

Report from Bonn by Rainer Apel

Minister endorses maglev trains

German railway infrastructure projects, including the magnetically levitated train, are gaining speed.

I will go there and promote our best technology, and that's definitely the Transrapid," the German minister of research and technology declared before his March 1 departure to Seoul, where 300 German high-tech firms opened an industrial exhibit, Technoerma.

Riesenhuber's endorsement of the magnetically levitated Transrapid train leaves him somewhat at odds with Siemens and other producers of the already fully developed ICE, Germany's new high-speed train that can travel at 250-300 kilometers per hour based on electric traction. The Transrapid can travel at speeds of over 400 kilometers per hour.

The South Koreans want to build a 600-kilometer high-speed track for the route between Seoul and Pusan by the late 1990s. The German ICE is in a fierce competition against the French TGV and Japan's Shinkansen systems, both also operating on the principle of electric traction. The Germans give their system a good chance in that competition because it is technologically more advanced, and they are promising both the sale of the train and technological know-how to the Koreans.

What Riesenhuber said did not please the ICE lobby, but he did the right thing, because the Germans are the only ones on the world scene to have a maglev train system ready for mass production. The ICE, the TGV, and the Shinkansen are modern versions of 80-year-old technologies. The system of magnetic levitation is the railway technology of the future.

Before making his statement on

the eve of his trip to Seoul, Riesenhuber complained at a press conference in Bonn about the lack of political support for the Transrapid, which needs a longer-distance track to operate on; it has been confined to a tiny experimental track of only 22 kilometers in northwestern Germany. Riesenhuber said that, with more support from the cabinet and the Parliament, a track of at least 100-200 kilometers would already have been built where potential clients from abroad could see how well it performed.

Meanwhile, the ICE will begin transporting passengers in Germany on newly built, special tracks in June. Intercargo, an ICE version for freight transport at 160 kilometers per hour, which will run on the ICE tracks at night, will begin operation this fall.

Apart from South Korea, the German ICE producers are also negotiating with Turkey, the Soviet Union, Taiwan, the United States, Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Poland on joint railway projects. The ICE is becoming reality while the Transrapid is still being developed.

But the Transrapid genie is out of the bottle. The project of a maglev track that would connect the eastern parts of Germany with its geographical center (running from Berlin via Leipzig and Erfurt to Frankfurt), made in mid-February by the prime minister of Thuringia (one of the five eastern states of Germany) has already been taken up at the parliamentary level.

A Social Democratic member of Parliament, Rudi Walther, declared on Feb. 25 that the maglev should be given the highest priority because it

would cut the train travel time between Berlin and Frankfurt from 8 to 2.5 hours. Walther, the chairman of the budget committee of the parliament, commissioned a study on the projected costs and feasibility of such a track. The fact that an endorsement of the project came from the chairman of the traditionally fiscally conservative committee, raises hopes for the maglev technology. In late autumn, when the Ministry of Transportation is expected to present its plan for infrastructure development in Germany during the remainder of the 1990s, a project for an operational maglev track may well be included.

Another breakthrough occurred on railway development when, two weeks after the Feb. 13 agreements in Moscow on German credit guarantees for exports of industrial products to the Soviet Union, a DM 1.4 billion package was sealed in Frankfurt for rail materiel exports to the Soviet Union. The KfW Reconstruction Bank and Dresdner Bank extended the credit, with a grace period of three years, for the delivery of refrigerated railcars and rolling stock from the German Waggon Manufacturing Inc. in eastern Germany, to the Soviet State Railways.

This sale involves the sale of solid, old-fashioned rail material to the Soviets, something that dates from the pre-ICE era; but this deal opens the door for talks on joint German-Soviet infrastructure development projects that were discussed last summer, but were interrupted by the Gulf crisis.

In their joint declaration of Sept. 13, Germany and the Soviet Union stated an intent to "include the most highly-developed technologies in the transport sphere" in their envisaged, 20-year cooperation. A Transrapid train running from Berlin to Moscow, via Warsaw in the late 1990s? It is time to talk about that.