

NEWS IN BRIEF

US urged to spend more on space manufacturing research

UNLESS the US substantially increases the resources that it devotes to research on manufacturing techniques in space, it could see its national pre-eminence in space activities lost to the Soviet Union and Western European countries, according to a report published by the General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of the US Congress.

The report suggests that the federal government develop a plan for broad collaboration with private industry for research into ways of producing substances such as alloys, crystals, semiconductors, and high purity medicines and vaccines in a space environment. Private industry on its own "cannot be expected to risk high, long-term investments at the present stage of research," the GAO says.

The federal government should be spending two to three times the \$20 million currently included in the budget for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to support such research if it is to retain parity with other industrialised nations, the report says.

Three Mile Island birth defects

OFFICIALS of the Pennsylvania Department of Health confirmed last week that in the last nine months of 1979 13 hypothyroid babies were born in three neighbouring counties compared to an expected number of three such births. The odds against such an event occurring by chance are less than one in 10^5 . Thyroid problems including hypothyroidism are known to be associated with exposure to I^{131} an isotope released into the atmosphere during the Three Mile Island accident. Officials said that likelier explanations than radiation exposure could account for the increase but that the timing was "peculiar and curious".

Supreme Court blow to campus unions

THE US Supreme Court dealt a damaging blow to attempts to unionise university faculty members when it ruled last week that an academic's involvement in managerial and administrative activities made him or her ineligible for collective-bargaining protection under federal labour law.

The Supreme Court's judgement was made on a case brought on behalf of the faculty of the Yeshiva University in New York City, by the National Labour Protection Board, which had argued that nothing in their responsibilities as educators precluded faculty members from

attempting to resolve concerns about the terms and conditions of employment through collective bargaining.

In a five to four decision, the Supreme Court ruled against the NLPB that because universities had to rely on faculty members to participate in making and implementing decisions, for example over course content or the appointment of new faculty members, they were not entitled to the protection offered to industrial workers.

At present, 80 private universities have agreed contracts negotiated through collective bargaining. The court's decision means that in future university officials may be able to refuse to bargain with faculty unions.

French government starts troubled reactors

THE French Minister of Industry, Andre Giraud, authorised last week the start-up of the troubled French reactors, Gravelines I and Tricastin I. Instruments to monitor the growth of cracks 6mm deep and 7-8mm long in the tubular base plates of the primary circuit heat exchanger have been put in place and the ministry considers that the safety of the reactors is assured.

Dutch aerosol propellants ban imminent

DUTCH authorities expect to ban the use of chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) for aerosol propellants from the end of 1981, the Minister of Public Health and Environment, Dr Ginjaar, has said in reaction to reports from the American National Academy of Sciences (*Nature* 3 January, page 2). The member countries of the European Economic Community (EEC) agreed last year to a 30% reduction in propellant use by 1982. Next year the countries will review the position, and if a total ban is not agreed, the Netherlands will do it alone, possibly followed by West Germany.

According to Dr Ginjaar, only these two countries favour more stringent controls. In the Netherlands the use of CFCs as aerosol propellants have decreased by 30% already, and the authorities are now preparing a complete ban on non-essential uses. **Casper Schuurings**

Information withheld on nuclear waste shipments

KEEPING to the government's nuclear information policy of "no news is good news" (*Nature*, 13 December 1979 page 665), the UK Minister of Transport has refused to produce the names of towns and cities through which nuclear waste is regularly transported by rail. Mr Jack Ashley, MP (Labour, Stoke-on-Trent) received a reply to a parliamentary

question from Mr Kenneth Clark, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Transport, stating that the names were being withheld because "it would not be appropriate", to give them. Ashley was told, however, that regular nuclear waste shipments do pass through Stoke-on-Trent.

Nuclear waste transport has been a target for public protest in recent weeks (17 January page 238) causing some official discomfort. At a recent press conference held jointly by the Central Electricity Generating Board and British Rail to explain their position on the shipment of nuclear waste through London, it was revealed that an anti-nuclear campaign plan to stop one of the trains by civil disobedience may have been defeated by information provided by an informer. When asked to elaborate at a later time on the possibility that the CEBG had "its own moles" in the anti-nuclear movement, a CEBG official told *Nature* that the remark was "a light hearted aside" but added that citizens should tell police about wrong doings since "in this country we trust the authorities".

South Africa maintains nuclear weapons capability

A REPORT issued last week* claims that South Africa has developed and maintains a nuclear weapons capability "in order to preserve apartheid in the face of the changing balance of power in southern Africa". Based on a detailed study of South Africa's uranium producing facilities, the report claims that a pilot plant located at Valindaba has the facilities to produce uranium oxide, uranium hexafluoride and enriched uranium. Estimates of plant output since 1975 show that South Africa has accumulated enough enriched uranium to make 4 Hiroshima sized bombs or 12 smaller devices in the 4 kiloton range. Delivery systems would be South Africa's British made Buccaneer and Canberra jets.

In the meantime, confusion exists about responsibility for what is thought to have been a nuclear explosion off the Cape of Good Hope on 22 September 1979. According to information released by the CIA the explosion has been identified from three independent instruments — the radio telescope in Arecibo, Puerto Rico and two independent observations from the Vela spy satellite. The CIA attributes the bomb to South Africa but a book authored by two Israelis published last week claims that the bomb was an Israeli device exploded with South African facilities.

*South Africa's Nuclear Capability by Dan Smith. *World Campaign against Military and Nuclear Collaboration with South Africa*. 89 Charlotte Street London W1P 2DQ