

## UK societies lobby against cut in school science curriculum

[LONDON] Ten of Britain's foremost professional science bodies have challenged the government to end speculation that it is thinking of reducing the time pupils spend studying science in the last two compulsory years of secondary school.

The challenge comes in a joint statement issued last week by a group of organizations that included the Royal Society, the Association for Science Education, and the Royal Academy of Engineering.

Britain's national curriculum, set up ten years ago, is currently being reviewed. One possible outcome is a reduction in the 20 per cent of curriculum time that most pupils aged between 14 and 16 spend studying science. Nigel Thomas, education manager at the Royal Society, says the statement is aimed at dissuading the government from adopting such a course of action.

## Minister pledges to boost Russian science spend

[MOSCOW] Valentina Matvienko, Russia's vice prime minister, promised last month that the government will "substantially increase" its financing of science and social needs in 1999. Speaking at a meeting in Moscow on 22 December, she said that the budget recently submitted to the State Duma (the lower house of the Russian parliament) proposed spending 80.6 billion rubles (US\$3.8 billion) on science and social needs.

This combined total represents an increase of 21.8 per cent on the amount formally allotted in 1998 — and is 73.9 per cent more than was actually spent. Fundamental science and new technologies receive 11.4 billion rubles, 2 per cent more than in 1998. But this amount is still only 2.0 per cent of the budget expenditure, whereas federal legislation requires that 4 per cent is spent on science.

## Indian scientists told to become trend-setters

[CHENNAI] Politics took precedence over science in the agenda of India's prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on 3 January when, after hurriedly inaugurating the Indian Science Congress at Chennai (formerly Madras), he immediately left to keep political engagements at Bangalore, failing to attend a traditional reception with delegates.

In a short speech, Vajpayee asked Indian scientists to become "trend-setters" focusing on high-quality work that would stand up to international scrutiny. He urged them to

work closely with the best institutions in the world, but added that they should be prepared to stand on their own feet "if any country tries to deny us the opportunities of legitimate scientific cooperation".

## Industrial research still soars upwards in US

[WASHINGTON] Research and development expenditure by private industry in the United States is set to surge by more than 9 per cent this year to a total of \$157 billion, according to an annual survey conducted by Battelle and *R&D Magazine*. The survey, which predicts industrial research trends by asking corporations about their plans and extrapolating the results to cover the entire US economy, says the federal government's spending on research and development will increase by only 2 per cent, to \$68 billion.

Because of heavy industrial investment, total US R&D spending as a percentage of gross domestic product rose from 2.4 per cent in 1994 to 2.6 per cent in 1998, according to government figures. The federal government's share of that — which was more than half as recently as 1980 — has now fallen to less than 30 per cent of the total. Industry's investment is mainly in applied research and development, however, and the government still supports most basic scientific research.

## South Africa ministry official stays on

[CAPE TOWN] Roger Jardine, who announced he was quitting as director-general of South Africa's Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology with effect from 31 December last year after a clash with his minister, Lionel Mtshali, has agreed to remain in office until May (see *Nature* 396, 298; 1998).

Jardine is thought to have been persuaded to stay on until the election, due in May, which is certain to be followed by a cabinet reshuffle. The presidential review commission has proposed combining the department's functions with those of others after the election.

## Solar observatory flies into yet more trouble

[WASHINGTON] Scientific observations with the recently recovered Solar and Heliospheric Observatory (SOHO) have been suspended after the last of three onboard gyros apparently failed late last month (see *Nature* 396, 399; 1998).

The gyro was used only occasionally, but was necessary for normal operation of SOHO's guidance system. Without it, the European-US spacecraft uses fuel at an excessive rate, according to Joseph Gurman

of NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, the US project scientist for SOHO.

Project managers hope to begin a temporary mode of operation that will allow most scientific observations to resume by the end of this month. Meanwhile, the European Space Agency is revising the spacecraft's guidance software, a permanent solution to the problem that could take several months.

## Sex discrimination suit at Lawrence Livermore

[SAN FRANCISCO] Six women are filing a class-action lawsuit claiming gender discrimination on behalf of more than 3,000 female workers at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in California.

The women allege that they have been systematically underpaid and under-promoted for decades at the lab, and say that they earn between \$1,000 and \$2,000 less per month than male counterparts. Their attorneys say back pay could average \$250,000 each. If the courts find in their favour, the laboratory could be forced to reimburse all the women it has employed. The laboratory is managed by the University of California's Board of Regents.

## Spacecraft heads off to take a dig at Mars

[WASHINGTON] The Mars Polar Lander blasted off from Cape Canaveral in Florida on Sunday (3 January), beginning its 11-month journey to become the first spacecraft to land near the edge of the planet's southern polar cap.

The lander is equipped with a robotic arm, which will dig one metre into the martian surface. Two microprobes will then conduct two days of soil and water experiments. The spacecraft is the second to be launched to Mars within three weeks.

## Alas, poor scientists, Shakespeare wins poll

[LONDON] Charles Darwin and Isaac Newton have failed to win the title of greatest Briton of the millennium in a national poll. More than 11,000 people chose William Shakespeare as 'Personality of the Millennium' from an all-male short-list drawn up by the BBC from votes cast in a poll of radio listeners.

Darwin and Newton polled fourth and fifth place, with even their combined votes failing to match those of Shakespeare. Prominent living scientists have been quick to express their dismay and question the high positions of other individuals short-listed, such as Winston Churchill and William Caxton, England's first printer. Michael Faraday and Alexander Fleming just failed to be short-listed.