

OLD WORLD

ESRO

Decisions in Principle

from a Correspondent

EUROPE took an essential step nearer transferring air traffic control links to space satellites at the end of last week. This is expected to enable ten times as much air traffic to cross the Atlantic as at the present busiest levels, and increase safety. The plan is a joint scheme with the US and decisions on European intentions and financing were taken at a two-day meeting of the Council of ESRO (European Space Research Organization) held at its technology centre in Holland. This follows 18 months of talks and negotiation with the Americans, culminating in a conference in Washington a month ago where decisions in principle were taken for a world wide aeronautical satellite network comprising at least three equally spaced satellites. Other states including Australia and Japan took part.

A "return match" meeting to clinch the project is scheduled for Madrid for early August.

Meantime, ESRO's council made a breakthrough last week in putting European space collaboration on useful satellites on a firm footing, covering other projects besides air traffic control. France, which threatened last winter to withdraw completely from the organization, is now securely back and is one of the European "big four" that will underwrite the new ESRO Space Applications Programme. Britain, Germany and Italy are the others. These countries have agreed together to fund \$70 million per year as a minimum for application satellites from 1974 till 1980. In the interim period, these countries have undertaken to provide between them \$27 million (1972) and \$53 million in 1973 to get the application programme started. The other six member countries are to contribute to whatever applications satellite they fancy "à la carte". The big four will support all of them. As at present envisaged this will be apart from the air traffic control project, the TV and telephone communications satellite scheme for Europe, and a meteorological satellite system.

To include space applications in its activities requires the original ESRO convention to be rewritten; this has been put in hand through a working party due to report by the end of 1971. The applications work is extra to the scientific programme, now committed at about \$30 million a year.

Officials see in last week's agreement and amiable atmosphere a solution to the perennial difficulties of European

space collaboration. It was probably significant that the ESRO council's discussion was able to complete its business without getting involved in any way with the controversial matter of space launchers and particularly the post Apollo programme that has acted as a spanner in the works of the Ministers' European Space Conference for the past 18 months. A lengthy communiqué was issued at the end of the meeting outlining the seven heads of agreement.

MRC

More Revelations

AS well as providing a detailed account of how Britain's largest medical research organization spends its money, the annual report of the Medical Research Council is rapidly becoming a good read in its own right. The report for 1970-71, published last week (HMSO, 85p), describes the overall pattern of research sponsored by the council in its own establishments and elsewhere, but there is also the third in a series of articles through which the MRC seeks to make plain the rationale underlying the organization of its research programme. Last year, the relationship between council policy and the universities came under scrutiny (see *Nature*, 227, 322 and 324; 1971); this year it is the turn of the council's own research units and establishments. By way of bonus there is the text of the MRC evidence to the committee on privacy. The report is about 40 per cent longer than last year's; the price, however, has almost doubled.

The council seems to be expanding its new found policy of letting its customers into the kitchen. In addition to the account of its own establishments, this year's report includes a section which seeks to trace the development of MRC policy with respect to research; in other words, a brief guide to the research topics which the council is currently eager to support. Chief amongst these are mental health, drug dependence, population control and arterial disease. Similarly, the MRC is anxious to encourage and increase the number of active researchers in psychiatry, clinical neurology, obstetrics and gynaecology, dermatology, clinical pharmacology, dentistry, mycology and epidemiology.

In 1970-71, the MRC spent £22,657,537, 92.6 per cent of which came from the Parliamentary grant-in-aid. Plainly, inflation is more than keeping pace with the council's economists, however, for the total income includes a supplementary grant of £1,385,000 to meet the cost of unbudgeted salary increases awarded to

the staff during the year. The table shows how the cost to the government of supporting the MRC has risen since 1966-67. Nevertheless, the council seems to occupy a favoured position in the government's financial scale, for with an increase in support of almost £4 million, equal to 7.5 per cent in real terms, the council is clearly holding its own where other organizations must finger nervously their purse strings.

The council claims that in implementing its research policies it "prefers where possible to work through the universities", but nevertheless the lion's share of its funds remains earmarked for its own establishments. The largest of these, the National Institute for Medical Research, took £2,735,721 in 1970-71 and its clinical counterpart, the Clinical Research Centre, claimed £2,029,310. Between them, the other 76 research units accounted for £9,936,784, while in contrast, research grants for work done in hospitals or in the universities amounted to only £4,831,365, 22.9 per cent of total expenditure. This sum represents an unprecedented increase of 42.3 per cent over the amount awarded in the previous year, a consequence, no doubt, of the surge of grant applications from university scientists unable to obtain support from their more usual sources.

There is no clear sign that the council intends to divert very much more of the funds in its gift towards research in the universities, a policy which is only partly explained by the reasons it has set out to justify supporting research in its own establishments. These are of three kinds, the

COMPUTERS

Hungary Looks Ahead

COMPUTERIZATION and the training of computer specialists feature prominently in the new (fourth) five-year plan in Hungary. The actual operation of the plan itself will involve more than 300 computers, a large proportion of which will be imported from other Comecon countries. During the next five years some 20,000 computer specialists are to be trained. A special educational centre is to be built, equipped with closed-circuit television, and consisting of at least twenty or thirty lecture halls, classrooms, laboratories, mechanical workshops and a central programming point. A ten-storey hostel block to serve the centre will also be built. By using prefabricated units it is hoped to complete the computer training centre by 1973.