

Business Briefs

Great Britain

Influenza epidemic exposes Blair's crimes

The high infection rates of severe influenza among the British population have shown that that country's hospital sector is dysfunctional, in terms of emergency treatment capacities, supply of beds, and other equipment, as a result of budget-cutting in public health. There is also a lack of at least 8,000 nurses, and many hospitals have begun to contract surgery and other equipment, on a part-time basis.

As of Jan. 6, only 16 beds for adults and another 25 beds for children were free in the entire country, a situation which can be blamed on the Thatcher-Major health sector "reforms," which have been continued by the government of Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The National Health System has been forced, because of budget cuts, to reduce services particularly for patients that must undergo surgery and other treatment, such as for kidney ailments. Close to 1.2 million patients are on a waiting list for such treatment, which, despite government propaganda about extra funds, has not much improved the situation of April 1998, when 1.3 million were on the waiting list, BBC reported. Much of the "improvement" has been at the expense of existing reserves in hospital beds, so that now, with tens of thousands suffering from severe influenza attacks, an outright emergency has developed.

Space

Polar Lander is on its way to Mars

The Mars Polar Lander, the second half of NASA's Mars '98 missions, was launched on Jan. 3. It will arrive at its destination in December 1999, about three months after its partner, Mars Climate Orbiter, launched on Dec. 11, 1998, is scheduled to arrive. The focus of the missions is to study climate change on Mars, with emphasis on the most important potential resource there—water.

Mars Surveyor 1998 Project Manager John McNamee explained on Nov. 13 that Mars is the only other planet where we know there is water, in the form of ice.

The Climate Orbiter will study Mars from an altitude of about 260 miles. It will record the distribution of water vapor, carbon dioxide, and dust in the lower atmosphere, and measure temperature and track the movement of clouds. It will also function as the communications relay from the Polar Lander back to Earth.

The exact landing site of the Polar Lander can be determined as late as August, based on images that the currently-orbiting Mars Global Surveyor is providing. The Polar Lander will touch down on the Martian south polar cap a few weeks after the seasonal carbon-dioxide frosts have disappeared, during summer in the southern hemisphere. The Lander is expected to operate for 60 to 90 days, until the Martian winter sets in.

About 10 minutes before touchdown, the Lander will release two microprobes, known as the Deep Space 2 experiment, which will collect atmospheric data before they crash into the surface at about 400 miles per hour. The probes will then conduct measurements, including of water in the soil. The lander is expected to set down about 60 miles away from the microprobes.

Health

China boosts research to combat AIDS epidemic

The National Center for AIDS Prevention and Control has been established within China's Ministry of Health, to study the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV, which causes AIDS) in China. The center has divisions focussing on epidemiology, clinical work, and pharmaceutical development, including HIV vaccine research. The Chinese government's concern over the growing AIDS epidemic in China was made visible on Dec. 1, with a public exhibition at the Museum of the Chinese Revolution in Tiananmen Square, describing the current status of the epidemic, and presenting the standard HIV prevention material.

According to the Jan. 4 issue of the *Scien-*

tist, limited testing and the lack of resources are contributing to the spread of HIV in China. The HIV epidemic in China is estimated at 600,000 cases by the World Health Organization, but this estimate may be too low, according to Chinese scientists. Official predictions from government scientists forecast 1 million HIV infections by the year 2000.

From the limited epidemiology done, researchers have found that China has seven major subtypes of HIV prevalent in the population, whereas most other regions of the world only have one or two subtypes. China also has a special recombinant subtype of HIV that has not been found elsewhere. The government hopes its scientists can establish more ties to U.S. and European researchers. Vaccines so far have been shown, in small trials in the United States and Europe, to be effective against only one or two closely related HIV subtypes. Having eight HIV subtypes will make vaccine development even more difficult using current approaches.

Agriculture

Brazil, Argentina face growing crisis

The agricultural crisis in Brazil and Argentina is growing increasingly acute. Lack of credit, budget cuts, and other austerity policies are behind this catastrophe.

In Brazil's state of Rio Grande do Sul, a major agricultural production area, National Agricultural Confederation president Antonio Ernesto de Salvo has warned about low grain stocks: Only 2 million tons of millet is currently stored, about 4% of the total harvest, rather than the 10% which would normally be warehoused. The next grain crop is now expected to be 80 million tons, rather than the 90 million originally estimated, making it necessary to import 10 million tons of grains, at a cost of \$2.2 million. According to the Jan. 4 *Correio do Povo*, "Budget cuts at the Agriculture Ministry . . . impose on Rio Grande do Sul the impossibility of storing the next harvest, without silos or warehouses."

