

Italy Keeps EMBL Anxiously Waiting

TRIESTE—Molecular biologists all across Europe are nervously tapping their fingers this month waiting for a letter from Italian foreign affairs minister Antonio Martino to the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL). The letter, if it arrives in time, will retract Italy's formal notice, issued nearly 1 year ago, to quit its membership in EMBL. Italy has until the end of the year to act; otherwise it is out and will have to reapply for membership.

Italy served notice of its intent to leave EMBL last year because it felt it was not getting enough return for contributing 16% of EMBL's \$44 million budget. But after a year of intense negotiation there is now every indication that the Italian government, satisfied with the prospect of increased appointment of Italian scientists at EMBL and the creation of a cluster of laboratories at a site near Rome, wishes to remain a member of the lab. Italian biologists' morale has also been lifted by a proposal to create a mouse genetic archive at the same location funded by the European Union (EU).

The nervousness at EMBL stems from the state of confusion in Italian politics. If an administrative hitch delays the arrival of the much-anticipated letter, says EMBL council chair Kari Kivirikko, "there might be a big mess." Although the letter must come from Martino, he is in turn waiting for the approval of Stefano Podestà, minister for the universities and scientific and technological research. According to Riccardo Cortese, director of the Institute for Research in Molecular Biology outside Rome and former EMBL program leader, there is no problem in principle: "Podestà has repeatedly said he is ready [to sign]."

Indeed, Eugenio Campo of the foreign affairs ministry office responsible for EMBL membership told *Science* that recent developments represent "a solution we find very acceptable." These include the appointment on merit of Italian Paolo Zanella as head of EMBL's European Bioinformatics Institute in Cambridge, U.K. But the key factor is the coming together of a number of initiatives to create a research powerhouse using mouse mutants at Monterotondo near Rome.

EMBL Director General Fotis Kafatos proposed a year ago to create four small EMBL-sponsored groups in Italy as part of a campaign to get some member countries more involved in the work of the laboratory. The plan now is to locate all four groups at Monterotondo, which will be complemented by the EU's expected siting of its mouse genetic archive there. Kivirikko explains that EMBL will finance four scientists in each Monterotondo group, which would

be free to seek further personnel and funding from other sources. The research would focus on mouse genetics or techniques using transgenic mice facilities. Italy's research funding body, the Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche (CNR), is expected to move related activities to the site, which is close to the CNR's Montelibretti Research Area, with its strong presence in chemistry research.

The EU's mouse genetic archive is an entirely separate project and forms part of its new 4-year biotechnology program, which was approved at the beginning of this month. A committee of European scientists made recommendations to the European Commission, the EU's executive arm, in planning the program. The plans identified a need for facilities of strategic importance for molecular biology and biotechnology. One of these was a new European genetic archive of mouse mutants, invaluable both for the understand-

ing of basic biological processes and for modeling human disease. The call for proposals for the new archive was issued this week, and a consortium of five European research organizations—research councils from the U.K., Germany, France, and Italy, plus EMBL—is expected to put in a joint bid.

Last month the EMBL council endorsed the creation of the EU archive and approved the four EMBL-supported groups (see letter on p. 1789). Kafatos told *Science* he believes "the decisions taken are fair and scientifically appropriate." But he took great pains to distinguish between "the two separate and parallel issues involving different players." Some accounts have lumped the EU and EMBL initiatives together as part of the same deal, and "a lot of damage has been done," says Kafatos.

Molecular biologists are now hoping that their best laid schemes of mice and men do not go awry in the confusion of Italian politics.

—Susan Biggin

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AIDS PROGRAMS

Piot Named Head of New UN Unit

For all their efforts to combat HIV and AIDS, the world's biggest and best public health organizations have precious little to show. As of late, this gloomy knowledge has led several leading organizations to rethink and reorganize. The latest strategic adjustment came on 12 December, when Peter Piot was named head of the ambitious, newly organized United Nations (UN) Programme on HIV/AIDS, which brings six UN organizations under a larger umbrella (*Science*, 25 November, p. 1312).

Though Piot hopes this new organization will help streamline the world's response to AIDS, he stresses that it's not a panacea. "I'm not naive," says Piot, who currently heads research and development at the World Health Organization's Global Programme on AIDS (GPA), which is being merged into the new program. "I'm well aware that the challenges are enormous." He adds that the effects on AIDS research likely will be minimal.

A Belgian physician and microbiologist, Piot established a reputation in AIDS research early in the epidemic by conducting some of the first studies of the disease in Africa. His earlier work led to the formation of Project SIDA in Zaire, an influential research program that was disbanded in 1991 because of political turmoil in that country.

His stature in the AIDS community was further raised by his recently ended tenure as president of the International AIDS Society, the lead organizer of the international conference on AIDS.



Naive—not. Peter Piot says he is well aware of his new job's challenges.

News of Piot's appointment was greeted with enthusiasm by most AIDS researchers and public health experts. "I think he's great," says epidemiologist James Curran, head of AIDS programs at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "He's firmly grounded in science and has long-term experience working in prevention of infectious diseases in developing countries."

In spite of enthusiasm from colleagues, it remains to be seen how much difference Piot's appointment—and indeed the entire UN AIDS move—will make to the epidemic. The new Geneva-based program, now being phased in and expected to be fully functional by 1996, will bring GPA together with AIDS activities of the World Bank, UNICEF, the UN Development Program, UNESCO, and the UN Population Fund. Piot says the move will offer opportunities for increased efficiency. "There has been overlapping by the different agencies, and we need to make sure that money is used in the most efficient ways." But he cautions that "one should not expect the moon from this."

—Jon Cohen