

## US approval expected for space station control module

**Washington.** US space officials expect approval this month to build an 'Interim Control Module' (ICM) that would keep construction of the international space station on track despite delays with a crucial Russian module. US space station managers were told last month that the Russian Service Module, which will maintain the station in its proper orbit during assembly, will be at least eight months behind its scheduled April 1998 launch. Construction of the station begins in November.

The less capable ICM, which is being designed by the US Naval Research Laboratory based on an existing defence satellite 'bus', would be paid for out of reserve funds, says Wilbur Trafton, head of space station planning at the US space agency. It would therefore not break the project's strict \$2.1-billion annual spending cap. But the plan still needs approval from the White House and Congress. □

## Gene therapy struggles in Europe

**London.** World-class work by Europe's gene-therapy researchers is not being translated into commercial applications because biotechnology companies are not being set up to exploit these innovations, according to a report from the Science Policy Research Unit at the University of Sussex.

The report, prepared for the European Commission by Sandy Thomas and Paul Martin, contrasts the small number of gene-therapy companies in Europe (12) with the 40 to 50 such companies in the United States. The authors point out that European pharmaceutical companies are investing in the US market and creating skilled jobs there, with the result that the benefits of European research are being lost to European companies. □

## Taxonomic alliance formed

**London.** Ten European taxonomic institutions have formed a consortium to help realize the joint potential of their natural history collections and expertise. The Consortium of European Taxonomic Facilities aims to increase the efficiency of taxonomic facilities through networking and cooperation, and its objectives will include improving the scientific, commercial and public access to databases, and promoting the training of systematists. Founding members of the consortium are museums in Copenhagen, Frankfurt, Amsterdam, Paris, Madrid, Berlin, Stockholm and London and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew, also in London. □

## Transgenic centre in Hong Kong

**Hong Kong.** A regional centre to train scientists in the production of transgenic animals has been set up at Hong Kong University, in the hope of boosting the study of genetics in the whole Asia-Pacific region. The university's biochemistry department believes it is the first in the region to have carried out gene-targeting work.

"We are trying to make this technology more available to scientists within Asia," says Kathryn Cheah, co-organizer of the centre and reader in biochemistry. "Our long-term aim is to make Hong Kong the centre of transgenic technology for the region." □

## French agency leaves Mururoa

**Paris.** The French Commissariat à l'Énergie Atomique (CEA) closed a 34-year chapter in its history on 31 December when it withdrew from Mururoa Atoll in the South Pacific, France's nuclear weapons testing site. Its departure follows the decision last year by Jacques Chirac, the French president, to abandon explosive nuclear testing and to sign the Comprehensive Test-ban Treaty.

CEA will retain a virtual presence at Mururoa, however, having left behind an automatic surveillance network, Telsite, which will

relay data to France via satellite from a dozen stations around the atoll. Telsite will provide geophysical data, as well as estimates of radioactivity in the air and water. Annual visits will also be made to take samples from the environment and from plants and animals.

Meanwhile, the International Atomic Energy Agency is nearing completion of an independent study of the consequences of testing in the region, and is due to release its report at the end of this year.

Dismantling of the CEA base at Mururoa — the Centre for Pacific Tests, which opened in 1962 and supervised 193 nuclear tests — will be completed by mid-1998, at an estimated cost of FF135 million (US\$25.6 million). France will also pay around FF1 billion annually over ten years to French Polynesia to compensate for closure of the test site. □

## Mary Leakey fund established

**London.** A fund has been set up in recognition of the scientific contributions of the palaeoanthropologist Mary Leakey, who died last month, to provide support for scientists pursuing interests similar to hers in fields such as archaeology, anthropology and palaeoanthropology. The creation of the Mary Leakey Fund for African Archaeology has been announced by the board of trustees and scientists of the L. S. B. Leakey Foundation, which was itself set up in 1968 in honour of her late husband. □

## US ban to protect against BSE

**Washington.** The US government has proposed a wide-ranging prohibition of the use of meat in animal feed, as a precaution against an outbreak of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), or mad cow disease, in the United States. The ban would prohibit the use of tissue from cows, sheep or goats in feed but permit the continued use of blood, milk and gelatine, for which no infection pathway is known, in feed for these animals.

If approved after a consultation period, the ban will codify a voluntary ban already being observed by the meat industry. Donna Shalala, the health secretary, said last week that, although there have been no reported cases of BSE in the United States, the ban "would add another level of safeguards to protect the United States against the potential risk". □

## Walker takes lobbying post

**Washington.** Robert Walker, the former Republican chairman of the Science Committee in the US House of Representatives, has been appointed president of Wexler Group, a Washington lobbying firm. Walker was a senior figure in the House Republican leadership until his surprise announcement a year ago that he would retire after the 104th Congress, which has just ended (see *Nature* 378, 757; 1995). He began work at Wexler this week, as the 105th Congress convened. Wexler's clients include the Science Coalition, a pro-science lobbying operation set up by some universities, and industrial corporations ranging from General Motors to Burger King. □

## Russian records rise in HIV

**Moscow.** Russia registered 1,031 new HIV carriers during 1996, almost equal to the total number of carriers for the previous nine years, according to a report from the Interfax news agency. Most of the new cases contracted the virus through the sharing of syringes for drug use. Russia now has 2,316 HIV carriers registered since 1987. The report quoted a health ministry official warning that a lack of funds was obstructing efforts to increase public awareness of AIDS. The number of patients in the "last and incurable stage of the disease" stands at 248.

Meanwhile, Hungary's National Health Institute recorded 606 new HIV carriers during 1996, according to a report from the MTI news agency in Budapest. Two hundred and thirty four have since developed AIDS, bringing the total number of AIDS patients to 4,000. Hungary's AIDS deaths now total 151. □