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CHERNOBYL: Checks replace the Community ban on food imports

The 12-nation European Community has lifted its ban on food imports from East European countries effected by the radioactive fall-out from the Chernobyl disaster. But member states must check all imports from third countries, to make sure the maximum permitted levels of radioactivity are not exceeded.

This new "post-Chernobyl" regime was approved by EC ministers on May 30, the day before the ban on imports, approved on May 12, was to expire (see Eurofocus 18/86).

The danger of iodine radiation is now over, according to the experts, as it has a half-life of a week. The threat now comes from another, if less dangerous, chemical substance, caesium, whose radioactivity is measured in becquerels (Bq).

The maximum permitted levels set by the Twelve are 370 Bq/kilo for milk and baby food and 600 Bq/kilo for all other food products, whether fresh or processed.

These requirements apply only to imports from third countries, for the Twelve have yet to agree on levels for food traded within the Community. However, member states cannot apply stricter standards to imports from their EC partners than are applied to domestic products.

HEALTH: The pesticide wave recedes

Pesticides represent a less dramatic but equally worrisome threat to health as radioactive crops. But their use is being curbed yet further. The European Community's agricultural ministers have now set maximum levels for pesticide residues in, and on, cereals intended for human consumption and foodstuffs of animal origin.

The action of pesticides does not stop with the destruction of plant insects and parasites. Sprayed on fields or pastures, they can find their way into the bread and milk we consume.

The new Community Directives, which complement the 1976 Directive covering fruit and vegetables, should result in food which has a more "natural" taste. The adoption of common standards would also make trade between member states easier.

HEALTH: Council adopts action programme in fight against cancer

The European Community ceased to be a purely economic community some time ago. Its current preoccupations extend well beyond the creation of a common market by 1992 - in fact to the establishment of a People's Europe. Which is why a recent session of the Council of Ministers was attended by the Community's health ministers..

The ministers adopted a Community-wide action programme to step up the fight against cancer. The programme, which draws partly on the conclusions of the ad hoc high level expert committee on cancer, was prepared by the European Commission and lists a number of activities to be undertaken on a priority basis.

They include (1) the preparation of measures aimed at reducing tobacco consumption; (2) the evaluation of research into nutrition and alcohol; (3) the identification of cancer producing chemicals to which workers and/or the general population are exposed, and (4) the exchange of information and experience on the early diagnosis of cancer and its treatment in Community hospitals.

Under the action programme a European information campaign is to be launched, for which the European Commission has asked for a sum of ECU 6.5 million*. The Council of Ministers also agreed on the need for joint action to fight AIDS. The health ministers called on all member states, and the European Commission, to see what activities could be jointly undertaken as regards information and education, on the one hand, and for dealing with the problem of the transmission of the disease, on the other. The Commission was asked to organize an exchange of information and, eventually, to present proposals, but it had to remind ministers that no funds are available for this purpose.

The ministers' concern with alcohol abuse, which found expression in the action programme against cancer, resulted in a request to the European Commission to pursue policies which strike a balance between the interests involved in the production and distribution of alcohol, on the one hand, and public health on the other. The Commission was asked to present proposals aimed at preventing alcohol abuse if it felt this necessary.

The health ministers also recommended the adoption by member states of a European Health Card, for the 8 to 10% of the population whose state of health can require emergency treatment. The card would allow doctors in other countries to give such treatment if required.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.64 or IR£ 0.71.

OIL PRICES: A good deal - but not for everyone

With one exception, consumers throughout the European Community have benefitted from the drop in oil prices. They have been able to drive their cars and heat their homes for less. But some have benefitted more than others, according to the European Commission, because of differences in national taxes.

The Commission's latest survey of the Community market for petroleum products shows that the average price of crude fell, in the 12-nation Community, from \$28 a barrel to \$16, between December 1985 and March 1986. This drop of 43% was due largely to falling world demand. Prices of petroleum products, exclusive of taxes, reflect this downward trend, according to the Commission.

Between January 1 and May 15 the price of premium grade petrol fell by 31% on average, of Diesel oil (Derv) by more than 28% and fuel oil by 28% .

Prices, exclusive of taxes, which are fixed in principal by the oil companies, have not fallen by the same amount everywhere. The falls range between 41% in Germany and only 22% in Portugal for premium grade petrol, between 38% in Spain and 19% in France for Diesel oil and between 42% in Spain and 14% in France for fuel oil.

To these differences must be added the divergent attitudes of the national governments. Some have raised the taxes on petroleum products in order to prevent a fall in their revenues; others have left them unchanged.

