

NEWS IN BRIEF

Europe's biotechnology programme one step nearer

THE European Commission has approved the £16 million, five-year research programme on biotechnology described recently in *Nature* (10 January, page 125). But the programme still has one hurdle to jump before it can be implemented: the Council of Ministers, where the nine EEC member states take final control over Commission proposals.

The Council will take advice from CREST, the Commission's official joint consultative committee for science and technology, in February; and from the European Parliament early in March. If there were no national objections, the programme could be approved in April.

IAEA to hold closed nuclear safety conference

THE International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna has organised an international conference on current nuclear plant safety issues to be held in Stockholm 20-24 October 1980. Reinhard Schmidt, scientific coordinator of the conference describes it as being within "the framework of those who want and need nuclear power". The conference hopes to address four main issues: assessment of current safety issues, improvements in safety, information exchanges, and development of increased national cooperation. Plenary sessions will be held with "exclusively invited papers" and conference participation "whether or not a paper will be presented must be through designation by the government of a member state of the IAEA". The meeting is expected to be open to the Press although a final decision has not been taken on this yet.

Academy report calls for orderly energy transition

A panel of the US National Academy of Sciences stated last week that both a significant increase in energy efficiency, and the development of new sources of energy — including the fast breeder nuclear reactor — were necessary to make an "orderly and smooth" transition to a coming era of energy scarcity.

The report, prepared by an *ad hoc* Committee on Nuclear and Alternative Energy Systems (CONAES) under a commission from the Department of Energy, emphasised in particular the importance of energy demand considerations in planning future energy supplies.

In a covering letter submitting the report to the department, the two co-chairman, Dr Harvey Brooks of Harvard University

and Dr Edward L Ginzton of Varian Associated, emphasise the importance of remembering that the energy problem does not arise from an overall physical shortage of resources.

"The problem is effecting a socially acceptable and smooth transition from gradually depleting resources of oil and natural gas to new technologies whose potential are not now fully developed and whose costs are generally unpredictable", they say.

The report also warns that current uncertainty about the problem associated with the development of nuclear fusion as a source of power means that it cannot be relied upon as a source of energy, at least not until well into the next century.

New head for US Atmospheric Research Center

DR Robert M White, for many years head of the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and its predecessor organisations, has been appointed president of the University Corporation for Atmospheric Research, responsible for operating the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, under the sponsorship of the National Science Foundation.

Dr White, who will succeed Dr Francis Bretherton as the full-time chief executive of UCAR, is currently administrator of the National Academy of Sciences' National Research Council. He has served as the US permanent representative to the World Meteorological Organisation since 1963, and was chairman of the WMO's world climate conference, held in Geneva in February last year. Dr Bretherton has relinquished his position in order to return full-time to scientific research.

Defector details NATO first nuclear strike plans

THE former senior secretary to the director of war games at NATO's Brussels headquarters said last week that NATO leadership planned to make first use of nuclear weapons in the event of a conflict with Eastern Europe. Ursel Lorenzen, who defected to East Germany last year, told a press conference in Berlin that NATO also had detailed plans to start a war by provoking major incidents such as blocking Eastern European shipping lanes or activating remote controlled mines in international waters. Ms Lorenzen, aged 41, said that for 11 years she had watched the planning and development of strategies to start a war with a rapid nuclear strike against East European nuclear targets. "I

was present countless times when high NATO officials and military men confirmed that NATO most certainly in every case would use atomic weapons first" she said. In addition she said that NATO carried out occupation and invasion exercises under simulated Russian winter conditions and that NATO officials had told her that they were drawing on the World War II experience of the Germans. Small NATO member states such as Norway and Denmark who objected to the nuclear strike plans were overruled by the bigger countries, she said.

French police break up researchers protest

A 24 hour occupation of the headquarters of the French national institute of health and medical research (INSERM) by medical researchers was broken up by police at the request of the directors of INSERM last week. Four hundred members of the trade unions representing French medical researchers occupied the headquarters to protest about the government's changes in the status of researchers in INSERM and the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). The unions called recourse to police action an "illustration of the determination of the institute's director as well as the minister of health and the secretary of state for research not to negotiate". The sensitive points in the new statutes include introduction of a new four year probationary period, a lowering of the maximum age for entry into the profession to 27 years old, and forced mobility at the discretion of research directors.

United Nations University delegation visits USSR

A top level delegation from the UN university visited the USSR from 6 to 11 January at the invitation of Academician D M Gvishiani, vice-Chairman of the State Committee of the USSR for Science and Technology. The purpose of the visit was to establish increased cooperation between the USSR and the university. Talks were described as "productive" but no formal agreements have been finalised. A similar visit to China last May resulted in the creation of two joint research projects in areas of the university's strength — one a study of land-water interaction in the Pearl River basin in China, the other a remote sensing project in the Netherlands — as well as the placing of Chinese scientists for limited periods in western research institutes and universities. "I think we can expect a similar outcome of this visit" a UN official said.