

Europe's millennium Moon mission fails to get off the ground

[PARIS] Proposals for a US\$200 million Moon mission to celebrate the millennium that were announced with great fanfare by the European Space Agency on 5 March were quietly abandoned at a meeting of the agency's ruling council last week (see page 425). The proposals called for the launch in 2000 of a small orbiter, Lunarsat, to scout landing sites at the Moon's south pole, followed the year after by the sending of a lander to begin setting up a 'robotic village'.

The proposed mission has been criticized by some as a stunt of limited scientific interest (see *Nature* 390, 8; 1997). Much of the funding was intended to come from industry and commercial sponsors. Some observers argue that this finance was likely to have materialized had the agency's council agreed to pump-prime the project with a small sum of money.

But the proposal died a quick death after a brief discussion by the council, which is said to have feared committing itself to a project whose costs might spiral if other sponsors failed to materialize.

Hands off our intellectual property, say researchers

[MUNICH] ALLEA, the association of 50 European academies of science, is calling for better protection of European researchers' intellectual property rights. It claims that the interests of the scientific community in Europe have been largely ignored in drafting recent directives on such rights, such as the European Union biotechnology directive and the database directive.

At the association's third general assembly, held in Munich last week, ALLEA members agreed to make a formal request to the European Parliament and the union's council of ministers to introduce into the harmonized patent law a 'grace period' allowing researchers to apply for patents for a defined period after publication. This 'grace period' should address the problem faced by European participants in the Human Genome Project, as the requirement to release sequence data immediately on to the World Wide Web eliminates the possibility of protection in Europe.

Russian academy opens door to more women

[MOSCOW] A two-day general meeting of the Russian Academy of Sciences awarded a gold medal to the academy's president, Yuri Osipov, for his achievements in mathematics. It also welcomed the news that the latest elections brought nine women

members — an unprecedented number — into the academy.

The meeting debated the implications of a new agreement with the state property committee, allowing the academy to keep for its own use the money it earns by leasing property given to it by the state. In a separate move, the academy decided to take responsibility for managing — and reaping the financial rewards of — the sale of rights to inventions produced in its laboratories.

French demand DNA database to fight crime

[PARIS] Pressure is growing in France for the creation of a national database of DNA profiles from convicted criminals, following the arrest last week in Paris of a suspected serial killer, accused of at least five murders and rapes. The suspect, Guy Georges, was identified after Gilbert Thiel, the judge leading the investigation, found a match between DNA at the scene of the crimes and DNA taken earlier from the suspect, who has a string of past serious criminal convictions.

Thiel, who personally searched laboratory records, said that the lack of a national database had "certainly been an obstacle" and had delayed the arrest. Plans for a national database, limited to those convicted of serious crimes, are contained in a bill on sexual delinquency submitted to the National Assembly last year. But an amendment forbidding conservation of DNA samples has resulted in confusion about the bill's scope.

Oil boss honoured for backing sustainability

[ST LOUIS] John Browne, chief executive of the British Petroleum company, has been honoured by the Missouri Botanical Garden for his efforts on behalf of sustainable development. In a ceremony last week, Browne received the garden's highest award, the Henry Shaw medal, for transforming the "corporate culture" of British Petroleum and aligning it "with the goals of sustainability".

Peter Raven, the garden's director, described Browne as "perhaps the only fossil-fuel executive to speak decisively and meaningfully for corporate responsibility". In a speech at Stanford University last May that was widely seen as distancing the company from other leading members of the oil industry, Browne characterized the possibility of human influence on the climate as too significant to be ignored.

Pellat takes top job in French atomic energy

[PARIS] René Pellat, who is 63, last week succeeded Robert Dautray as high commissioner of the French Atomic Energy Commission (CEA), becoming the most

senior adviser to the government on nuclear affairs. Pellat, a research director at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), was president of the administrative council of CNRS between 1989 and 1992, and president of the French space agency, CNES, from 1992 to 1995. He has also been a member of the government's scientific council on defence matters, and of the scientific board of France Télécom. Pellat's research expertise is in plasmas, planet formation, and magnetic and inertial nuclear fusion.

Sanctuary charged with ill-treating chimps...

[WASHINGTON] The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has filed charges against the Coulston Foundation, an organization based in New Mexico that cares for about half of the research chimpanzees in the United States (see *Nature* 390, 321; 1997), alleging breaches of the Animal Welfare Act. Similar charges were brought against Coulston in 1995. Since then two chimpanzees have died in controversial circumstances, and animal rights activists have waged a war of words against the New Mexico centre. "We're gratified that USDA has acted on the overwhelming evidence of negligence involved in the death of the chimps," says Suzanne Roy, director of In Defense of Animals.

...and Kyoto's chimp 'linguist' is pregnant



[TOKYO] Kyoto University's Primate Research Institute announced last week that Ai, its 21-year-old language-trained chimpanzee (above) has become pregnant through artificial insemination and is expected to give birth in August. The institute began trying to artificially inseminate Ai, which can recognize numerous Kanji (Chinese characters), numbers and visual symbols, in 1995, as part of a project to discern whether the use of symbols and tools can be transmitted across generations.

Tetsuro Matsuzawa, a professor in comparative cognitive science and the leader of the project, hopes that the birth of the baby chimpanzee will make it possible to determine whether Ai and her offspring can communicate by means of artificial language.