

OLD WORLD

ESRO

Italians Frustrated

IN spite of all the entreaties of recent weeks and a last ditch offer by the Italian government, Esro decided last week that it would stop supporting the present scientific activities at the European Space Research Institute (Esrin) at Frascati, Italy, after September 1973. The door is not completely closed, however, and as a sop to the scientists and others that have been fighting hard to keep Esro as a viable scientific entity the Esro council suggests that "additional Esro activities appropriate to location at Frascati are to be investigated in cooperation with the Italian authorities".

It now remains to be seen whether the Italians carry out their threat (see *Nature*, 234, 3; 1971) to withdraw from Esro as their plan for an Esro/Centro Nazionale delle Ricerche (CNR) collaboration has not been accepted by the council. According to this plan Esro was to have contributed \$1 million a year towards the cost of running the laboratory while the Italian government would have contributed \$1.7 million. It became apparent two weeks ago at a previous Esro council meeting that this plan would have a rough passage when two member countries—Germany and the Netherlands—expressed concern over the \$2.0 million a year that Esro is currently costing Esro—this being a different objection to that first voiced against the continued support of Esro, namely that the research carried out at the laboratory is not compatible with the future aims of Esro.

Esro still plans to use the buildings at Frascati and it was announced last week that the Esro technology dissemination service is to be transferred from Paris to Frascati in late 1972 or early 1973. Such a move is not likely to placate the Italians as their aim is to keep a viable Esro scientific effort within Italy.

As well as stopping support for Esro the Esro council agreed that as from next July the organization's sounding rocket launching range at Kiruna in Sweden would be transferred to the Swedish authorities. These decisions will lead to employment problems for Esro and, although most of the employees at Kiruna will become employees of the Swedish government, it is far from clear what will become of the employees at Esro—75 of whom are scientists. Esro currently employs 1,300 people—120 of whom are graduate scientists, 365 graduate engineers, 475 technicians and 340 administrative and other personnel. It is not known at present how the decisions will affect the number of employees although an Esro spokesman said last

week "there is certainly no mass redundancy of any kind being planned".

The Esro council also agreed at last week's meeting on an overall plan for the organization until 1980. There will be an intensification of the applications satellite programme that will receive \$70 million a year during 1974–80. Activities during the next few years will be concentrated on prototype development of aeronautical, navigation, meteorological and technological satellites and the budget during 1972–74 will be maintained at \$283.6 million which will increase to \$330 million during 1975–77.

MARS

No Cause for Concern

from our Soviet Correspondent

THE successful soft-landing on Mars, at a point approximately 45° S, 158° W—between the Electris and Phaethontis regions—of the instrument capsule from the Mars-3 probe has led to concern among some western observers about the possibility of biological contamination of the planet. The veil of secrecy surrounding the Soviet space programme has not helped to allay this disquiet, nor has the absence of any mention of biological experiments aboard the current probes in the preliminary press reports.

Writing in *Pravda* on December 6 (after the first batch of data and the short-lived video signals from the Martian surface had been received by orbital relay), Dr L. Mukhtin, Head of the Departmental Laboratory of Exobiology of the Institute of Space Research of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, stressed that exobiology is still part of the Soviet Mars programme. The search for life and for organic compounds, whether of biological origin or produced by ultraviolet radiation, will be carried out by future probes using "specially developed automata". The current probes, he says, are only "preparing the ground" for this important survey. If the results are negative, and "a strict proof of the absence of life on Mars" is obtained, this will be of equal scientific importance, "giving the possibility in the future of carrying out biological experiments in the conditions of a completely sterile planet".

It seems clear, therefore, that the Soviet Laboratory of Exobiology considers the Mars-3 descent capsule not to be a biological hazard to the planet.

CHEMICAL INDUSTRY

Dow Europe Healthy

DOW EUROPE, a subsidiary of the Dow Chemical Company, is now one of the most profitable members of the Dow group. Since its creation in the early 1950s to provide the European and African markets with specialist products (agricultural chemicals, for example) it has evolved in such a way that it now accounts for 26 per cent of Dow's world sales (which are at present running at \$2,050 million a year) and about 30 per cent of the company's profits.

The president of Dow Europe, Mr Z. Merszei, claims that the goal set in 1963 of a 10 per cent increase in earnings each year has only been missed once—in 1970. And he says that the financial results for 1971 will show that the rate of growth of profits has clearly recovered to its pre-1970 level. The financial director, Mr P. Stroebel, says that the increasing growth of the company at a time when others are tightening their belts is a consequence of fundamentally different attitudes within the Dow corporation. Although many companies direct their investment to increasing their share of well tried markets, he said, Dow was always trying to tap new ones. Dow's European showpiece, its plant at Stade, West Germany, will soon be the company's largest chemical complex in Europe, producing many of its basic chemical requirements such as chlorine and sodium hydroxide.

Over the years Dow has channelled about 6 per cent of its European investment into Britain where there are now two manufacturing plants, at Barry and King's Lynn. The company also recently announced the establishment at King's Lynn of an agricultural research centre at which thirty professional scientists will eventually work; its budget is expected to be about \$1 million a year. Dow already has what are described as technical service laboratories at Horgen, Switzerland, but the King's Lynn centre will be the company's first fully fledged research laboratory in Europe.

INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS

Same Game, New Rules

C. A. PARSONS, the Newcastle engineering company, has once again issued dismissal notices to 33 employees who are members of the United Kingdom Association of Professional Engineers. The company originally dismissed the engineers last July when they refused to join the Draughtsmen's and Allied Technicians' Association which, by working to rule twice and striking once,