

Money row looms over ESA role in space station project

Paris. Scaled-down plans for Europe's participation in the international space station, Alpha, announced only last month, have already become deadlocked after a dispute between member states of the European Space Agency (ESA) about how much each should contribute towards the overall costs.

Under the terms of the new plan, ESA has decided to reduce its proposed contribution from ECU3.5 billion (US\$4.5 billion) to ECU1.8 billion for the period from 1996 to 2000. This followed pressure from Germany and France, who both told ESA that they could not afford the original cost. But ESA has so far obtained commitments from its member states to cover just ECU 1.2 billion.

One problem is that Italy, which has serious budgetary pressures at home, has yet to make a firm commitment to the space station. Yet even if Italy does contribute ECU300 million, as originally planned — and many observers consider this now to be an over-optimistic figure — ESA will still be left with a deficit of ECU300 million.

France's national space agency CNES said this week it was not able to offer any more money. "We are not going to make up the deficit of others for a non-priority programme", says CNES chairman André Lebeau. "Germany leads the project, it should assume its responsibilities."

Jean-Daniel Lévi, director general of CNES, adds that the French space agency is not willing to let the space station "crush" its other programmes. In any case, no decision on the final level of the French contribution seems likely until after the presidential elections.

French feelings are running particularly high because the previously proposed Crew Rescue Vehicle (CRV) — which was to have been built by France, and would have cost ECU1.2 billion between 1996 and 2000 — is the main victim of ESA's scaled back plan.

Delphi poll backs English-French translation

Paris. French and German researchers agree that the United States heads the world science league, and that Japan is third; but both consider themselves to hold second place. This is one conclusion of a comparison of opinion polls of scientists carried out in both countries.

The preliminary results of the French poll were announced last week by François Fillon, the minister of higher education and research. Based on the Japanese 'Delphi' polling technique, 3,000 French scientists were asked for their views on 1,000 possible technological developments over the next 30 years. Scientists were asked to indicate how important they

"We wanted the CRV, but we didn't have the money for it", says Lévi. He still argues that ESA's proposals meet the cuts demanded by both Germany and France. But one consequence of the whole process is that France has reduced its planned contribution from ECU600 million to ECU300 million.

ESA's contribution to the station will now be limited to the Columbus Attached Pressurised Module (APM), which will be built by Germany and Italy, and the Automated Transfer Vehicle (ATV) a relatively low-price vehicle that will ferry freight and fuel to the station, and is to be built by France.

Observers say the CRV was more technologically challenging than both these contributions, and would have provided Europe with the expertise it lacks in returning astronauts to Earth.

The APM was retained, they say, because it was considered essential by the United States and Germany. The ATV is both cheaper than the CRV and also essential for the use of Europe's Ariane V launcher, intended as payment in kind as part of ESA's contribution towards the estimated ECU2.4 billion running costs of the station.

Germany seems to have different ideas. Speaking in a parliamentary debate on the national budget last week, Jürgen Ruttgers, minister for research and technology, said that the agency had not taken German demands seriously enough, and had not looked sufficiently hard for a solution to its financial problems.

"It's ESA's job to speak with the other partners and get this sorted out", says one official at the German science ministry. At present, he adds, France and Italy are "not giving responsible answers" to Germany's demands. Others point out that, given the high stakes involved, agreement will inevitably be reached, but it is likely to require a political input. **Declan Butler**

thought each development would be, and when and how likely it was to be achieved. Among the priorities identified was a telephone link between France and the United Kingdom with simultaneous translation; optimistic that its gestation time would be less than that of the Channel Tunnel, the experts predicted such a link by around 2006.

The responses will be fully analysed by the middle of next year. Fillon says the results will indicate which areas deserve funding at a national level to preserve French strengths in the technology concerned, and which are candidates for international cooperation. **D.B.**

French research body wins back funding after budget crisis

Paris. The French government last week agreed to reimburse a FF500 million (US\$100 million) deficit accumulated over the past few years by the country's largest research organization, the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS). The sum represents the balance between promises of funds made in the budget and actual payments received.

But if the move has brought momentary relief to CNRS researchers, it has done little to dampen their concern about the government's long-term commitment to supporting research in general and CNRS in particular.

The deficit has dominated debate inside CNRS since last September, when Guy Aubert, the organization's newly appointed director general, told laboratories they could spend just 60 per cent of the funds allocated to them at the beginning of the year.

The subsequent row reached a climax in February, when the CNRS's national committee suspended a meeting with Aubert and passed a series of motions asserting that French research was being "sacrificed".

The researchers' protests seem to have paid off. Shortly afterwards, Aubert obtained a promise from François Fillon, the Minister for Research and Higher Education, that there would be no cuts or freezes in this year's CNRS budget of FF10.86 billion. He also promised to restore the FF500 million deficit, although on a schedule to be agreed after an official audit of CNRS's finances.

Last week's decision means that the government will unblock FF300 million immediately, and pay CNRS the remaining FF200 million before the end of the year. Fillon says he decided to take prompt action "in anticipation of the audit's results" in order to allay concern that the rescue plan might be affected by the outcome of the presidential elections in May.

But some observers suggest there may have been a more political motive at work. The government had rejected similar requests only a few days earlier, and the decision on reimbursement was eventually taken by Edouard Balladur — who is both prime minister and a presidential candidate — within hours of a public promise by Lionel Jospin, the Socialist candidate, to recapitalize CNRS fully if he was elected.

Some labour union representatives claim that the government's previous promises to help CNRS were intended primarily to quell protests from researchers — an allegation also made by Jospin. They remain concerned about the outcome of current discussions about a proposed reform of the agency, and by uncertainty caused by the forthcoming election. **D. B.**