

for the institute heads' extra work. This, it ruled, classified the institutes as *Mischbetriebe* (mixed business), which, according to a 1982 decree, should have ruled out the reduction of the *Nutzungsentgelt*. Regular institute work and the extra occupations of technical staff, it argued, cannot be financially balanced.

Pulverer and Eggers had maintained their scheme until 1987. They claim to have received repeated verbal encouragement to do so from the university administration and ministry officials.

They now feel the victims of the unclear legal situation after 1982. Pulverer blames the ministry for its wrong advice. "The ministry's legal advisers let us walk straight into the trap," he says.

He disagrees with one judge's view that, being university professors, they should have been intelligent enough to realize they were on thin ice. "We are medics and not lawyers," he says.

Including interest, Pulverer and Eggers will be hit with bills of about DM5 and DM2.5 million [US\$2.6 and 1.3 million], respectively. "My entire savings will not be sufficient," Pulverer says, "I will also have to sell my art collection."

Quirin Schiermeier

Israel shuts four 'incubators' for high-tech companies

Jerusalem

Four of Israel's 16 publicly supported 'incubators' for high-tech entrepreneurship are to close next year, says the office of Israel's chief scientist. The incubators were set up in 1991, originally to help immigrant scientists from the former Soviet Union develop their research.

Dafna Zamir, assistant to chief scientist Orna Berry, says that the closures are intended to make the programme more efficient, and that there will be no cuts in the number of projects accepted. No decision has been taken on which incubators will close, says Zamir. But the main criterion will be the number of projects that they have been able to attract.

The decision to close the incubators follows a fierce debate in the country's newspapers. Critics, including economists and some entrepreneurs, argue that the programme is a waste of money that has failed to produce profitable companies. But the programme's director, Rina Pridor, denies this and has fought successfully to preserve the current level of funding in the face of a move by treasury officials to make cuts.

The programme provides US\$300,000 in seed funds over a two-year period, as well as

managerial and administrative assistance. According to the latest figures, which cover the period up to June 1999, more than half of the projects that began in the incubators have continued under their own steam after leaving the framework, most with private funds.

There has been \$240 million of private investment in incubator projects since the programme began, notes Pridor, while the government has invested \$180 million.

One of the criticisms of the programme is that some of the incubators are in outlying areas rather than big cities. This was intended to attract high-tech industry away from the crowded central region and to make the incubators available to immigrants housed in these areas during a period when Israel had to absorb more than half a million immigrants in three years. Zamir says that geography will not be a consideration in deciding which ones to close.

Elie Engender, the director of the Ofek La'Oleh incubator, located in a small town near Haifa, says he's not worried, because he has no shortage of projects. He says the current grants make it difficult for incubator start-up companies to pay their researchers decent salaries.

Haim Watzman

\$2m ransom sought for kidnapped ecologists

Moscow

The Polish government last week rejected demands from Chechen kidnappers for \$1 million each for the release of two Polish scientists taken captive in August in Dagestan, one of the Russian North Caucasian republics bordering Chechnia.

Zofia Fiszer-Malanowska of the Warsaw Ecology Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and Ewa Marchwinska-Wyrwal of the Ecology Institute of Katowice, had travelled to Dagestan at the invitation of Rasul Magomedov of the Biological Resources Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Makhachkala, the capital of Dagestan.

The two ecologists arrived at the beginning of August and stayed at Magomedov's house. Soon all of them, together with Aleksander Karamasov, another Dagestanian scientist, moved to the Gunib region for ecological research. After the expedition failed to return at the expected time, the police started an investigation, but found only the car the scientists had used.

In September, relatives of Magomedov managed to negotiate his release. But his colleagues were left in captivity. A handwritten



Danger zone: this science base on the Abramov glacier, at 4,000-metres altitude in the Pamir mountains of Kyrgyzstan, was burned by terrorists in September. The base was set up in the former Soviet republic by the Central Asia Hydrometeorological Institute more than 30 years ago.

note from the hostages was planted on the Polish embassy in Moscow last week. In the note, the hostages ask for help because of their deteriorating health (both women are approaching 60). They are being held in a concrete cellar in Urus-Martan, Chechnia.

"We have no other information about our two citizens except that both are alive," says a spokesman for the embassy. The Polish

authorities declared that they will not pay the ransom. A Polish diplomat plans to visit Georgia in a bid to negotiate for the release of the women.

Kidnapping appears to have become an increasing hazard for researchers working in the former Soviet Union, where the activity has become an important source of income for dissident groups.

Carl Levitin