The winners are German motorists: they have seen prices at the petrol pump fall by some 23% between 15 January and 15 May. For motorists in Luxembourg the fall has been somewhat less - 19%. In Britain and Belgium prices have fallen by around 15% - but only 8% in Ireland. Only in Denmark have prices moved upwards - by 7%.

As for motorists using cars powered with Diesel engines, the happiest are in Holland, Luxembourg and Belgium, where prices for Diesel oil have come down by around 22%. Prices in the U.K. have fallen by 13% and in Ireland by 10%. But they rose 13% in Denmark.

As for fuel oil for domestic heating, prices fell by 32% in Belgium and Ireland, by 25% in the U.K., but rose by 13% in Denmark.

HEALTH: A black list for cleaner factories

Silver compounds can be a health hazard to workers, even in concentrations of not much more than one hundredth of a milligram per cubic metre. Not surprisingly, these compounds, as well as the mineral itself, are among the 100 dangerous substances for which the member states of the European Community are being asked to set maximum exposure levels.

A 1980 Community Directive already requires them to set levels for a range of dangerous substances to which workers are likely to be exposed. But it leaves the member states free to fix whatever limits each of them considers safe.

In 1984 the EC Council of Ministers agreed on the need for harmonization. The European Commission, which drew up the proposal now before the Council, wants to harmonize the maximum exposure levels for nearly 1,000 dangerous substances which are already the object of legislation in the individual member states. The 100 it has now selected are all substances often present in factories and workshops, and include cyanide, nicotine and phosphoric acid.

The levels proposed by the Commission correspond, in most cases, to those already in force under national legislation (where it exists). But for a score of substances, including ammonia, ferric oxide (fumes), quartz and silver the Commission favours stricter standards.

CONSUMERS: Inadequate cleaning instructions put clothes at risk

Clothing manufacturers are under no obligation to provide cleaning instructions. In fact there is no national legislation or Community directive on the subject, as the European Commission recently told a Euro-MP, Vera Squarcialupi.

And in the absence of national legislation, the Commission added, the question of harmonization simply does not arise. That the subject is an important one for both consumers and clothing shops is recognized by the Commission, which is trying, therefore, to do what it can to help. But it has very few powers for this particular purpose under the EC Treaty.

TRADE: The European Community as the "superpower"

Mention foreign trade and people at once think of ships carrying raw materials and manufactured goods. But the more dynamic sector of foreign trade is made up of such intangibles as banking, insurance, transport and tourism, known collectively as "services".

When it comes to trade in services, the European Community, already the world's largest exporter of goods, is the "superpower". Its annual income from services averaged over \$100 billion between 1979 and 1982. This was three times that of the United States, and it leaves out trade between the member states.

The Community will stand to benefit, therefore, from any moves to reduce the barriers to world trade in services. But this was not evident in 1982 when, largely at American insistence, discussion of services got underway in the GATT, the Geneva-based organization which sets the rules for international trade. The Community was reluctant, in fact, to embark on negotiations for an international agreement on services.

The shift in the EC's position was explained by the European Commissioner for external trade, Willy De Clercq, to an economic symposium in Switzerland on May 27. Investigation, he said, had shown that the Community's service exports face numerous, serious obstacles. At the same time, European firms in the service industries regard themselves as among the world's most competitive.

The Community's balance of trade in services has been positive since the 1960s at least. Commission studies indicate that many of the EC's service industries which are likely to grow faster as a result of liberalization supply an input to the other sectors of the economy. They include financial services, information technology, consultancy and advertising. More international competition would improve the quality of services available to the Community's manufacturing industries, making them more competitive vis-a-vis American and Japanese firms.

When the world's trade ministers meet in Punta del Este, in Uruguay, this September, to discuss the launching of a new round of international trade negotiations, the EC will join the other developed nations in supporting the view that trade in services be included. Even if this view wins the backing of all developing countries, the negotiations themselves are likely to be long and difficult. Americans, for example, would regard as discriminatory a rule that managers of foreign banks must speak the language of the host country, in order to be able to communicate with its banking authorities.

EDUCATION: Commission acts in favour of a Students' Europe

The European Commission firmly believes that the educational authorities of a member state of the European Community cannot refuse admission to a student from another member state on grounds of nationality alone.

In its view this would amount to a violation of the EEC Treaty, given the ruling of the European Court of Justice in the so-called Gravier case. The case was brought by a French student, Françoise Gravier, against the Belgian educational authorities. The Court held that as a citizen of a Community country Miss Gravier was entitled to the same treatment as Belgian students - and not required, therefore, to pay the registration fee charged foreign students.

