IN BRIEF

USSR space set-back

The cancellation this week of the *Soyuz 25/Salyut 6* link-up is a serious set-back to the Soviet space-programme and a blow to its prestige, especially as some major exploit to mark the 60th anniversary of the October Revolution was widely expected. It also stresses, once again, the great reliance placed by Soviet planners on automatic control even of manned spacecraft. According to the Tass announcement, the two craft were automatically brought close together, and then a docking operation was carried out from 20 metres. "Deviations from the planned docking regime" led to the decision to abort the mission.

Antarctic meeting

The main achievement of the Antarctic Treaty meeting, which ended in London last weekend, was to agree on interim arrangements for conserving marine living resources. Details were not immediately available but the drift of the discussions has been clear.

First the agreement is voluntary. Second it looks at this stage as if it will be confined to restraints on catch quotas of krill and the exchange of statistics. The agreement can only be temporary because West Germany, which has been active in the field, is not a signatory of the Treaty.

The Treaty powers have also agreed to extend their voluntary moratorium on minerals exploration and exploita-

tion. Experts attending the meeting think that it will be at least five years before enough scientific data has been accumulated to assess the likely environmental effects of any exploration and exploitation.

Telescope agreements

ESA is to contribute a faint-object camera and a solar array to NASA's Space Telescope programme under an agreement signed last weekend. The telescope is due for launch in 1983.

Progress has also been made in the Dutch-American Infra-red Astronomical Satellite (IRAS) project with the award last week of a contract for construction of the satellite by the NIVR in Holland.

EVEN the sophisticated generally believe what they hear on the radio, or see on television. A few days ago these media prominently featured a report by the UK Department of the Environment which apparently dealt with the world's future. Listeners or viewers (I was both) received the impression that a group of economists and scientists had engaged in a complicated and detailed exercise, using sophisticated mathematical models and advanced computers, and after years of hard grind had come up with the conclusion that if the world's population continued to grow exponentially at something approaching 3%, in fifty or more years the forebodings of Malthus, first put forward nearly two hundred years ago, would be realised, and mass starvation would overtake mankind. Other shortages, including that of energy, would be less serious.

My reaction was that here was yet another expensive and pointless exercise, over-supported by government funds, discovering something which was obvious to anyone with a little knowledge of these problems. We have seen many such useless exercises in the past, the most notorious being a Cabinet Office report on Energy; this was obviously just another example of governmental irresponsibility wasting the taxpayers' money.

Before expressing this view, however, I waited until the next day, expecting to find a fuller summary in the serious daily press. I found no mention in the *London Times*, the *Financial Times*, the *Guardian* or the *Daily Telegraph*. I did not consult the tabloids. Now I've received the volume which stimulated the radio and television but did not interest the newspapers. It is Research Report 19 from the Systems Analysis Research Unit

(SARU) of the UK Departments of the Environment and Transport, and is called "Sarum 76: Global Modelling Project". It extends to some 230

Model report

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pages, and as it costs no less than £15, is not expected to have a mass circulation.

My reactions to the document are quite different to those stimulated by the radio. It is no facile statement of the obvious. I assume that it did not interest the newspapers because it draws no conclusions, contains no pithy summary forecasting doom, but is a serious and careful study, adding another useful volume to the series of reports from these two government departments.

The writers of Sarum 76 (anonymously, only the Director's name appears) have got together an immense amount of information about

world incomes, populations and their changes, energy, renewable and non-renewable resources and agricultural productivity. The figures and tables alone make the volume worth its inflated price. The team has produced a sophisticated mathematical model which, if you think modelling is worthwhile, is itself a model (in another meaning of this over-used word) for this type of study, and it will clearly be useful for others with similar interests.

The report shows that Sarum 76 can be used to test many reasonable assumptions for the effects of any number of permutations and combinations of the changes in population, productivity, climatic conditions and all the other known factors which may affect our future. It makes no claims to foretell the future, and admits that this is not the ultimate, perfect model for this purpose. There is indeed a figure, reminiscent of some in *Limits to Growth*, which shows that if the world population grows at 2.27% a year, food supplies per head could increase for fifty years and then fall rapidly, but this should be seen in the context of many other possible forecasts.

We are now wedded to acronyms, but where those have existing meanings they should be used with care. ASH is undoubtedly suitable for Action on Smoking and Health, but in England Sarum is the old name for the city of Salisbury, and our Established Church adopted the Sarum Liturgy in 1542. Its use brought back to my mind a limerick—in England, incidentally, Hampshire is commonly abbreviated to Hants:

There was a young curate of Salisbury
Who used to be most harum-scalisbury
He went through Hampshire
Without any pampshire
'till his bishop said he must walisbury