

Norway's Arctic diplomatic fix

Poles' defection in Spitsbergen casts shadow

The two Polish scientists who defected last month from the Polish geophysical station at Hornsund (Spitsbergen) have created a delicate diplomatic problem for their Norwegian hosts and something of a crisis for Norwegian Arctic research.

Although sovereignty over Svalbard (the island group of which Spitsbergen forms part) was granted to Norway by international treaty in 1920, by the same treaty Norway undertook that the nationals of the signatory countries (of whom, with later accessions, there are now 41) should be treated on an equal footing with regard to economic activities.

The Soviet Union thus has two coal-mining bases, one near Barentsburg and another at Pyramiden. Similarly, under a memorandum from the Norwegian government to the other signatory states, foreign expeditions have free access to carry out scientific research in Svalbard as well as free access to the information on the islands held by the Norwegian Polar Research Institute.

The Polish research base at Hornsund is staffed by a team of 10 scientists from the Institute of Geophysics of the Polish Academy of Sciences. The research programme includes geological, geophysical, glaciological and meteorological work. A relief expedition, consisting of the 1982-83 scientific team plus a group of technicians to carry out routine maintenance work at the station sailed from Gdynia in July.

On 10 August, two of the scientists (it is not clear whether from the incoming or outgoing teams) decided to ask for political asylum, and radioed the Norwegian *Sysselman* (governor), announcing their intention to report in person to file their applications at the administrative base at Longyearbyen.

This transmission was, however, picked up by the Soviet Union's mining post at Barentsburg, which sent a helicopter to intercept the two Poles who were repeatedly "buzzed". One was driven back to base while the other fled into the hills and returned to Hornsund next day.

When the *Sysselman* heard what had happened, he sent out in his own helicopter to pick up the two would-be refugees; the Soviets, however, realized what was happening and sent their own helicopter to try and reach them first. In the words of one Norwegian official, *Sysselman* won the race, confirmed that the two men still wanted political asylum and took them back with him for questioning to Long-

yearbyen, whence they were dispatched to Oslo for "safe keeping". Their requests for asylum are now being processed; their identities are for the moment being kept confidential.

A number of diplomatic questions remain to be clarified. Military activity on the islands is strictly forbidden under the Svalbard Treaty of 1920; and it could be argued that the Soviet use of their helicopter in what can only be called a third-party police action could be construed as a breach of this agreement.

Furthermore, the Soviet helicopters are supposed to ply only between Barentsburg, Pyramiden and Longyearbyen, while some 44 per cent of Svalbard (including South Spitsbergen, where Hornsund is situated) comes under nature protection orders, where any technological encroachments, including motorized vehicles, are forbidden. Noise harassment of geese and other aquatic birds during the moulting season is particularly hazardous since it can scatter flocks and separate the young prematurely from their parents.

So far, the Norwegian Foreign Office seems concerned to keep the whole incident low-key. For their part, the Soviets can have little wish to fall foul of the Norwegian environmentalists. The Soviet Union extracts some 400,000 tonnes of coal



from Svalbard each year.

At Barentsburg, however, the reserves covered by the Soviet claims patent are almost exhausted, and output is now maintained only on the basis of a leasing agreement with the Norwegian mining company which owns the adjacent areas. A Norwegian Royal Decree of 1971 stipulates that no new mining, oil drilling or other industrial operations can be initiated without a thorough preliminary study of possible environmental consequences.

Vera Rich

Two Soviets banned from Perth

Canberra

The Australian government refused two Soviet scientists visas to attend the 12th International Congress of Biochemistry in Perth on 15-21 August, organized by the Australian Academy of Science under the aegis of the International Union of Biochemistry (IUB). The scientists are Professor Y.A. Ovchinnikov, vice-president of the Soviet Academy of Sciences who was to deliver a plenary lecture, and Professor S.S. Debov, also a member of the academy. Taking umbrage, the other 25 Soviet registrants boycotted the congress. It now appears that the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) may ban Australia as a venue for international conferences at its meeting on 12 September.

The Soviets singled out for exclusion were regarded by the Australian embassy in Moscow as government men rather than scientists. Consequently the banning is consistent with government policy of not allowing high-ranking Soviets into the country. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the government announced a package of sanctions against the Soviet Union, after a cabinet decision in January 1980. These moves included the suspension of a bilateral scientific and technological agreement signed in 1975, and the banning of mutual visits by

ministers and senior officials. A cooperative expedition on a Soviet research ship was called off, Soviet scientists in Mount Stromlo Observatory were sent packing, student scholarships to the Soviet Union were cancelled and visas refused to Soviet agricultural officials. In addition universities were advised to suspend academic exchanges but not multilateral conferences.

After these events, the Australian Academy of Science found itself in the invidious position of having to provide IUB with an assurance that no scientists would be barred. It sought from the government a "form of words" considered to be acceptable to IUB — "bona fide scientists from all countries will be admitted to Australia to attend the conference subject to the normal rules and requirements for visitor entry to Australia in operation at that time." But the then minister for immigration, Mr Ian MacPhee, wrote to the then foreign secretary of the academy, Professor Gordon Ada, in June 1980 — "I should stress that if this form of words is used, it must be understood by the academy that the normal rules in operation at the time of any conference might well exclude a particular scientist, a group of scientists or scientists of a particular nationality. I could not forecast what would be normal in say 12 months or 3 years time."