

Business Briefs

Rail

China Building New High-Speed Network

Sept. 21—China will complete its high-speed rail system by 2012, the Ministry of Railways announced on Sept. 10. Some routes of this 13,000 km network are already running. When the entire project is completed, it will link most of China's important cities, with travel times less than a quarter of those required today.

The network will consist of eight trunk lines, four north-to-south and four east-to-west, and 38 smaller lines.

Over half the track—8,000 km—will be designed to support trains which can run up to 350 km per hour, and the rest will carry trains that run 250 kph, Zhang Shuguang, chief engineer of the Chinese Academy of Railway Sciences, said at a conference in Chongqing. Zhang estimated that the system will be able to carry 7 billion passengers a year.

Belgium

Budget Minister Says Nation Near Bankruptcy

Sept. 24—In an interview with the Flemish Belgian newspaper *De Standaard* on Sept. 5, the Liberal Party's Federal Minister of the Budget, Guy Vanhengel, declared that, to solve the country's budget crisis, "everybody should make efforts. The banks as well as the health care system; the efforts we have to make are gigantic. If you looked at it as if you were looking at a company, Belgium is a state of virtual bankruptcy, except that public authorities cannot be put in such a situation. It's not 5 minutes before 12:00, but 5 minutes after 12:00. The longer we wait, the worse the situation becomes."

The four regions of Belgium (Flanders, Wallonia, the Greater Brussels region, and the German-speaking region) are "tied to the same rope as the mountain climbers of the overall federal Belgian government," said Vanhengel, who

charges that Belgium is being pressured by the European Union: "Europe sends us letters to tell us to take care that matters don't get out of hand."

Bank bailouts, rising unemployment, increased spending for an aging population, health care and unemployment compensation, a 7% drop of fiscal revenues, and a fall of GDP by 3.4% are all contributing to the debt spiral.

Belgian Socialist Laurette Onkelinx commented on the declaration, that "this is what the Liberal Party always wanted to do, to cut into health care and public services."

Space

NASA Vets Tour China's Manned-Flight Facility

Sept. 26—For the first time for any Americans, two senior former NASA astronauts toured China's manned space facilities yesterday. They will also be touring China's manned spacecraft launch site. The breakthrough has wide-ranging economic, diplomatic, political, scientific, and space-exploration policy implications.

A 2006 visit to China by former NASA Administrator Mike Griffin—a first—scrupulously avoided any mention of joint activity involving manned space flight. The Bush Administration did not want to indicate readiness for any such cooperation, and the Chinese were not ready to open their program to American scrutiny.

The recent visit, by Fred Gregory, a three-time Shuttle astronaut and former NASA Deputy Administrator, and Tom Hendricks, a veteran of four Shuttle flights, who is president of *Aviation Week* magazine, included discussions with five of the six Chinese astronauts who have flown in space, including the first, Yang Liwei, who is now in charge of astronaut training, and China's first spacewalker, Zhai Zhigang.

Aviation Week reports that technical discussions included China's plans for its next missions, involving the docking and rendezvous of two spacecraft.

Cooperation of the United States and China in manned space flight would dramatically increase global space exploration potential. After NASA retires the Space Shuttle, only the Russian Soyuz craft will be available to carry crew members to the International Space Station. Adding China's Shenzhou craft would increase crew access, and enable a back-up space transport capability.

Ireland

Fascist Lisbon Treaty Set for Second Defeat?

Sept. 28—Despite the corporatist campaign that for weeks has been hammering Irish voters to ratify the European Union's fascist, supranational Lisbon Treaty on Oct. 2, growing indications are of a "No" vote.

The *Irish Times* reports that citizens are enraged at their government for bailing out the banks. Polling of residents of a housing complex found only one voter who planned to support the referendum.

In the past week, Ireland's 20,000 taxi drivers have launched an intensive "No" mobilization, with bumper-stickers, leaflets, and posters.

Bloggers on the Irish web are pointing to an increasing number of people betting on the "No" votes on the PaddyPower bookmakers' website.

Polls conducted in early September, made by anti-Lisbon activists that were the only to have accurately forecast the "No" vote in the 2008 referendum, said that 51% of Irish voters would vote "No" and only 35% "Yes" this time.

The "No" campaign (CAEUC alliance) has been exposing the EU-sponsored mass austerity that is planned for after the Irish voters go to the polls.

EU officials say they have no plans for what to do if Ireland defeats the treaty again, since its own rules say that if any single country defeats it, it can't be implemented. Ireland already defeated it in 2008, but was arm-twisted by the EU to hold another referendum.