Rebuilding takes a downturn

Munich

WHEN Bonn agreed two weeks ago to earmark a further DM1,760 million (about \$1,000 million) to help rebuild universities in eastern Germany, it seemed on the surface to be an encouraging step. But a number of signs, including last-minute reductions in the amount of the payments, indicate that things may not be as rosy as they seem and that the aid might run out just when it is needed most.

The latest segment of the programme, which was approved by Bonn and the *Länder* (states) on 24 May, will help the former East German universities to rebuild departments — such as law, economics, social sciences and the humanities — considered tainted with Communist ideology. The new programme will also pay university salaries for as many as 2,000 researchers from the former East German Academy of Science and two other academies, and will create 650 five-year positions for young researchers and graduate students.

The programme was originally expected to provide DM3,000 million (about \$1,765 million) over five years, but it had to be reduced by 40 per cent when the *Länder* in

RESEARCH COLLABORATION

Charities cohabit in Cambridge

London

NEXT week sees the opening of a new £5 million institute for developmental biology at the University of Cambridge, the first major British research institute to be funded jointly by two of Britain's leading medical research charities.

The new institute will initially house some 12 research groups, under the direction of Cambridge developmental biologist John Gurdon. The goal is for Cambridge to become an internationally competitive centre for UK developmental biology, bringing together work on the mouse, *Drosophila*, *Xenopus* and other model organisms.

The institute's £5 million capital cost and the £2–£3 million annual budget are being provided by the Wellcome Trust, which will pay two-thirds, and the Cancer Research Campaign (CRC). Michael Morgan from Wellcome says the collaboration was possible because the two charities have complementary research interests. The fact that Wellcome has a policy of not supporting cancer research simplified the division of responsibility for funding between the trust and the CRC, which was potentially a tricky problem.

The two charities decided to fund the institute on the basis of its scientific merit, Morgan says, but a secondary consideration was a desire to halt the 'brain drain' of British developmental biologists moving abroad.

Peter Aldhous

western Germany pulled out. Now, the federal government will pay for three-fourths of the programme, and the eastern *Länder* will provide the rest.

The reduction will make a "significant difference", says Peter Gutjahr-Löser, chancellor of the University of Leipzig, because the eastern German universities will not be able to compete effectively with western German universities for professors.

Eastern universities do not at present have the money to pay their faculty more than 60 per cent of average western salaries. In its original form, the new programme would have paid salaries at western rates for more than 200 professors or assistant professors at Leipzig alone, but now that has been reduced to fewer than 60.

Even worse for the eastern universities, the programme will now pay for only two years to resettle academy researchers at universities, instead of the original five. This defeats the purpose of the programme, says Jochen Stoehr, head of the research division of the science ministry in Berlin.

The financially strapped eastern universities will not take on academy people, Stoehr says, because they will have to pay them out of their own funds in just two years. Five years would have allowed time for more long-term positions to open through retirement.

The Federal Ministry for Research and Technology has promised that the programme will be reviewed in two years and possibly extended, but Stoehr says that by then it will be too late.

At the heart of the funding problem is the fact that the west is approaching the limit of its generosity. In February, the western *Länder* agreed to transfer DM4,800 million in income from the 'turnover tax' on business transactions to eastern Germany. Altogether, the western states have poured DM80,000 million into various funds to help eastern Germany, with the result that western universities are now facing cuts.

So, in February, the western *Länder* said that they had done all they can for rebuilding eastern Germany, and that it would be up to Bonn to do the rest.

But the federal government will not be able to go much further in improving conditions at eastern German universities, either. As the negotiations on the 1992 German budget draw to a close, it seems very unlikely that the Research Ministry will get any increase in its projected budget of DM8,400 million.

The chairman of the science advisory council Wissenschaftsrat, Dieter Simon, expresses disappointment over the lack of solidarity showed by the west for the east. "They don't realize that the old West Germany has gone under," and that the annual game of trying to get more money from taxpayers or Bonn each year has ended, he says.

"The new game is about sharing what we've got." Wissenschaftsrat had recommended that the programme be funded at the original figure of DM3,000 million.

Gutjahr-Löser at Leipzig argues that it is shortsighted of the west not to devote more support to eastern German education and science. The number of students in the whole of Germany continues to increase, he notes, and the eastern universities, which have traditionally taught many fewer students than the western universities, will have to shoulder much of the added burden. But the eastern schools will be hard-pressed to do this if they cannot attract good faculty, and this in turn will increase the pressure on already overcrowded universities in the west.

Underlining the seriousness of the situation, the president of the German university rectors' conference, Hans-Uwe Erichsen, said in April that unless something is done soon, a "collapse in the German university system" can hardly be avoided.

Some observers have criticized the eastern *Länder* for not refusing to accept the trimmed-down version of the new programme. Simon disagrees. It would have been "suicidal" not to accept it, he says, because "they need all the help they can get."

Steven Dickman

EARTH SCIENCES

Scientists watching Japanese volcano

Tokyo

ALL eyes in Japan are on an erupting volcano in the southern island of Kyushu which killed 15,000 people the last time it burst into life 200 years ago.

Mount Unzen, near the town of Shimabara in Nagasaki Prefecture, began smouldering last November and then became comparatively quiet a few weeks later. But intense seismic activity resumed earlier this year and by the middle of last month a cracked dome of viscous lava emerged in the volcano's crater. A few days later, the volcano burst into violent eruption with flows of ash and volcanic gas cascading down the mountainside to within a few hundred metres of residential areas.

Then on Monday (3 June), the volcano spewed a pyroclastic flow — a mixture of gas and rocks — into a nearby residential area, which had earlier been evacuated. Initial reports were that 20 people were injured and 28 missing. Many of the missing were apparently researchers and journalists who had not left the area.

When the volcano last erupted in 1792, it was not pyroclastic flows that killed most people. Rather, earthquakes associated with the eruption set off a landslide on a nearby mountain, triggering a tidal wave that swept away thousands of people. Scientists observing the mountain are keeping a close eye on the locus of earthquakes in case the same happens again.

David Swinbanks