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AID: Natural disaster aid granted

European emergency aid worth £1,28 m has been given to the victims of natural disasters in France, Italy and Greenland.

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INDUSTRY: Commission acts on steel aids

The world steel situation has never been bleaker. Steel consumption has been unable to keep up with production as recession hits most of the world's manufacturing industries. The resulting over-production poses a major problem for most industrialized nations who have reacted by trying to streamline their steel plants and lower output.

In addition to a series of measures designed to curb excess steel production, the European Commission also monitors all kinds of national aid programmes drawn up in the different Community countries to shore up their ailing steel industries. Recently, it decided to take action against a series of aid projects drawn up by nine Member States.

As the Commission sees it, these projects do not comply strictly enough with its regulations concerning the restructuring of steel plants and reduction of their production capacities. The cutbacks in production included in the Member State programmes cover only 14 m tonor, while the Commission's objective remains to reduce steel production by 30 - 35 m t before 1986. This would leave the European Community with a surplus capacity of 47 m t by 1985.

The reduction in production capacities demanded by the Commission when it comes to industries receiving national assistance, applies above all to firms which use outdated and less profitable installations. These rules also apply to plants who chalk up the most losses every year and who receive the highest amounts of public assistance.

The Commission's current investigation covers seven major steel manufacturers in Belgium, including the famous Cockerill-Sambre plant. Belgium's steel industry has received a total of about £54 m over the period 1974 to 1981 for restructuring programmes, and about £6.9 m for conversion projects. Commission statistics show that Belgium's production of crude steel dropped from 19 m t in 1975 to 17.9 m t in 1981.

In Germany, the Commission is investigating state aids which include investment assistance, help for energy saving and environmental protection, research and development schemes and the like. Help for restructuring from the Community during the past 7 years has totalled almost £432 m , while aid for conversion projects came to about £70 m .

German production of crude steel has grown from 62.9 m t in 1975 to 67.8 m t in 1981.

France, where steel production has dropped from 33.7 m t in 1975 to 17.9 m t in 1981, is also under investigation for state aids to steel industries. The Community has also helped the restructuring and conversion processes

by giving aid worth £443 m and £131 m respectively during the period 1974 - 1981.

Italy, where crude steel production has increased from 32.7 m t in 1975 to 40.8 m t in 1981, is being investigated for two loans. The Italian steel industry has been encouraged to restructure and convert with aid worth £599 m and £26.5 m respectively.

The United Kingdom is also under investigation for five loans given to the steel industry. The country has seen its crude steel production drop from 27 m t in 1975 to 25.4 m t in 1981. It received a total of about £386 m for restructuring and £185 m for conversion.

The other countries under Commission investigation are the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Ireland and Greece.

The Commission is expected to continue its bilateral consultations with the governments and firms in question with a view to reaching final decisions during the first half of 1983.

AGRICULTURE: Farm funds aid development

While the European Community Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund (also known as the EAGGF or the FEOGA) is best known for its support of farm prices and incomes, it is also active in a lesser known role of aiding rural development.

A significant amount is earmarked every year to improve the conditions under which farm products are processed and marketed to improve public services in rural areas, for forestry development and for collective irrigation works in Europe.

For instance, it was estimated that, at the end of 1980, some £170 m had been granted for the financing of over 800 separate projects in the sector. As part of the programme, the European Commission in Brussels has just announced a whole series of grants to finance projects in Italy and Southern France.

In one set of projects, some £28 m have been granted for collective irrigation works in seven depressed regions of the Italian Mezzogiorno area. These include Marches, Latium, Abruzzi, Campania, Basilicata, Calabria and Sardinia.

During the same period, the Commission also announced the second instalment of 1982 aid for projects concerning the improvement of farm and local roads, and provision of electricity and drinking water supplies in the poorest areas of Southern France and Italy. In total, 120 projects are to be financed, 47 in France worth £3.46 m and 73 in Italy at a cost of £8 m.

The 47 French projects will be in Aquitaine, the Midi-Pyrenees, the Rhone Alpes, the Languedoc, Roussillon, Provence-Alpes, Cote d'Azur, Corsica and one project will cover several regions. The largest share of the funds will be for the development of drinking water supplies and the regions receiving the most will be the Midi-Pyrenees and the Cote d'Azur.

In Italy, the 73 projects are scattered in Valle d'Aosta, Liguria, Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria, Molise, Puglia and Sardinia. Sardinia and Puglia are the areas receiving the largest amounts and overall more than half of the total for Italy is destined to finance road projects.

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TRANSPORT: "Flight deaths unnecessary" say MEP's

British comedian Marty Feldman, who recently died in the United States, some years ago did a famous sketch set in an airplane, which was about to crash. The captain's disembodied voice comes over the tannoy telling passengers to fasten their seatbelts, put on their life-jackets, release oxygen from the luggage racks, make for the life-rafts and so on, but each order is followed by the refrain "without unfastening your seatbelts". As the passengers tie themselves in knots and the audience is reduced to helpless laughter, the sketch predictably ends with the words "This is a recorded message. Goodbye and good luck!".

If this apocalyptic tale is already sending you scurrying to cancel the holiday flight that was to wing you on your way to sunny Teneriffe or the Costa Brava, stop. Flying is actually about the safest way that you can travel, as well as being relatively quick and comfortable, according to a report just released by the European Parliament's Transport Committee.

