

The comments made by Professor Ahmed Azad in respect of NCBT

Dhaka 3rd December. With a profound sense of pleasure, we post the comments made by Professor Ahmed Azad - the champion who has been spearheading the campaign for the enactment of NIB act by the Parliament granting it autonomy, sine qua non for all round development of an institute

1. The “NIB Act”: We share your elation that the “NIB Act” has been approved by Cabinet and it will soon be placed before Parliament. We congratulate the Project Director and the small number of current scientific staff for their hard work. However, some of the credit should also go to those GNOBB members who interceded with the State Minister, the Secretary and the Chair of the PSC of MOSICT, and on whose recommendation the “NIB Act” was placed before Cabinet. But has any GNOBB member, other than the Project Director”, had the privilege of seeing the “NIB Act”?

GNOBB members can not give any constructive suggestions, or in fact interact unless they know the contents of the “NIB Act”. The State Minister and the Secretary of MOSICT never said that the “NIB Act” is a secret document, and in fact the State Minister acted on it on the basis that it had the support of the Biotechnology community. The previous government document, the National Biotechnology Policy, was made public in 2006 and the Biotechnology community was invited to comment on it.

Suggestion 1: *We request the government to make the “NIB Act” available to the Biotechnology community, and also request the Moderator to kindly post it*

on the GNOBB website. This will allow GNOBB members to make useful and meaningful comments.

2. The “NIB Act” and the Aspirations of the Biotechnology Community: In response to the government’s National Biotechnology Policy, the Biotechnology community of Bangladesh (resident and expatriate), which includes all GNOBB members, prepared a Position Paper and a set of Recommendations that were formally presented to the GoB in April, 2007 and again this year. Four of the specific recommendations that refer directly to the NIB are shown below:

(iii). The existing National Institute of Biotechnology (NIB) in Savar would operate most efficiently as an autonomous "Research Flagship" of the National Commission for Biotechnology (NCBT)* with an internal research centre and would collaborate with external units (in universities and public and private research centres) spread across the country. The NIB, as the national resource and

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training centre, will play a complementary role with the NCBT in the development of biotechnology research in Bangladesh.

* (The fate of the proposed NCBT is still not resolved, and in view of the “NIB Act” the NIB needs to organise itself without the NCBT at this stage).

(iv). The internal centre of the NIB will consist of three sections: (a) Research

Section; (b) Major Equipment and Core Facilities Section; and (c) Technology Transfer and Commercial Applications Section. The Research Section will consist

of a number of Divisions covering different areas of Biotechnology (Agriculture, Health, Energy and Environment) with focused research objectives.

(v). The NIB will be the focal point for facilitating and supporting all research activities in modern biotechnology that are being carried out in different organisations in the country. The major equipment and core facilities and commercial expertise of the NIB should be accessible to all research groups involved in biotechnology research in Bangladesh.

(vi). An International Scientific Advisory Committee (ISAC) needs to be formed with expatriate and local experts to review the scientific, technological and innovative activities of the NIB, ensure that the Institute's scientific activities conform to international trends and practices and help secure financial support for

the NIB from international funding agencies.

Suggestion 2: *If the above recommendations, or some of them, have not been*

incorporated into the "NIB Act" then this needs to be done before it is tabled in

Parliament. That is only if there is a serious intention to transform the NIB into the premier Biotechnology institute in Bangladesh. It may not be too late to intercede through the Chair of the PSC of MOSICT.

3. NIB as the Focal Point and National Resource Centre for Biotechnology:

This

was the whole purpose for establishing the NIB. Currently there are a very small number of junior scientific staff and their activities are spread too thin to be effective. There is no high containment laboratory or a contained glass house for experiments with infectious agents or GMOs. Two of the most important areas, including Medical Biotechnology, are not even part of the scene in the current NIB which can, therefore, not qualify as a National Resource Centre.

Suggestion 3: *The government needs to provide adequate funding to hire sufficient number of trained personnel and to make the necessary infrastructural changes. It should immediately form an International Scientific*

Advisory Committee (ISAC), consisting of resident and expatriate experts, to

guide and monitor the development activities of the NIB.

4. Focus on National Priorities and Public-Private Partnerships: Because of the

lack of critical mass of trained scientific staff the NIB needs to confine its activities to areas of national priority and make the fruits of research available to

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the people through the government's preference for public-private partnerships (PPP). At the request of the Chairman of the PSC for MOSICT for some examples of PPP where the NIB could be involved, some GNOBB members

submitted the following:

(i). Production of Bio-Gas, Bio-Fertiliser and Bio-Fuels from animal and plant waste: The technology already exists within academic and government laboratories in Bangladesh and SMEs could be set up all through the country as a

partnerships between private sector and Local Governments with the help of the Ministries of Industry, SICT, Energy and Agriculture. The technology could be further improved by biotechnologists working in academic and government laboratories.

(ii). Development of high-yielding food crops resistant to infective agents, insects, drought, salinity and floods: Collaboration (short, medium and long-term projects) between NIB and associated academic research centres, various ministries of the government, and private-sector funding from the agri-biotech and seed companies.

(iii). Development of essential biopharmaceuticals and vaccines: Collaborations (short, medium and long-term projects) between NIB and associated biomedical laboratories, various government ministries, and private funding and infrastructure support from the pharmaceutical industry. This would also have an enormous export potential.

(iv). Bio-prospecting the unique flora and fauna for the discovery of new drugs, biological pesticides and bio-fuels: Collaboration (medium to long-term) between NIB and associated academic research laboratories, various ministries of the government, and private sector funding from pharmaceutical and energy industries.

(v). New Jute varieties with improved fibre quality and resistant to environmental stress: Collaboration (medium to long-term) between NIB, academic and government research laboratories, various Ministries of the Government, and private funding from the jute industry. This would also have enormous export potential.

Suggestion 4: Under the prevailing circumstances the NIB's best chance to have an impact on national development in the short term would be to focus on

one or more of the above R&D activities in collaboration with other academic

and research institutions and the private sector. The ISAC could provide necessary guidance if required.

By acting on and implementing the above suggestions the NIB could in the future become internationally competitive and the premier Biotechnology R&D centre in Bangladesh.