SCIENCESCOPE

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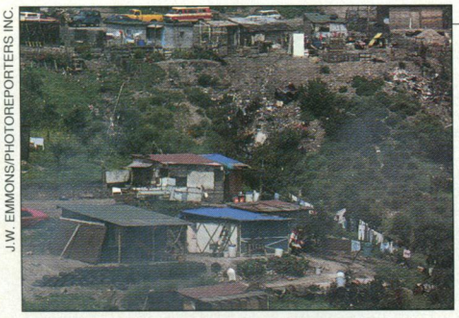

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Settling for less. Science and technology were given short shrift in draft settlements plan.

Science Slighted in UN Habitat II Agenda

Many of the world's academies of science are upset that a United Nations (UN) meeting on improving global living standards has given science and technology the brush-off. They expressed their concerns as government representatives gathered this week in Istanbul for the UN's Conference on Human Settlements, also known as Habitat II.

According to U.S. National Academy of Sciences (NAS) leaders attending a meeting of 72 academies held in Istanbul in connection with the UN conference, the group drafting the Habitat II agenda included only one sentence of a paragraph on the importance of science and technology that the NAS and other academies had suggested 5 months ago. Chemist Sherwood Rowland, NAS foreign secretary, is concerned about the potential impact. "The framers of the 100-page agenda do not see that any major technological advances are needed for the amelioration of the problems of cities," Rowland says.

Last week, the academies signed a statement asking world leaders to give more attention to technical possibilities for improving the quality of life in urban areas—such as investing in better sanitation systems and using computers to track the course of infectious diseases. Rowland was to present the statement to a Habitat II committee this week. But even if wording is added to the document, he worries that the delegates' attitude could "undermine any effort to improve the quality of science and technology as applied to the problems of the cities."

Flouting Criticism, NBC Replays *Origins* Show

When a TV program called *The Mysterious Origins of Man* aired in February, scientists protested that it promoted pseudoscience and misled the public (*Science*, 8 March, p. 1357). The program, hosted by Charlton Heston, suggested among other things that evolution is a questionable theory, that human civilizations began more than 100 million years ago, and that scientists have conspired to suppress important archaeological evidence.

Now, it seems, the scientific outcry has backfired. The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) will air the show again on 8 June, and its press release uses the outrage of university professors as a selling point for this "program that dares to challenge accepted beliefs." The production company, B.C. Video Co., even has a World Wide Web site devoted to the controversy (and to selling videotapes) (http://rumba.ics.uci. edu: 8080/faqs/mom.html).

"It's a pathetic way to make a buck," says Jere Lipps, director of the Museum of Paleontology at the University of California, Berkeley. "The program's first showing made science teaching more difficult. ... Showing it again as science is irresponsible." David Schwimmer, a paleontologist at Columbus College in Georgia, says: "That anyone would nurture this level of ignorance is scary." Schwimmer has used the show as a teaching aid by analyzing the claims and evidence with students.

The show's independent producer, Bill Cote, says he and NBC are "shocked that scientists are overreacting," adding that "NBC's extensive legal department put us through the wringer until we presented a balanced view."

Ariane 5 Failure Throws Euro Space Science Off Course

As *Science* went to press, Europe's Ariane 5 rocket had just pirouetted out of control during its maiden flight, forcing engineers to destroy it. The 4 June disaster could deal a double blow to European space science, setting back solar studies and indirectly affecting the international crewed space program.

When it went down, Ariane 5 took with it four satellites it was carrying into orbit as part of an ambitious project to study Earth's magnetosphere—the region around our planet which deflects particles from the solar wind (*Science*, 24 May, p. 1095). That mission is lost. And unless the Ariane 5 program can quickly get back on course, the failure could cast a shadow on Europe's participation in the International Space Station as well. That's because the cash-strapped European Space Agency had negotiated a deal with its partners—the United States, Canada, Japan, and Russia—in which ESA would pay its share of station operation costs not with cash, but with flights of Ariane 5, ferrying supplies to and from the station.

European space officials are trying to put a bright face on things, saying they hope to solve Ariane 5's problems before its next flight in the fall. "This was an experimental flight," French space minister François Fillon told a press conference at Ariane 5's launch site in French Guiana after the failure. "We are going right ahead to prepare the second launch."

Bill Blocks Computer Purchase

Supercomputers, by definition, are the fastest machines in the world. But buying one can be excruciatingly slow if you're a federally funded research lab—especially if you choose not to buy American. Last week the saga of the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) in Boulder, Colorado, which had raised lawmakers' ire by considering a Japanese machine (*Science*, 17 May, p. 941), took another turn when legislators added language to a spending bill that would stop NCAR's funding agency, the National Science Foundation (NSF), from signing off on the deal.

NCAR researchers want the best tool for global climate modeling, while legislators want to prevent foreign companies from "dumping" products at below-market prices. On 17 May, NCAR announced it had picked the NEC Corp. of Japan, rejecting offers from U.S.-based Cray Research Inc. and another Japanese company. NCAR planned to negotiate a contract worth up to $35 million. But 3 days later, the Department of Commerce wrote to NSF that it believed the machine's cost of production "is substantially greater" than NEC's bid and that such a purchase would harm U.S. supercomputer makers. And on 30 May, the House panel that sets NSF's budget declared no money in the bill could be used to pay anyone who "approves a contract for the purchase or lease of a supercomputer"—if Commerce officials conclude it is being sold below fair-market value.

NCAR, on orders from NSF, is reviewing NEC's winning bid to see if it reflects the company's true costs. The Commerce investigation is continuing, says a spokesperson, and a positive finding could lead to fines against NEC. Meanwhile, NSF officials are seeking a compromise that will satisfy Congress and give researchers what they want.