SCIENCESCOPE

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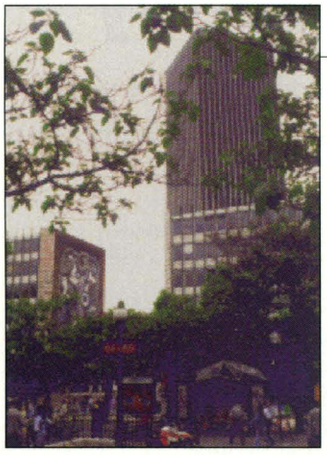

Danger zone. Jussieu campus.

Bastille Day Bombshell Over Science Campus

On France's 14 July Bastille Day holiday—traditionally marked by street celebrations and firecrackers—President Jacques Chirac dropped a bombshell of his own on the science community. During a TV interview, Chirac announced that the Jussieu campus in the heart of Paris—site of two major science universities and several internationally known research institutes—would be shut down "before the end of the year" due to heavy asbestos contamination of the campus's '70s-era buildings.

The news has left Jussieu's 38,000 students and 10,000 professors, researchers, and technicians shell-shocked and uncertain about their future, as there are no firm plans yet about where to move the universities. On 15 July, the presidents of Jussieu's universities and Vincent Courtillot, head of the Institute of the Physics of the Globe at Jussieu, issued a statement saying that a rapid move would be a "death sentence" for their institutions. Yet Chirac reportedly has decided that vacating the campus is preferable to a minimum $200 million asbestos removal.

Education ministry officials, also caught off guard, hastened to say that Jussieu might not close until the 1996–97 academic year ends. Education minister François Bayrou is appointing a special committee to study the matter and recommend a new campus site. One possibility is a new business center being developed in southeastern Paris.

Yet even if a suitable site is found, Chirac's dramatic decision may bode ill for the future of the universities. "I'm already getting calls from students we accepted for next year," says one biology professor. "They say they can't come if there isn't going to be anyplace for them to be."

Controls on DNA Could Impact Research

Genetic privacy, once an arcane topic that fascinated ethicists and molecular biologists, is heating up as a political issue. Members of Congress have now introduced 11 bills that would protect citizens against misuse of genetic data. The latest and perhaps most comprehensive proposal goes so far that even one of its creators—law professor George Annas of Boston University—is concerned.

The bill (S 1898), introduced on 24 June by Senators Pete Domenici (R–NM) and Paul Simon (D–IL), contains many provisions supported by Annas, who helped draft a model bill that formed the basis for this proposal. S 1898 would require written consent from the donor before anyone could collect, store, or analyze human DNA (except when DNA analysis is sanctioned by the court or used to identify a body). The bill also bars genetic discrimination by employers and insurers. But the Senate version doesn't include sections that would allow researchers to use "anonymous" DNA samples stripped of personal identifiers in population studies. Annas notes that this could unnecessarily restrict some research.

Genome staffers at the National Institutes of Health and the Department of Energy see defects in some of the proposals, too, but expect they may be revised, perhaps in the next Congress (this one is nearly out of time). In a look ahead, however, the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee will hear testimony about DNA privacy on 25 July from Human Genome Program leader Francis Collins and other witnesses.

U.S. Frets Over Global Biosafety Rules

Next week in Aarhus, Denmark, scientists and diplomats from more than 100 countries will begin drafting a plan that strikes fear in the hearts of biotech companies and U.S. officials. The reason for concern: The international biosafety protocol the delegates are preparing could clamp down on exports of genetically modified seeds and foods.

The protocol, an outgrowth of the Biodiversity Treaty, is a reaction to the possibility that an imported bioengineered crop could, for example, transfer herbicide resistance to weeds or wipe out the genetic diversity of a native plant. U.S. delegates (who attend meetings as observers because the Senate hasn't ratified the 1992 treaty) have argued that national laws and voluntary agreements will guard against such mishaps. But treaty signatories rejected that logic last fall in Jakarta, Indonesia, agreeing instead to a binding protocol.

That decision has upset U.S. officials and the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO), an industry group. If the protocol is overly cautious, says Richard Godown of BIO, it could mean "that all the ships should stay in the harbor and all the farmers shouldn't plant." U.S. delegates in Aarhus, a working group meeting, will push for rules that would restrict exports of transgenics only if there is some known risk.

But many developing countries and some Nordic nations and nongovernmental organizations will likely argue that transgenic products should not be traded unless data show they won't harm the environment. Chee Youke Ling of the activist Third World Network says "There's a lot of cause for concern about how the assessment has gone in Europe and the U.S.," adding that in some countries, assessment techniques are "nonexistent." The working group has through 1998 to draft the protocol, which then must be approved by treaty signers.

NIH to Aid Former Soviet Scientists

If up-and-coming biomedical scientists in the former Soviet Union (FSU) and the United States don't know each other already, they will soon. This week in Moscow, U.S. Vice President Al Gore and Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin announced a new $1.4 million program to fund U.S.–FSU joint projects in biomedical and behavioral sciences.

The effort is funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the U.S. Civilian Research and Development Foundation for the Independent States of the FSU (CRDF), a private nonprofit started last fall with $10 million in Defense Department funds. Scientists in FSU countries (except the Baltic nations) and NIH grantees or intramural scientists can apply for 2-year collaborative grants of up to $80,000.

FSU biomedical researchers are already getting help from a $15 million Howard Hughes Medical Institute grants program (*Science*, 14 July 1995, p. 155). The CRDF-NIH program is a bit different, particularly in that it will fund travel and workshops over the next few months to bring together U.S. and FSU scientists to "determine whether there's mutual interest in developing a program," says Karen Peterson of NIH's Fogarty International Center. The travel funds are aimed at young scientists, or those in military research cities once closed to foreigners, who lack international ties.

CRDF's main grant competition, aimed at defense conversion projects, closed last March, drawing more than 3000 applications; these awards are to be announced later this month. The deadline for proposals to the CRDF-NIH program is 15 February 1997. More information is available on the World Wide Web at http://www.crdf.inter.net.