific and health issues of most concern to them. The conference will form an integral part of the OECD work programme for 2000 and its outputs will be fed into the G8 Heads of Government meeting in Okinawa, Japan in July 2000.

The announcement of the conference followed an intensive one-day OECD dialogue with civil society, when representatives from scientific associations and non-governmental organisations met to discuss bio-

technology and food safety at OECD headquarters on 20 November. Representatives of some 50 bodies from civil society and from the scientific and business communities attended and discussions focused on three main topics: consumer concerns, environmental concerns and agro-food concerns. □

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Water Plan

At the EuroMed Ministerial Conference on local water management in October 1999 in Turin, twenty-seven European Union Member States and Mediterranean countries called for the implementation of a "Marshall Plan" to guarantee access to water.

Delegates adopted a Declaration providing for an action plan outlining their priorities. They also identified sources of funding to remedy a water production situation in a region already considered a cause for concern.

The European Union will release Euro 5 billion and the World Bank and European Investment Bank an additional Euro 3 billion for action in this area.

According to the experts, 29 million people living along the Southern shores of the Mediterranean are already under the "critical" per capita threshold of 500 cubic metres. A total of 115 million people have access to less than 1,000 cubic metres, already held by experts to be "insufficient."

The action plan promotes, as a first step, the following six priorities:

- integrated management of local drinking water supply, sanitation and sewage services;
- local water resources and water demand management (quantity and quality) within catchment areas and islands;
- prevention and mitigation of the negative effects of drought and equitable management of water scarcity;
- irrigation water management;
- use of non-conventional water resources;
- preparation of national and local scenarios for the period until 2025 that enable precise objectives to be set and action to be taken for sustainable water management.

When implementing these six priorities, the following activities will be considered:

- strengthening institutional capacity and training;
- exchange of information and know-how in a coherent manner;
- transfer of know-how and technology;
- awareness raising, mobilisation and promotion of commitment by all beneficiaries.

Within the framework of this Action Plan, the MEDA programme, in its regional context, should be mobilised by means of a call for proposals for significant regional projects as soon as possible after the Turin Conference.

The objective is to implement a coherent set of operational projects resulting from the Action Plan in the year 2000. Euro-Mediterranean Water Directors and the Commission will be entrusted with coordinating, following-up and assessing the implementation of the Action Plan. To achieve this, they will make use of the Mediterranean Water Network and the Euro-Mediterranean Water Management Information System (EMWIS). □