

Business Briefs

Agriculture

Nigerian Minister Blasts Greens on Biotechnology

If we were to take seriously the efforts to stop agricultural biotechnology, millions of Africans would suffer and die, Nigeria's Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development Hassan Amadu wrote, in a commentary in the Sept. 11 *Washington Post*.

Agricultural biotechnology and genetically modified seeds hold great promise, such as enhancing herbicide tolerance and providing resistance to insects and disease. But some people want to deny this to Africa. Organic farming is fine for those who can afford to experiment, Amadu said, but, "Starving people do not have this luxury. They want food and nourishment, not lectures, and we certainly won't allow ourselves to be intimidated by eco-terrorists who destroy crops and disrupt scientific meetings that strive to reveal the facts."

He said, "Millions of Africans—far too many of them children—are suffering from malnutrition and hunger." He pointed out that agricultural biotechnology offers a way to stop this suffering. He quoted one of Africa's leading plant geneticists, who said recently, "In Africa, GM [genetically modified] food could almost literally weed out poverty."

"The harsh reality is that, without the help of agricultural biotechnology, many will not live," Adamu said.

Namibia

Refusal of Loan for AIDS Drugs Explained

Namibian Permanent Secretary of Health and Social Services Kalumbi Shangula explained why his country had refused part of a \$1 billion loan from the U.S. Export-Import Bank for purchase of anti-retroviral drugs to combat HIV/AIDS, in a commentary entitled "We Can't Shoulder More Debt to Treat an Incurable Disease," in the Sept. 17 *Washington Post*. "Our decision not to accept the offer was based on the conviction that the

risks our country faced in taking the burden of a loan outweighed the benefits we would receive from the drugs," he wrote.

ExImBank chairman James Harmon had criticized the decision of Namibia and three other African nations that rejected the loan.

Shangula lamented that his nation is once again being labelled as doing nothing to combat HIV/AIDS, which is killing the continent of Africa. However, while calling the ExImBank loan offer "noble," especially as it is coupled with an offer by five pharmaceutical companies to cut prices, Shangula said that because anti-retroviral drugs are not a cure, it would mean plunging the country into "perpetual debt" to keep buying the drugs. Also, he noted, there are many other deadly pandemic diseases affecting millions of people in Sub-Saharan Africa, including tuberculosis and malaria, which kills more children under the age of five than any other disease in the world. The amount offered Namibia as part of the loan would only help prolong the life of a few thousand citizens.

Nuclear Energy

Russian Minister Outlines Putin's 'Atoms for Peace'

Russian Minister of Atomic Energy Yevgeny Adamov, in a press briefing in Moscow on Sept. 12, provided additional details to the proposal for nuclear energy development which Russian President Vladimir Putin made at the UN Millennium Summit. Putin's proposal starts from the standpoint, Adamov said, of 10-15 years of work that has been done, not just in Russia, but is "the combined result of the scientific potential and the needs existing in the world." Adamov said that people in Africa and Asia who "live in boxes and understand what it means to have an energy allowance of 200 kilowatt-hours per capita every year," understand that energy is needed for survival.

Adamov said that the proposal has three aspects: solving the energy supply problem, making nuclear energy safe, and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. He proposed that new generations of nuclear technology

would solve the problem of safety, making accidents impossible "by design." For non-proliferation, designs can be built that separate the weapons from the civilian power technologies.

Such an approach could work, as opposed to the approach of the Carter Administration to try to stop proliferation by stopping the development of nuclear technology.

Adamov said that Russia hopes to cooperate with Japan and France. "They are the countries which historically have similar technological approaches to ours," such as closing the nuclear fuel cycle, through reprocessing spent nuclear fuel, and using breeder reactors.

Adamov said Russia must decide whether to do nothing with its nuclear power plants, make the investment to extend their life, or expand the use of nuclear energy. The plan that the Ministry of Atomic Energy is proposing would mean that, while making the investments to extend the lives of the operating plants, Russia would go from the 21 reactors now operating, to 50 reactors in the year 2020, and 60 by 2030. Asked if this were "too aggressive," Adamov pointed to the way that France responded to the 1970s energy crisis, by going nuclear.

Adamov said that maximum use of the so-called alternative sources of energy, such as solar and tidal energy, could not substitute for more than 10% of total global energy needs.

Biological Holocaust

New Dangers Found in 'Mad Cow'-Type Disease

In a finding that promises to explode the prevailing myths that so-called "Mad Cow" disease, or bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), is under control, British scientists at the Medical Research Council Prion Unit in London have documented how normal, healthy mice, that were injected with mulched remains of hamsters which had died of disease caused by the sub-virus prion, stayed healthy, but when other mice and hamsters were injected with the remains of those healthy mice, the second generation

rodents not only died of the symptoms within five months, but they began generating their own strain of prion, the Sydney *Sun-Herald* reported on Sept. 10.

