Britain weighs plan to axe US science mission

Washington. Plans by the Foreign Office to close the science and technology section of the British Embassy in the United States are likely to be scaled down thanks to fierce lobbying by UK science minister William Waldegrave and industry minister Michael Heseltine.

News of the plans, which arose from a routine government inspection earlier this

why is it science that has to be chopped?" said one official, who also expressed fears that the other three major diplomatic outposts of British science — in Paris, Bonn and Tokyo — could also be at risk.

Waldegrave and Heseltine, who both want to be seen as strong defenders of UK science and technology, have jointly pursued the issue in London and are hoping for a compromise whereby the section continues to function on a smaller scale. Supporters are concerned, however, that the compromise will leave the section so weak that closure will be only a matter of time.

Associated Press

Nick Browne, press attaché at the embassy, confirmed that the inspection had taken place and said that its results were still being evaluated. "There will be changes in the science section and elsewhere", he said, but declined to comment on the likely outcome. Peter Willis, a spokesman for the Foreign Office in London, said that "a final decision

has not yet been taken on the inspector's recommendations".

Neither spokesman would confirm details of either the inspectors' findings or any impending compromise. But a number of sources in Washington and London said that the inspectors had recommended closure.

The inspectors are senior former diplomats who conduct regular reviews of the entire UK diplomatic corps. A reversal of their judgement on political grounds would be highly unusual: in the words of one government official: "they are expected to get it right".

The science mission was originally engaged in the physical exchange of large quantities of scientific reports — up to 1,800 a month during the Second World War — but its staff was reduced in size as technology and alternative channels of exchange simplified this task. In recent years, however, the mission has become involved in arranging contacts between senior science officials in the two countries and monitoring US science policy developments.

Colin Macilwain

Congress agrees to new NIH office for AIDS programmes

Washington. A deal between the two houses of the US Congress has opened the way for an autonomous Office of AIDS Research (OAR) to administer the \$1 billion that the National Institutes of Health (NIH) spends annually on the disease. But it will not take effect unless Congress reconciles a dispute over whether those with HIV should be allowed into the United States — the only issue blocking passage of a bill to reauthorize NIH programmes.

The new AIDS office will be headed by a full-time director with authority to apportion NIH's AIDS budget among its institutes. At present, each is funded directly and the director of one of them — Anthony Fauci of the \$1 billion National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) — is also the part-time director of the Office of AIDS Research, coordinating but not controlling spending.

The change has been sought by AIDS activists as a way to strengthen the government's efforts and is opposed by NIH officials, who see it as an unnecessary additional layer of bureaucracy. Fauci does not want the purely administrative job of OAR director, yet he cannot be pleased to lose control of the \$450 million in AIDS funding that goes to NIAID.

But one AIDS activist discounts rumours that Fauci is unhappy enough to leave NIH. "Tony wants to keep his laboratory at NIAID and talk of him quitting is a scare tactic", says Mark Harrington of the Treatment Action Group in New York. "I think when the president signs the bill, he'll go along with it." Fauci was unavailable for comment.

If the bill goes through, the NIH office will be one of two new elements in the fight against the disease. The other is an 'AIDS czar', yet to be named, who will work directly for President Bill Clinton in the White House.

AIDS activists are concerned that the dispute over the NIH bill may delay AIDS spending for the 1994 fiscal year that begins on 1 October. But a spokeswoman for NIAID said that those plans are ready to be implemented, that financial planning for 1995 is already under way and that the budget for fiscal year 1996 would be the first under the control of the new OAR director.

The proposal to establish an autonomous Office of AIDS Research is part of a complex NIH reauthorization bill, of which the sole remaining disagreement is a provision that would bar the immigration into the United States of those with HIV. Staff of both houses were meeting again this week to seek a compromise on that issue.

Colin Macilwain

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REASONS

Sir Henry Tizard (right) and US Army Lt Gen. Eddy attend a post-war British civil-defence planning exercise.

year of British diplomatic service activity in the United States, emerged last week as the section celebrated its fiftieth birthday — making it the longest-established unit of its type anywhere in the world. The section was formally opened in 1943, shortly after Sir Henry Tizard arrived in Washington to exchange information on radar, fission and other military technology.

British ambassador Christopher Meyer did not mention the closure plan at a fiftieth birthday reception held at his residence, at which he praised the past and present work of the section. In the 1950s, the section had 11 diplomats and 20 locally hired staff, but it has since scaled back to three diplomats, led by science and technology counsellor Don Rolt, and a small support staff.

Waldegrave, whose Office of Science and Technology is currently producing a White Paper (policy document) on science policy, led the fight to save the section after senior officials in scientific government departments in London objected to the closure. "We all know that funding is tight, but