

Cable-car crash kills 20 radioastronomy workers in French Alps

[PARIS] A cable-car used to gain access to the Institute of Millimetric Radioastronomy (IRAM) facility in the French Alps crashed to the ground last week, killing all 20 people on board. The group was travelling to work at IRAM's radiotelescope observatory, 2,650 metres up a mountain slope, when the accident occurred. About 500 metres into the ride, the cable broke and the car plunged 80 metres to the ground.

IRAM is operated by France's Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Germany's Max Planck Society and Spain's National Geographic Institute. The site, on top of the Bure plateau, hosts an array of five 15-metre telescopes, which allow the observation of interstellar molecules and dust from comets and stars.

An official investigation is being carried out into the cause of the accident, which is still unknown. The cable-car was the only link to the facility, so research has been severely hampered since the accident, with researchers relying on helicopters for access. IRAM was in the process of building a sixth radiotelescope, but its construction will now be delayed.

St Petersburg matches money from Soros

[MOSCOW] Officials in St Petersburg have started distributing individual research grants to match the money allotted to scientists by the International Educational Programme in Exact Sciences (ISSEP), which was set up by the international financier and philanthopist George Soros.

In doing so, Russia's second-largest city has joined 18 other Russian regions — including Moscow, Rostov, Samara and Tatartan — in participating in the programme. The move was made after Vladimir Yakovlev, the governor of St Petersburg, met the city's scientists and educationalists. Over the past five years, Soros has put US\$76 million into ISSEP, while the Russian federal budget has given \$4 million and local authorities a further \$3 million.

France speeds up Internet access

[PARIS] French researchers logging onto the Internet this summer will notice a major increase in the speed of connections. The government announced last week an upgrade of the national research network, Renater, that will double its backbone speed

to 2.5 gigabits per second, with universities and private and public research units connected at up to 155 megabits per second.

The upgrade is seen as essential to stimulating the development of modelling, digital libraries, telemedicine and virtual campuses. Annual upgrades of about a further gigabit per second are also in the pipeline.

NIH makes large income from federal projects

[WASHINGTON] The US National Institutes of Health (NIH) dwarfs other federal agencies in terms of revenue received from the licensing of inventions based on federally funded research projects, according to a report by the General Accounting Office (see www.gao.gov/new.items/rc99173.pdf).

The report found that licences produced \$102.2 million in royalty revenue for the NIH, compared with just \$1.8 million, \$1.5 million and \$1 million for the Navy, the US space agency NASA and the Army, respectively, from 1996 to 1998. The Air Force and the Department of Energy together collected \$1 million.

Biosphere 2 to house carbon dioxide study

[WASHINGTON] The Packard Foundation has awarded a \$1 million grant to a research team that plans to use Biosphere 2, the giant greenhouse in southern Arizona, to study the effects on ecosystems of changing carbon dioxide levels.

Wallace Broecker, a geochemist at Columbia University in New York who was instrumental in the university taking over the management of the often-troubled facility three years ago, will lead a team of researchers in conducting the five-year project. The grant is the largest yet attracted by Biosphere 2.

A case of tuberculosis goes missing in hotel

[SAN DIEGO] A vial of infectious tuberculosis bacteria went missing last week in San Francisco when a thief stole luggage containing the sample from the hotel room of a researcher from the University of California at San Diego.

The researcher had just received the canister of bacteria from a colleague at the University of California at Berkeley during a conference on tuberculosis and leprosy. University officials say that all the appropriate procedures were followed in the handling of the vial, and the incident shows that researchers should guard samples closely while they are being transferred for studies.

Gore pledges to double cancer research funds

[WASHINGTON] US presidential candidate Al Gore said last week that, if elected, he would commit to doubling the amount that the federal government spends on cancer research over five years.

In a speech in Philadelphia in which he urged "a major new commitment to federal cancer research", the vice-president claimed that such an investment would save 200,000 lives and prevent 700,000 cases of cancer in the year 2010 alone. Gore also said that the commitment to cancer should be "matched by a similar commitment to all biomedical research".

ESA and John Innes Centre name new heads

[LONDON] The council of the European Space Agency (ESA) has a new chairman. Alain Bensoussan, president of the French Space Agency, was elected to a two-year term at the end of last month. He takes over from Hugo Parr, director general in the Ministry of Trade and Industry of Norway, whose three-year term of office ended on 30 June. Bensoussan, an engineer with a doctorate in mathematics, has been a member of the ESA council since 1996.

Meanwhile Christopher Lamb, currently regius professor of plant science at the University of Edinburgh, has been named as director of the John Innes Centre in Norwich, one of Europe's leading centres for plant science. Lamb spent much of his career at the Salk Institute, La Jolla, California, where he founded and directed the plant biology department. He takes over from Mike Gale, who has held the job for the past nine months. Gale will stay on as a senior member of staff at the institute.

Early American bones to be tested for age

[WASHINGTON] The controversial 9,000-year-old skeletal remains of a Native American found in Washington state three years ago will require more study, including destructive tests, to determine precisely the age of the bones.

The US Department of the Interior, which is embroiled in a legal battle over whether scientists should be given access to what some Native American groups consider to be sacred remains (see *Nature* 397, 551; 1999), will consult with Native American tribes before conducting further tests. Non-destructive analysis over the past few months has shown that the bones are all from one man, who was between 45 and 55 years old when he died, and that the skeleton is likely to have been buried intentionally.