The evidence of mice carrying prion has lent credence to the theory that "Mad Cow" disease, and the related new variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) that infects humans, could be being carried silently by apparently healthy cows and humans. These humans may infect surgical and dental patients through contaminated instruments, which can never be completely sterilized against vCJD.

The mice experiment was begun four years ago by the Research Council Prion Unit's Dr. Andrew Hill and colleagues, under the direction of Prof. John Collinge. The particular strain of prion injected into the mice is called scrapie, and it is believed to have given rise to the BSE epidemic that began in Britain around 1985 and has since spread to continental Europe, and which molecular tests show is the source of CJD. Hill, now at the pathology department at the University of Melbourne, Australia, said, "The bottom line is that healthy cattle may harbor infectivity and never show any signs of BSE. It is entirely possible that, in the same way, humans might be harboring the disease at this sub-clinical level. As we don't know how many people may be incubating the disease—which may be longer than the normal lifespan—then there are possible implications for medical and surgical procedures."

Already, the incidence of CJD is apparently increasing: In the five years since its discovery in two British teenagers, vCJD has been reported in 79 people in Britain, 2 in France, and 1 in Ireland. Alarming, 36 of those were reported in only the past year.

China

Economy Is Undergoing 'Strategic Readjustment'

China is carrying out a "strategic readjustment of its economy," and is encouraging foreign investors, *China Daily* reported on Sept. 11. For the first time, foreign investors will be allowed to take a controlling share in

China's strategic east-west gas pipeline projects, the *People's Daily* reported on Sept. 11.

China is taking steps to encourage foreign businesses to participate in the reform of state enterprises, to set up research and development centers in China, and to invest in high-tech industries, "in accordance with the global development strategy of multinational corporations."

An official of the State Council office in Beijing, Zhou Ai, said that foreign investors could take controlling interests in the four pipeline projects to be built to bring gas from China's oil-rich, underdeveloped west, to the east coast. Zhou told potential multinational investors that this was a special policy to encourage foreign investment into China's western regions.

Although foreign investors have been encouraged to have input into these projects, this is the first time that they will be able to acquire controlling shares. They will be granted preferential policies for energy and other resources, if they invest in the west. Also, foreign investors will now be allowed to be involved in urban gas pipeline networks, and in 44 different sectors of light industry.

The Chinese government is also trying to get multinationals to set up R&D centers. Imported equipment for the centers will be exempted from tariffs and linkage taxes, and from sales taxes for technology transfer.

Foreign investors will also be welcome to participate in projects to restructure the debts and assets of dozens of China's state-owned enterprises, including in the chemical and paper industries. This is the third and last year of the project announced by Prime Minister Zhu Rongji to complete the reform of China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs). The reform has not been achieved. China's banks are maintaining many long-standing bad loans to SOEs, and the effort to get foreign investment is an attempt to fill the hole. In the past year, a total of 1,300 billion yuan (\$156.6 billion) of bad assets from SOEs has been turned over by China's banks to four asset-management companies set up by Beijing beginning last spring.

China Daily quoted a financial manager of a Shanghai firm, saying that purchasing or investing in Chinese bad assets is a new, fast, and cheap way for multinational corporations to enter China's market.

JAPANESE combined losses from bad loans at 17 major banks may have reached 21.2 trillion yen (about \$200 billion), according to the International Monetary Fund in its Sept. 11 "International Capital Markets Developments, Prospects, and Key Policy Issues World Economic and Financial Survey."

ALL OPPENHEIMER money has been pulled out of South Africa, because "the country is in such precarious straits," and "the government cannot be trusted," says a knowledgeable source formerly from Durban (now in the United States), who recently visited South Africa.

SOUTH KOREA is trying to find as much as 700,000 tons of assorted grains, including rice from Thailand and Chinese corn, to send to North Korea in its food aid on credit plan, the South Korean press reported on Sept. 10. The North is known to have requested up to 1 million tons of any kind of grain at the second round of ministerial talks in Pyongyang in August.

THYSSEN KRUPP is expected to be chosen as the adviser to the government of Uzbekistan on the restructuring and privatization of the Almalyk Mining and Metallurgical Complex. It does not plan to run the plant, but may get involved in marketing and distribution of products.

THE INDIAN Space Research Organization is proposing to build recoverable and re-usable satellites for conducting microgravity experiments in space. If approved, an official said, it would take three years to build such satellites.

TAJIKISTAN'S mountainous rural areas, where drought has reduced grain production to zero in some districts, are facing famine, threatening 3 million people. A Red Cross team said: "The situation is much more serious than we expected."