

# Mayor Seeks to Polish the "S" in Unesco

*The U.N. agency's new director-general, Federico Mayor, says he wants to sharpen the focus of its science programs on two areas: "frontiers of science" and environmental problems*

**T**HIS should become the international house of science," says Federico Mayor Zaragoza, the new director-general of the Paris-based United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization. "I hope that while I am here I will see that happen, and it is for this reason that we need U.S. scientists back very badly."

The 54-year-old Spanish biochemist was appointed to the post last November after a fierce electoral battle with his controversial predecessor, the former Senegalese education minister Amadou Mahtar M'Bow.

Next week, he will address one of his most important tasks head-on when he uses a visit to Washington at the invitation of the National Academy of Sciences to explore the conditions under which the United States may be prepared to reconsider the decision it took in 1984 to withdraw from the agency, complaining of inefficient management and excessive politicization.

The U.S. withdrawal, which was followed a year later by that of the United Kingdom and Singapore, has resulted in a 30% cut in Unesco's \$350-million annual operating budget. But Mayor argues that his desire to see the United States return—its continued absence, he has said, would leave any plans for restructuring the agency "devoid of meaning"—goes beyond financial considerations. It is also aimed at restoring the intellectual integrity of the organization.

"As with all U.N. institutions, we obviously need financial contributions," Mayor said in an interview with *Science*. "But we also need the contribution of knowledge, of know-how, and of ideas by which we can spread Unesco's ideals of peace and universality."

In the past, Unesco's science programs have received less criticism—and significantly less critical publicity—than some of its other activities. Indeed, a State Department report in 1984 found little wrong in this field. Nevertheless, the science programs have not entirely escaped the more general comments that Unesco's activities are too diffuse and overmanaged, to the detriment

of their intellectual content. Mayor says he is keen to overcome this problem, for example by encouraging the scientific community to play a larger role in setting the agency's scientific agenda.

Broader consultation, he says, implies in particular an enhanced role for organizations such as the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) in helping to revise the scientific component of the agency's medium-term plan for 1990–1995.

Mayor's proposed amendments to the medium-term plan will be presented to the Executive Board at its next meeting in May. The board's reaction will be seen, not only in Paris but also in Washington, as a key indicator of his chances of giving Unesco both the shake-up and a face-lift that many feel it needs after the internal and external turmoils of the past few years.

New ideas for scientific activities are expected to be well to the fore. "If I emphasize the role of science and the scientific commu-

nity, it is partly because I was the candidate of the scientific community for the post of director-general," says Mayor, a reference to the petition signed by many prominent scientists which was presented in support of his nomination (*Science*, 23 October 1987, p. 473).

The overall theme of his new proposals, says Mayor, will be to refocus Unesco's activities along the three principal axes of its original charter: education, science, and culture. The science activities themselves would be more sharply oriented toward the two areas in which he considers Unesco has a particular role to play: encouraging basic research (particularly in the developing countries) and supporting the coordination of research programs on subjects which are, by definition, global in scope.

These goals will be expressed through two different programs. The first, whose details are still to be worked out, will carry the title "frontiers of science." In this category will be grouped those current activities which relate to the support of basic research.

But he adds that he is open to new ideas, on the grounds that "the science has to come from the scientists," with Unesco acting primarily as a catalytic agent. For example, Mayor—who has himself carried out research in both Spain and the United Kingdom on nutrition and brain development—says one possibility may be to see if Unesco can be associated in some way with the Human Frontiers Science Program suggested by the Japanese government.

The second program will concentrate on environmental problems. This is a field in which Mayor has been active both as a member of the Club of Rome and as an enthusiastic supporter of the need for "sustainable development," the key idea in a report published last year by an international commission headed by Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland.

"Given, for example, our support for research on the oceans or in vulcanology, I would like to bring these together and to see Unesco contributing, together with organizations such as the United Nations Environment Program and ICSU, to the creation of an early warning system for world pollution," he says. "If we could provide a weekly picture of the state of global pollution, then this could be very important to political decision-makers."

Much of Unesco's most effective work in recent years has been in science education and technical training, from the primary to the postgraduate level, and Mayor says he intends this to be continued and developed. But, repeating an idea close to the heart of the original founders of Unesco in the years after World War II, Mayor says that Unesco



**Federico Mayor.** *Sounding out the prospects for renewed U.S. membership.*

"is not only a service organization, but also an intellectual organization."