The Commission is ready, in fact, to take legal action if necessary to end discrimination based on nationality. It gave this assurance recently to two Dutch Euro-MPs concerned by their government's refusal of a residence permit to at least one prospective student for the school of interpreters in the Dutch city of Maastricht. The school, as Florus Wijssenbeek and Gijs de Vries pointed out, was founded with Community aid.

The Commission told the two Euro-MPs it had already taken up the matter with the Dutch authorities, drawing their attention to the judgment in the Gravier case.

ENVIRONMENT: Commission wants stricter controls on vessels

The European Commission wants stricter controls on ships calling at European Community ports, in order "to rid our seas of sub-standard ships", in the words of Stanley Clinton Davis, the European Environment Commissioner.

Since 1982 all ships entering West European ports are subject to inspection under the Memorandum on Port State Control, whose 14 signatories include all Community countries, except land-locked Luxembourg, and the European Commission. Some 38,000 ships flying foreign flags have been inspected so far from the standpoint of safety and the prevention of pollution, and 1,500 detained or delayed for serious deficiencies.

At the recent Hague conference of the signatory countries, aptly named "Safe Ships on Clean Seas", Mr Davis stressed the European Commission's commitment to help implement the Memorandum. He wanted inspection procedures to be closely harmonized. "To do otherwise", he noted, "would be to encourage ports of convenience, something which must be avoided at all costs".

PRICES: How much is it in pounds?

The innocent abroad is frequently spotted by his frequent use of the words "How much is it in pounds?" (or francs or marks ... or yen). But prices are seldom comparable, even when you know the exchange rate.

Your money, in other words, goes further in some countries than others. To find out by how much you have only to consult a Table published by the European Community's statistical office, Eurostat, under the somewhat forbidding title "Purchasing power parities and exchange rates".

The latest Table shows that the pound in your pocket bought more in the European Community's Mediterranean states but a good deal less in Denmark and Germany, for example. The price level in the U.K. was 12% lower than in Ireland, while Irish prices were 5% lower than the French, for example.

The Table confirms what tourists know from experience: price levels in southern Europe are lower than in the north. But it also shows that the price level in the Community is relatively low compared to the United States and Japan. Prices in Portugal, for example, were 46% lower than in the U.S. in March, although Danish prices were 6% higher.

YOUTH TRAINING: Wanted: A Certificate acceptable to employers

Educational authorities in nearly all member states of the European Community have largely implemented the policy on youth training adopted by the EC's Council of Ministers three years ago, according to a European Commission report. The remaining problems, it notes, relate to the handicapped, young girls - and to the quality of education.

The report favours a certificate, to be given to all who have successfully completed a training programme, which employers could accept. It would include information on not only the results obtained but also the aptitudes of the person in question. The report expresses doubts, however, as to whether the educational system in the European Community is equipped to evaluate students in terms of the needs of societies undergoing technological and economic change.

The report underlines the problems the Community faces because of the increase in the number of young people. But it notes that their numbers will decline in all member states, and concludes that while the pressure on the educational system will fall, the need for good training programmes will remain.

A PEOPLE'S EUROPE: Waving the flag

The stars at the flag raising ceremony were not the three presidents nor even this year's winner of the Eurovision song contest, Sandra Kim, but the flag itself - blue, with a circle of 12 gold stars. This is the flag of the European Community, raised for the first time on May 29 before the headquarters of the European Community, to fly alongside the flags of the 12 member states.

In their speeches the presidents of the Community's major institutions - Commission, Council of Ministers and Parliament - paid homage to its founding fathers, especially Robert Schuman, and to their successors, including the Italian Euro-MP, Altiero Spinelli, who died in harness a few weeks ago.

The Commission President, Jacques Delors, declared that they had achieved their main objective - an end to war in Europe. Even if the Community appeared petty and discouraging at times, it was worth looking back on these 40 years of peace.

This theme was echoed by the President of the European Parliament, Pierre Pflimlin. He expressed the hope that the European flag would become "the symbol of the peaceful combat for European union".

The flag, President Delors' "symbol of hope", was carried to the flagpole by 12 children from the European schools, accompanied by the European Commissioner for a People's Europe, Carlo Ripa di Meana. It was raised to the strains of the European "anthem", Beethoven's Ode to Joy.

The sun came out, just long enough for the ceremony to end with Sandra Kim singing "J'aime la vie".