

Uncertainty over leukaemia link to nuclear reactor

[MUNICH] German scientists and politicians last week challenged a study commissioned by a local citizens' group into the north German nuclear reactor 'Krümmel' which concluded that radioactive emissions are the likely cause of a series of leukaemia cases.

Since 1989, 21 leukaemia cases have occurred near Krümmel, and three children have died. A new study carried out by Inge Schmitz-Feuerhake, a physicist at the University of Bremen, found Americium 241, a daughter product of plutonium, in dust samples collected near Krümmel.

Schmitz-Feuerhake argues that emissions from the reactor are the only possible cause of the contamination. But experts at the University of Bremen and the National Research Centre for Environment and Health in Munich say that, since Americium 241 is in the fallout from nuclear weapon tests, it can be detected almost everywhere.

Japan will help to combat air pollution in China

[TOKYO] Japan and China are to collaborate in projects to tackle environmental problems in

China. Projects mooted include developing alternative energy use and curbing greenhouse-gas emissions in urban areas, according to a joint communiqué released by the governments during last week's visit to Japan by Jiang Zemin, the Chinese president.

Japan will help to develop Dalian, Guiyang and Chongqing into "models cities" by applying anti-pollution technologies, setting up programmes to improve energy efficiency and supervising training schemes for energy policy-making. China has indicated its intention to participate in the preliminary activities of the Acid Deposition Monitoring Network in East Asia, a programme chaired by Japan's Environment Agency.

Donation funds German computing centre

[MUNICH] A new institute for computer sciences is to be established next year in Potsdam, east Germany, with the help of a personal donation of DM100 million (US\$59 million) from Hasso Plattner, the head of SAP, Germany's most successful software company. This is the largest private contribution to university education ever made in Germany, where private university funding has little tradition.

The Hasso Plattner Institute will offer bachelor and masters courses in software

systems engineering to 100 advanced informatics students at the University of Potsdam. The state government of Brandenburg, where Potsdam is located, hopes that money from the European Union's 'structural funds' will provide most of the estimated DM40 million construction costs of a new building for the institute.

Moscow plans to boost jobs in science towns

[MOSCOW] The authorities of Moscow district — a vast territory around the Russian capital which excludes Moscow itself — have adopted a programme to support the 24 'scientific towns' in the territory. The scientific organizations which are at the heart of the towns belong to the state, but the federal budget fails to finance them fully.

"The level of unemployment in our scientific towns is two to three times the average for the district," says Alexei Vorontsov, deputy head of the Moscow district administration.

UK systematics report highlights priorities

[LONDON] The first complete assessment of the United Kingdom's natural history collections and expertise in systematics and

biodiversity was launched this week by the UK Systematics Forum.

The report, *The Web of Life*, seeks to focus research on three areas of high priority: description and documentation of biological diversity, the development of classification systems, and the organization of results. Launching the report, the Natural History Museum in London described the British collection of more than 100 million specimens as “a resource unrivalled in its scientific and historical importance”.

Societies look at effects of Scottish devolution

[LONDON] **The Royal Society and the Royal Society of Edinburgh are to conduct a joint study of the implications for science of the new Scottish parliament. A working group of the two societies, chaired by Geoffrey Boulton, provost and dean of science and engineering at the University of Edinburgh, will issue a report just after the first elections to the parliament are held on 6 May.**

The parliament will devise a committee structure and, scientists hope, a means of obtaining appropriate scientific and technical advice. Although it will not have jurisdiction over the UK research councils, which fund most scientific research in Scotland, it will control general university

funding and various research-reliant government functions, including agriculture, industry and fisheries.

NASA satellite to study how a star is born

[WASHINGTON] A two-year NASA mission to study star formation in interstellar clouds was due to get under way this week.

Launched by a Pegasus rocket into orbit 600 kilometres above the Earth, the Submillimeter Wave Astronomy Satellite (SWAS) has been planned to observe the spectra of hundreds of interstellar clouds containing water, molecular oxygen, atomic carbon, and carbon monoxide.

Observations in the satellite's sensitivity range from 487 to 556 gigahertz are not possible from the ground because of interference from the Earth's atmosphere.

Brussels names advisers for Framework projects

[MUNICH] **The European Commission last week appointed 278 experts as members of 17 independent advisory groups, to provide advice on the content and direction of research financed under the fifth Framework programme of research.**

The members were selected from among

5,000 proposed candidates. More than one quarter of the selected experts are women, although only ten per cent of the candidates were female. Most members of the advisory groups are academic researchers, and one third come from industry.

Computer game star is science 'ambassador'



[LONDON] Lara Croft (left), the larger-than-life star of the UK-designed computer game “Tomb Raider”, has won surprising endorsement from the science minister, Lord Sainsbury, as an “ambassador” for British scientific excellence.

Speaking this week on science and the knowledge economy, Sainsbury argued that Britain should be promoting its contemporary high-tech achievements as much as those of the past. “I want people, when they think of this country, to think of such scientific achievements as Thrust, the first supersonic car, rather than Stephenson or Faraday,” Sainsbury said.