

international news

Tbilisi : a conference with problems

from Vera Rich

THE problem of the participation of Soviet scientists in international conferences is a long-standing one, and organising secretaries have for many years had to deal with the problem of delegates who are refused visas and substitutes who have little or no knowledge of the subject concerned but who are "approved" by the Soviet government. The case of the International Conference on Artificial Intelligence at Tbilisi this week raised the problem in a particularly acute form. Since the venue of this conference was in the USSR, the difficulties over visas and "exit dossiers" could not arise for would-be participants within the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, several Jewish refusnik scientists have been prevented from attending.

Professor Aleksandr Lerner was informed on June 5 by the KGB that it regarded the invitation from the Programme Secretary of the Conference, Professor Patrick Winston, as an "American provocation". Since then Professor Lerner has been called in by the KGB and questioned for several hours in connection with his invitation to the conference.

Another would-be participant, Ovsei Gel'man, received his long-awaited visa for Israel just in time for him to be safely out of the Soviet Union before the conference began. On reaching Vienna, he disclosed the remarkable piece of information that the physicist brothers Isai and Grigori Gol'dshstein, who, being residents of Tbilisi would not have to obtain any travel or residence clearance to attend the conference, still had no idea at the end of August that they had been invited. It should be noted that these tactics of exclusion originate from the KGB only; the "establishment" Soviet scientists themselves have made no objection to the participation of the refusniks.

The Tbilisi conference has been used by more than 70 academics from British, US and Canadian universities as an occasion to protest against the treatment of Soviet scientists Valentin

A NEW Soviet base is to be established in Antarctica this year to prospect for mineral resources on the continent. Manned by a research team of 50 geologists, geophysicists and cartographers the station, called Druzhnaya Amity, will be based on the Filchner Ice Shelf at the southern end of the Weddel Sea, a region that until now has received scant Soviet attention.

According to an announcement from the official Soviet news agency, Tass, exploration will extend from the Antarctic Peninsula to Queen Maud Land, crossing an area which, until territorial claims were suspended by the Antarctic Treaty in 1961, was a part of the British Antarctic Territory that had also been claimed by both Argentina and Chile.

There is little room for doubt that the prime objective of the new Soviet team will be to prospect for mineral resources, with oil, gas and copper as the main targets. The Tass announcement stated that "the south [of the region to be surveyed] is reminiscent of the ore bearing zones of Siberia, while the west is a continuation of the American mountains [Andes] famous for their deposits of non-ferrous minerals.

"The most extensive region of continental shelf in Antarctica, a potential natural storehouse of oil and gas," the statement continued, "extends across the Weddel Sea and the Filchner Ice Shelf". Significantly, Soviet interest in Antarctica has in the past been concentrated largely on the opposite, eastern side of the continent.

Although official sources in Britain deny that there is any significance in the timing of the announcement, which followed closely the eighth Consultative Meeting between the signatories to the Antarctic Treaty in Oslo, it may force a decision on the

outstanding problem of the commercial exploitation of Antarctica. The Oslo meeting, which ended on June 20, was the first at which the signatories confronted that issue face on, and they were unable to reach any final decision. It was, however, agreed that the matter would become the subject of exhaustive international investigation involving all 13 signatories, and to that end a meeting is to be held in Paris in 1976 in preparation for the 1977 Consultative Meeting in London.

The Soviet decision to press on with preparations for eventual commercial exploitation may, however, precipitate a more positive response because of the new station's location. Sovereignty over the Filchner Ice Shelf was formerly the subject of an unsettled dispute between Argentina, Britain and Chile, and though territorial claims are suspended under the treaty, awkward legal questions would emerge should the Soviet Union uncover commercially exploitable resources in the area.

The decision to establish the base does not apparently run contrary to the Oslo recommendations and it is unlikely that the Soviet government will act to contravene the terms of the existing treaty. Though a solution to the problem remains some way off, there are indications that the signatories may eventually reach a mutually acceptable solution within the treaty, particularly as they are reluctant to throw the matter open to broad international debate. It is, therefore, likely that the Soviet Union, while attempting to forestall further prevarication on an issue of growing concern, will uphold the treaty; certainly, there is no reason why under its terms they should not establish a base in what was once British Antarctic Territory.

—Allan Piper

Turchin and Leonid Plyushch. The Western group, which includes many eminent names in the field of artificial intelligence, have petitioned the Soviet Academy of Sciences, Premier Brezhnev, Procurator General R. Rudenko and a good many more prominent officials. Noting that Turchin and Plyushch have been dismissed from their jobs and harassed "for defending the freedom of their colleagues", the

signatories proclaim Turchin's dismissal as "inexcusable" and Plyushch's hospital detention and drug treatment as "horrifying".

"We want to make it clear", they add, "that scientists around the world, and in particular members of the Artificial Intelligence community, have taken a keen interest in the fate of these men, and strongly protest against the treatment they have received."