

West German space research

Hermes causes sacking and cabinet unrest

Hamburg

A row over the West German space programme has resulted in the sacking of the head of the Department for Space Affairs, Aeronautics and Traffic Research. Wolfgang Finke, a Social Democrat, was removed from the post he has held for 13 years by the Minister of Research and Technology, Heinz Riesenhuber, a Christian Democrat, last week.

The two have disagreed over almost everything: Riesenhuber accused Finke of not having done enough for the ocean research programme; Finke in turn opposed his boss's decision to cut traffic research. But the crucial point of their disagreement reflects a political quarrel within the coalition cabinet over West German participation in European space programmes and, in particular, over participation in the French Hermes space shuttle project.

Like some ministers, Finke has fought for "stronger engagement for an independent European space potential that represents our political importance, our economic capacity, and technical knowledge".

Riesenhuber, however, is against a European space adventure. He has already agreed to cooperate in the construction of the Ariane 5 rocket, under French management, and to join with the United States to build the space station Columbus, at a cost for West Germany of DM 4 million. But two years ago he rejected France's offer of a share in the development of Hermes because of doubts over costs.

The French estimate of a total cost of DM 6,600 million was referred to as "total nonsense" by the minister, who considers that the worldwide satellite system necessary for the control and supervision of the space shuttle will alone cost at least DM 6,600 million. And he is very much aware of the words of Gerhard Stoltenberg, Minister of Finance, who announced to the cabinet in June last year that there was to be no money for Hermes or similar big projects. Before he is willing to reconsider his position, Riesenhuber wants a more realistic calculation of the likely costs.

On the other hand, Chancellor Helmut Kohl, another Christian Democrat, supports cooperation with France in general, and Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher, of the Free Democrats, is urging his colleagues to back Hermes. The two — among others — have been influenced by a report published last week by the Research Institute for Foreign Policy, in which support is demanded for both

Hermes and a European space station. One of the authors of the paper is none other than fired Wolfgang Finke. It appears that Finke had told Kohl that he had his chief's support for the report — without the latter's knowledge. Riesenhuber thus had no choice but to sack him.

On balance there remains lukewarm support for the Hermes project within the cabinet. But questions over real costs and the extent of French domination of the project will need to be answered before any real commitment is forthcoming. **Jürgen Neffe**

Hermes limps on to ESA's agenda

WEST Germany gave a grudging commitment last week to go ahead with "preparatory studies" for a possible European space shuttle, Hermes, despite the sacking of the official responsible for coordinating Germany's space policy (see above).

However, the agreement last week by all 13 member states of the European Space Agency (ESA) that Hermes, so far only a French project, should be thus "Europeanized", falls far short of a total commitment to build a shuttle.

No money has yet been committed, but in three months, at the October meeting in Paris of the ESA council, states will be expected to make a declaration of what share they will take of a 48-million-ECU (European Currency Unit) nine-month detailed analysis of the real costs, benefits and likely technical problems of building Hermes.

ESA officials believe that the commitments made in October to this £32-million preparatory programme should be a "good indication" of likely future national involvement in the full construction of the space plane. However, a spokesman for the West German research ministry, BMFT, took time off from a European technology conference in London on Monday to say that German estimates of the true cost of Hermes were "five to six times" the £1,500 million or so suggested by the French. Moreover, the spokesman said, the German research minister, Heinz Riesenhuber, had told his British opposite number, Geoffrey Pattie, that Germany backed the British alternative project, "Hotol", a project for a horizontal take-off, partly air-breathing space-plane. "Hermes is old technology", the spokesman said. "Hotol is the future".

Robert Walgate

Biotechnology

UNIDO centre taking shape

An international biotechnology centre for the developing countries came a step closer to realization last week with the appointment of its first director. Professor Irwin Gunsalus, emeritus professor at the University of Illinois, was chosen to head the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (ICGEB) at a meeting organized by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO).

Five years have passed since the idea of a centre to bring the benefits of biotechnology to the developing countries was first proposed. During that time, many scientists, recognizing that there is a void in knowledge of molecular genetics and recombinant DNA technology in these countries, have given the centre their blessing. Now, UNIDO has provided funding to employ Gunsalus for three years, during which time he will recruit the scientists and technical staff needed to make the centre operational. He will also have to try to raise funds for the centre, which is not expected to be easy.

Italy has so far been generous in supporting the scheme and one of the centre's two branches is planned for Trieste. The other is to go to New Delhi. Rapid progress is unlikely, for almost all of the 37 countries that have signed up to support the centre are from the developing regions of Africa, South America, the Caribbean and Asia and are not easily able to provide money. The major industrial European countries, the United States and Japan have yet to support the centre and may well not do so until they have a chance of seeing how successful it will be.

Control of the centre is intended to remain within the developing countries so they can be confident that it is not just a route by which their best researchers can vanish to the advanced nations. Indeed, it is hoped that the flow will be in the opposite direction, with researchers from the advanced nations taking visiting fellowships at the centre. It is planned that each will have a staff of 30 scientists, 20 post-doctoral students and 40 technicians. Many of the staff will be on 2-3 year appointments.

Running the pair of institutes is not going to be easy. In theory, with the developing countries' heavy dependence on agriculture, biotechnology should bring enormous benefits. But much basic research on tropical agriculture remains to be done and the institutes will need to stimulate such research, at the same time fighting off demands for rapid returns on investment.

Alun Anderson