Only about 800 people die in airplanes every year, compared to about 300 000 who die on the roads, says the report. But more than half the deaths are caused by fire asphyxiating people trapped in the aircraft on the ground and could be avoided by introducing additional safety measures, it argues. Among the recommendations it lists are tougher controls on the amount of "hand baggage" allowed in the passenger cabin, the compulsory fitting of burst-proof catches to overhead lockers to stop things falling on people's heads, improvements in seating design, the use of non-inflammable and non-toxic materials in the cabin decor and the clear marking of emergency exits on the outside of the plane to help rescue workers on the ground, in the event of a crash.

Alexander Sherlock and Richard Cottrell, the two British European Democrat MEP's who first brought up the subject in Parliament, say that there are other obvious ways to make air travel safer. For example, they say, people ought to be obliged to buy their duty-free liquor and perfumewhen they arrive at their destination, instead of before they leave. The near-universal practice of filling up the passenger cabin with heavy and highly inflammable liquids packed in glass bottles is clearly pretty stupid, they observe.

The report, which was compiled by French European Popular Democrat MEP Michel Junot, calls for concerted European Community action to introduce a set of common fafety standards.

LANGUAGES: Unscrambling the language puzzle

The Tower of Babel would look tame compared to the multi-lingual challenge that confronts most international relations and business. The key to the whole business is translation - from the interpreters standing between world leaders to the translators, squeezing nuances in half a dozen different languages, out of a single document.

This is especially true in the European Community institutions where documents are translated into the seven official languages. Meetings often depend on the fluency and mental agility of the interpreters.

There are also good business reasons for stepping up multi-lingualism in the Community. More and more businessmen realise that access to the markets of the Middle East and South East Asia can only be achieved through a knowledge of Japanese, Arabic, Chinese and other local languages.

The European Commission has been working to improve the transfer of information between languages since December 1976, adopting three specific work programmes along the way. The latest of these programmes was adopted recently.

This new programme takes into account a number of new developments in the rapidly growing language sector. Firstly there has been a rapid development in new technologies, especially computerised information retrieval systems for telecommunications and business management. Secondly, now that Greek is an official Community language, the workload of the translation departments has increased considerably.

The new European action plan will focus on increasing output capacity and improving the quality of mechanical translation software to meet the needs of the Community and its institutions. Community financing will also be used for the survey and collection of existing terminological resources and the creation of multilingual terminological tools, including thesauri for information management, data banks and other computerised dictionaries.

The emphasis will also be on the promotion of practical applications of existing multilingual tools, especially for European industry.

The action plan is expected to cost about £2.17 m and will require the participation of everybody involved in multilingualism, including teachers, publishers, documentalists, computer specialists, translators, interpreters, terminologists and people responsible for industrial marketing.

PARLIAMENT: "Year of the family"

A declining population in Europe and falling birthrates mean that the European Community should do something to encourage family life, according to the European Parliament's Committee for Social Affairs and Employment.

In a recent report the committee applauded existing initiatives put forward by the European Commission, which, "despite the limited funds at their disposal", had introduced a number of programmes to benefit families. Among them were listed the campaign against poverty, the programme to help migrant workers and their families and a programme to help the handicapped.

But the limited and marginal nature of existing policies mean that they remain inadequate in the face of the need for a real "family policy", according to the committee.

The two main objectives of a European Community family policy would be firstly to identify the basic needs and secondly to encourage member states to adopt suitable policies at national level.

In addition, says the committee, the European Commission should launch a five-year action plan for 1983 - 1988, which would have certain priority aims, including the earmarking of funds from the Community budget for a family policy, the organisation of seminars to bring together representatives of employers, unions, family associations, and Members of Parliament, and a research programme to investigate aspects of family life, including sex education and the generation gap.

The action programme would get help from the European Social Fund and would concentrate on least-favoured groups such as migrant, one-parent and low income families.

A "Year of the Family" in the near future could win public support for the scheme, says the report, which was compiled by Italian Christian Democrat MEP Maria Cassanmagnago Cerretti.

BABY SEALS: Between the devil and the deep blue sea

Two meetings and 20 hours of tough negotiations have resulted in a European ministerial decision on what to do about the now notorious annual massacre of 187,000 Canadian baby seals.

At a meeting of the European Council in Brussels, ministers decided to recommend a ban on imports of baby seal skins until March 1, 1983, when a final decision on future import restrictions will be taken. The provisional measure is not binding on Community member states and gives them the option of whether or not to enforce any sort of ban.

The move, which is clearly a compromise to play for time, shows the dilemma in which ministers find themselves, caught between the devil of outraged European public opinion and the deep blue sea of not wishing to jeopardise relatively good Euro-Canadian relations.

A petition calling for a European import ban has already attracted 5 million signatures and the support of 90 percent of the European Parliament. But at least two Community member states, the United Kingdom and the Federal Republic of Germany, have important commercial links with Canada.

Britain is the Community's main importer and processor of baby seal skins and the industry provides hundreds of jobs. In the Federal Republic of Germany the deep sea fishing fleet relies heavily on Canadian waters for 14,000 t of cod caught under an EC-Canada fishing agreement that Ottawa has threatened to break if Europe's ban on baby seal skin imports goes through.

Either way, it looks as though European governments will be forced into some sort of fixed decision by March, which is when the new baby seal hunting season begins.

AID: Natural disaster aid granted

European aid worth more than £1.28 m has been channelled through the European Commission to help people affected by natural disasters in Europe.

About £860,000 went to help victims of the disastrous floods which hit 41 "departments" of south western France in November, affecting nearly 100,000 people.

The same storms hit Italy at about the same time and emergency aid from the Commission amounted to about £140,000.

An additional £280,000 has been given to Greenland, where shifting pack ice is affecting the traditional fishing lifestyle of nearly half the population.