

CITES chief removed in scandal over trade in banned species

[LONDON] Izgrev Topkov, secretary-general of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), has been removed from his post after six years at the helm of one of the United Nations' most controversial secretariats.

Two members of the CITES secretariat in Geneva have also been dismissed for their role in awarding permits to organizations that wanted to trade in plants and animals on the CITES list of banned species.

The dismissals have been authorized, following two investigations, by Klaus Töpfer, the executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which is responsible for the CITES secretariat.

A UNEP spokesman confirmed that Topkov has "been moved", and that two of his staff have been dismissed "for improper behaviour in handing out permits". But Topkov's eventual fate is uncertain; he may take up another post within the UN.

Topkov was personally not implicated in any wrong-doing, according to UNEP sources. But his failure to prevent the permits being given out for trading in banned species meant that he had to take ultimate responsibility. "If you have responsibility to manage something, and you are unable to exercise that authority properly, you have to go," sources say.

Topkov's deputy, Jim Armstrong, has taken over temporarily as secretary-general of CITES. Topkov's responsibilities will eventually be looked after by a senior UNEP official until a more permanent replacement can be found.

The unauthorized granting of permits is believed to have taken place over at least two years. Two separate investigations — one by a CITES committee of country representatives, and another by the UN — are understood to have reached the same conclusions.

Topkov is a former Bulgarian diplomat, and became secretary-general of CITES six years ago. He was previously a member of the intergovernmental negotiating committee responsible for the UN climate convention.

The investigation into the CITES secretariat was completed last December, and Topkov's position has been looking increasingly precarious ever since. But a decision about his fate could be taken at the time only by the then executive director of UNEP, Elizabeth Dowdeswell, whose own contract was coming to an end.

CITES is one of the oldest UN conventions, having come into force in 1975. Its 143 member states agreed to ban commercial international trade in endangered species listed by CITES.

Ehsan Masood

Small-scale space projects 'threaten collaboration'

[MUNICH] A transatlantic panel of space scientists has warned that attempts to boost international collaboration among space agencies are being challenged by the shift to 'smaller, faster and cheaper' missions. Collaboration is seen as increasingly necessary because of shrinking budgets.

This is one of the conclusions of a report by the European Space Science Committee, a body associated with the European Science Foundation and the US National Academy of Science's Space Studies Board. The report was presented last week to the US space agency NASA, the European Space Agency (ESA) and national space agencies.

International collaboration in space missions saves money and promotes good front-line science, says the report. But NASA's new philosophy of launching fewer big missions and more 'smaller, faster, cheaper' missions — now being followed to some extent by ESA — discourages collaboration because of the rapid turn-around times of small missions and the reduced financial incentive to join forces.

The report summarizes studies of 142 cooperative projects and missions between the United States and individual European countries or ESA that have taken place in the last 30 years.

The report says that most international missions, such as the Hubble Space Telescope and the SOHO solar mission, have been scientifically very successful. Hubble and SOHO were collaborations between NASA and ESA. Like the Germany/UK/US X-ray astronomy mission ROSAT, Hubble and SOHO were driven by clearly defined scientific goals, and backed by strong scientific communities on both sides of the Atlantic.

But the committee points out that a significant number of projects were not fully successful in meeting their scientific goals. It identifies eight key elements that could be used to assess whether future international missions are likely to be successful.

These include scientific support through peer review, clearly defined scientific goals and a strong scientific community, shared objectives between all partners, appropriate procedures for data handling and distribution, and a "sense of partnership".

The report highlights the ESA-NASA gamma-ray astronomy mission INTEGRAL as an example of a shaky collaboration. INTEGRAL was almost abandoned in an advanced development phase because of an unexpected decision by the US Congress not to fund one of its the mission's main instruments.

The strong European gamma-ray astronomy scientific community managed to patch things up, and INTEGRAL is now due to be launched in 2001.

The error in setting up the international collaboration, says the report, was that a scientific community of equivalent strength did not exist in the United States. That made the mission vulnerable to political and budgetary attack there.

In contrast, the major problems that almost inevitably occur in complex missions were able to be handled with ROSAT and SOHO because of their strong and well-coordinated scientific teams, says the report. The ROSAT hardware had to be modified at the last minute when the mission's Shuttle launch was abandoned because of the Challenger disaster, and the satellite had to be redesigned to interface with an expendable launch vehicle. But this caused little delay to the project's schedule.

Formal procedures, such as the use of standardized agreements, would help to avoid problems of misinterpretation of ad hoc agreements, and of partners pulling out of missions in their development stages, says the report.

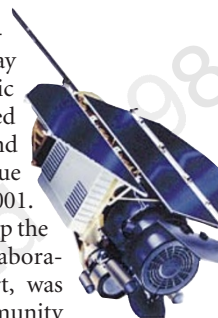
Clear advance agreements on data handling are particularly important for Earth observation missions, where security and commercial interests have sometimes hindered data exchange.

A sense of partnership is a "recipe for success", says the report, making it important that the media and scientific reports should acknowledge all the partners concerned. European scientists have frequently been angered by the neglect of their contributions to Hubble observations. ESA contributed 15 per cent of Hubble's development and construction costs, and wins 20 per cent of observation time through peer-reviewed competition.

John Culhane, director of the Mullard Space Science Laboratory in London and chairman of the European Space Science Committee, says he hopes the report will encourage the agencies to develop more systematic approaches to international collaboration.

"Science can prosper from collaboration independent of the issue of saving money because it brings more creative thinking to bear on missions," he says.

Successful teamwork: ROSAT redesign caused little delay.



ROSAT