Similarly, the Argentine Agrarian Federation told *Ambito Financiero* that govern-

ARMENIA, Georgia, and Bulgaria signed a transport agreement on Dec. 23, for movement of freight to Europe via a recently inaugurated ferry link from the Black Sea Georgian ports of Poti and Batumi to Varna, Bulgaria. Armenian Transport Minister Yervand Zakharian said access to the connections could boost Armenia's external cargo-turnover by 20-30% in 1999. Iran has expressed an interest in joining the agreement.

NEW ZEALAND'S Dairy Board, the last bastion of industry regulation after 14 years of Mont Pelerin Society policies, is resisting plans by the Shipley government to break up its monopoly. The Board says it could lose up to \$1 billion over the next four years; the industry is worth \$7 billion per year. "It is quite clear the industry does not support deregulation," said board chairman John Storey.

TANZANIAN Prime Minister Frederick Sumaye has said the country faces a deficit of 600,000 tons of maize and has appealed for help. "In some regions, people are reported to have completely depleted their stocks and may face serious shortages. This could lead to famine conditions for the poorest and most vulnerable of our people," he said.

THE FEDERATION of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry has proposed that India adopt an infrastructure-led growth and export strategy. The slump in exports has been mainly due to infrastructure bottlenecks, including power shortages, the high cost of finance, and invisible costs incurred because of transport delays, a Federation paper stated.

CHINA'S Guangdong International Trust and Investment Corp. will file for bankruptcy, Reuters reported on Jan. 10. Wu Jiesi, the governor of Guangdong, told reporters, "To my knowledge, China's bankruptcy law does not provide for priority to foreign creditors." He said that some 20,000 individual depositors would get their money (about \$100 million) back first.

ment tax and austerity policies are wiping out small and medium-sized agricultural producers at a rapid rate. The number of farmers "is increasingly smaller," said FAA president Rene Boneto. "The interior of the country is becoming depopulated." Marcelo Muniagurria, president of the Rural Confederations, blamed the farm crisis on "the enormous lack of profitability, as a result of the drop in international grain prices."

Science Policy

Indians warned about technological apartheid

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee called on the nation's scientific community to be prepared to "deliver the goods" themselves, if any other nation tried to "arm-twist us and deny us the opportunities of legitimate scientific cooperation," in a speech to the 86th annual session of the Indian Science Congress Association on Jan. 3, the *Hindu* reported.

For more than three decades, India has been on the "technology control radar screens" of advanced nations, Vajpayee said. But attempts to deny technology to India had not been without benefit, because it spurred scientists to further strengthen the national capability. "This has reinforced our belief in the maxim that strength respects strength," he said, pointing out the achievements of nuclear scientists at Pokhran which had "filled the entire Indian scientific community with self-confidence."

But at the same time, in the current interdependent world, and when research and development has become costly, "our scientific community must forge the closest possible collaboration with the best institutions across the globe," he said. The scientific establishment must focus on quality which withstands international scrutiny.

The Prime Minister identified meeting the needs of industry, agriculture, and services as problem-solving areas for scientists. "Food security, water management, energy and material conservation, low-cost housing, environmental protection, maximizing our exports by achieving cost and quality competitiveness in world markets, high-quality technical education leading to self-

employment opportunities; all these are crucial for our national development," he said. Also, universities and R&D institutions must be freed from bureaucratization for creating world class scientific research.

In the future, science would have to strive for a new integration of knowledge systems that combine reasoning, ethics, individual behavior, social relations, and the environment. "The world will have to move toward harmonization of science and spiritualism in order to attain peace, prosperity, and happiness for all," he said.

Infrastructure

Malaysia will resume national projects

Malaysia plans to restart work on major infrastructure projects that were interrupted by the Asian financial crisis, which in 1998 shrank Gross Domestic Product by 6%. Prime Minister Mahathir bin Mohamad said that everything will be done on the government's part, to achieve a minimum of 7% growth every year, in a speech on Dec. 20. This will enable Malaysia to revitalize its economy and achieve the goal of becoming a leading industrial nation by the year 2020.

The government asked Tenaga Nasional Bhd, the national power utility, to consider reviving the Bakun hydroelectric dam project. Infrastructure development is seen as a crucial catalyst for economic development, with a return of \$11 for every \$1 invested.

Also in December, in an address inaugurating the Farmers' Management Institute and opening the 25th annual general meeting of the National Farmers' Association, Mahathir called on farmers to play their role in upholding national sovereignty and reducing dependence on foreigners, especially in food supplies. "We should not be complacent," he said. "If we do not strive to be better, they [foreigners] will dominate us. . . . Today, they are taking over most of the companies belonging to Asians in countries which have bowed to the IMF [International Monetary Fund]." He called on farmers to improve production, through adopting more sophisticated technology and crop diversification.