

More than just preparing

from Vera Rich, London

THE launching of the two-man spacecraft, Soyuz 17, and its link-up with the orbiting space station, Salyut 4, should not be considered simply as a preparation for the forthcoming Soyuz-Apollo project. So said Major-General Georgii Beregovoi, Head of the Cosmonaut Training Programme, at a press conference given after the successful link-up. On the contrary, he says, the joint Soviet-USA missions will merely be a part of the Soyuz programme, "a chance to broaden the range of tasks which can be solved using the Soyuz craft".

Although this comment may be interpreted as an echo of the confidence which the successful link-up has evoked in the Soviet space planners after a year notable for its setbacks, there is more to it than simply post-launch euphoria. The primary aim of the current mission, said Beregovoi, is to test out a new control and life-support system. According to the TASS data, this involves approximately normal atmospheric pressure and temperature in the cabin, representing a return to standard Soviet procedure after Soyuz

16, which with its reduced cabin pressure and increased oxygen content was a compromise with US practice.

The control system referred to is presumably the new autonomic navigation system, based on the use of ionic sensors and permitting the station to be orientated with respect to the Sun, Moon and planets in various regimes of orbital flight, and which also includes a device for orientating the spacecraft with respect to the earth in conditions of minimum illumination above the night side of the planet.

Nevertheless, even if Soyuz 17 is not a direct preparation for the Soviet-US mission, its success or otherwise must surely affect the confidence of the space planners of both nations in the outcome of the joint project. □

The Shtern case

The case of Dr Mikhail Shtern, formerly Director and Senior Consultant in the polyclinic of the Vinnitsa Provincial Endocrinological Health Centre has, during the course of pre-trial investigations and the trial itself, caused considerable reaction in the West, which has not passed unnoticed by the Soviet authorities. In the pre-trial investigations, the charges against Dr Shtern ranged from dissi-

dence to the murder of child patients. Apparently as a result of the protests, and also because it proved impossible to find witnesses to substantiate the murder charge, when the case finally came to trial the only charges Dr Shtern faced and those for which he was duly sentenced were those of "swindling" (charging for medical treatment) and "the taking of bribes".

Although these are clearly less serious charges than murder (or, in a Soviet context, dissidence), they seem intended to take Dr Shtern's case outside the competence of such organisations as Amnesty International which undertake to deal with cases of "prisoners of conscience". In the past 18 months, how every, there have been several cases of would-be emigrants to Israel facing criminal charges and, in Dr Shtern's case it was admitted on May 29, 1974 by the Procurator of the Investigations Department, V. Kravchenko that the preparation of an accusation against Shtern was connected with the desire of his family to emigrate to Israel. Accordingly, those who have been campaigning for Dr Shtern have shown no signs of being put off by the circumstances of his conviction. New letters of protest are being prepared, seeking a reversal of the verdict and sentence. □

THE Israeli Government has set up a Ministerial Committee for Science and Technology to tackle problems of research and development, and to determine whether activities in these fields are in line with the general policy of the government.

The scientific community in Israel feels that the establishment of the new committee is long overdue. Scientific and technological activities in the country have expanded extensively during the past five years; mainly because of governmental support its share in total civilian research and development and education investments was 69% in the fiscal year of 1973-74. This share increases when investments in defence research and development are included, since these are totally covered by the government.

The overall investment in research and development and higher education—both civilian and defence—reached a total sum of IL 1,500 million. There is, however, growing public criticism because of what is felt to be a lack of central policy in allocating government and public funds to achieve more direct and positive results. For instance, it is felt here that universities—which are private institutions—are supported too heavily by the state, whereas elementary and secondary schools suffer from lack of funds and teachers. It is also felt that a good deal of the

money spent on civilian research and development yield few benefits to the country in these trying days.

Israel is blessed with a 'brain influx', an inflow of professional manpower. An exceptional phenomenon for a small and developing country, this influx consists of local university graduates, of Israeli researchers who return home after working abroad for several years (mostly in the USA), and of

New Israeli science committee

from Kapaï Pines, Jerusalem

scientist-immigrants from North and South America, Europe and lately from the Soviet Union.

Alas, the blessing might become a misfortune if this manpower is not used to best advantage. A central policy is needed and it is hoped that the new Ministerial Committee for Science and Technology will also tackle this problem.

The committee's tasks include: (1) ratification of the general policy of the state for the advancement of scientific research and technological development and the application of

them to meet the economic and social needs of the country; (2) deciding the goals of the state's budget in the fields of research and development, and its priorities; (3) defining inter-ministerial procedures which will assure coordination of all government operations in science and technology; (4) rectifying any changes in the organisational layout of the research carried out in government laboratories; (5) confirming appointments of Chief Scientists in state ministries; (6) confirming any other functions in the fields of science and technology which the committee will think fit.

To stimulate the committee and to give emphasis to inter-ministerial problems, it is composed of ministers whose ministries engage in scientific and technological functions: The Prime Minister (chairman), a minister without portfolio (vice-chairman), and the ministers of finance, defence, health, education and culture, agriculture, commerce and industry, interior, housing and transportation. The coordinator of this committee is the Director-General of the National Council for Research and Development, Dr Eliezer Tal.

● Professor Saadia Amiel, one of Israel's leading atomic scientists, has been appointed to the strategic planning division of the Defence Ministry, according to a report in the *Jerusalem Post*.