He openly expresses his desire to see the organization become a new focus of international debates on the role of science in the modern world, one of the reasons he is keen to see the United States return as a member. "The benefit to U.S. scientists of being with us is that the very important potential of other scientific organizations can only converge in one organization, such as Unesco."

Convincing the scientific community, according to observers in Paris, that this is a task Unesco is capable of achieving effectively—indeed, that it is even a task which is necessary—will not be easy. Many point out that previous efforts have often resulted in top-heavy, over-centralized bureaucracies.

Mayor, who was deputy director-general under M'Bow between 1978 and 1981, admits to a widespread perception of Unesco being a bureaucratic institution. "It is true that in some parts there is an excessive proportion of administrative personnel," he says. But he quickly adds that "this will not be the case in the future," pointing out that already, under the last 2 years of M'Bow's administration, staff numbers have been reduced by more than 800 and that "unfortunately we will have to abolish another 115 posts." Travel budgets will be cut by 25%, and other economies are being planned. To reach a goal of reducing the operating budget by a further \$15 million a year.

In the case of its science programs, he adds, "the first step is to ask the scientists to give their own views on what should be done to increase the efficiency of the organization"—a topic which will be high on the agenda when he meets with members of the National Academy and others next week.

Mayor's moves are being closely watched, in particular to see whether he can chart new directions for the agency and restructure it sufficiently to convince the United States and the United Kingdom to return—but without alienating those Third World member states who would be quick to exploit evidence of excessive pro-Westernism. The U.S. State Department has already made it clear that there is unlikely to be a hasty return to the fold, and that neither good intentions alone—nor vaguely worded commitments to universal principles—will be sufficient.

Mayor himself talks of operating through consensus and compromise, and of not rushing too hastily into changes. The main thesis of his first address to the Unesco staff after his appointment last year was "reforms without disruption." As the author of a book entitled *Mañana siempre es tarde* (*Tomorrow Is Always Too Late*), he is also aware that, in the end, it will be his actions that count. ■

DAVID DICKSON

## Severe Fire Devastates Soviet Science Library

*Many rare volumes were destroyed in a blaze that swept through the library of the Soviet Academy of Sciences; experts say other Soviet libraries are in poor physical condition*

THE library of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, founded by Peter the Great in 1714 and located in Leningrad, is one of the most important book collections in the Soviet Union and in the world. But in February, fire broke out in the library, which quickly became a "furnace," according to a *Pravda* article. By the time firemen put the blaze out 19 hours later, nearly a half-million books, including many rare 16th- to 18th-century works, were destroyed. Millions of other volumes were damaged by the flood of water that firemen poured into the building.

Six weeks later, the library staff is in the midst of coping with the damage. Last week, foreign conservators, including a team of three Americans, flew to Leningrad to help rescue the surviving books. "It's the biggest calamity in any library in recorded history, I think," said Donald Etherington, who was one of the American consultants and is vice-president of Information Conservation, Inc. But Etherington said he was "impressed" with the Soviet efforts so far. "They seem to have a grip on the problems," he said in an interview.

The fire occurred on 14 and 15 February, but word about it is just now being reported in the West. Library officials at first played down the extent of damage in the Soviet press. But a subsequent article in *Izvestiia* accused library authorities of trying to cover up the disaster and criticized the way they handled the crisis. Similar charges were made by Dimitri S. Likhachev, a leading Soviet scholar, in a speech at the annual meeting of the Soviet Academy of Sciences on 16 March. "The announcements of the library directors, meant to calm the public, have turned out to be half-truths, which, as is well known, are more dangerous than lies," the *Izvestiia* article said.

Of the library's estimated holdings of 12 million books, 400,000 were destroyed, according to Hugh Olmsted, head of the Slavic department of the Harvard College Library, who visited the library after the fire and has been tracking reports of the damage in the Soviet press. Most of the books destroyed were part of the prized Baer system—named after the 19th-century curator and scientist Karl Ernst von Baer. About 188,000 of them were foreign books and



**The aftermath.** Nearly a half-million books are believed to have been destroyed and millions more are badly damaged.

Paul Hoesel/ONYX Pictures