Foreign contracts 'Russia's only chance'

[MOSCOW & LONDON] The appointment of Yevgeny Primakov as the new Russian prime minister and the promise to give cash-starved scientists a portion of their unpaid salaries may go some way towards stabilizing Russian politics. But they are unlikely to ease the hardship for researchers in the foreseeable future.

No solution is in sight to the salary crisis among scientists (see *Nature* 395, 109; 1998). The Ministry of Atomic Energy (Minatom), for example, is owed 2.8 billion rubles (US\$280 million) by the government, including 800 million rubles in up to four months of unpaid salaries. Staff staged a mass picket outside Minatom's Moscow building earlier this month.

Victor Ivanov, Minatom's newly appointed deputy minister, acknowledged last week to a press conference in London that foreign contracts are the only realistic solution to the crisis. Ivanov said that the ministry and its local reactor management had dug deep to support those most in need, but there is little more that can be done.

Overseas orders for nuclear materials, such as radioactive isotopes, "are the only way our institutions will survive", he said. Speaking on the day Primakov was nominated as prime minister by President Boris Yeltsin, Ivanov said Minatom institutions that relied solely on the Russian government "will have to shut down, or suspend work".

But Ivanov stressed that Russia was to press ahead with plans to expand its domes-

Unlucky strike: nuclear industry workers picket the parliament building in Moscow last week in support of demands for four months' back pay. Slogan on the left reads: "A hungry nuclear worker is much more dangerous than any other one".

ALEXANDER ZEMLIANICHENKO/AP

tic nuclear power programme. Three pressurized water reactors are being completed, and regulatory as well as local planning approval had been obtained for a fourth. He also said that Russia was keen to develop a new generation of fast breeder reactor with the help of foreign partners.

Ivan Gradobitov, deputy chairman of the nuclear workers' trade union, said that the government could not shirk its responsibilities. "The ministry is responsible for the situation since it serves as a state customer

for its own enterprises," he said.

Meanwhile, the Russian Committee of Scientific Collectives (RCSC), a federation of science trades unions, continues to send telegrams alerting Yeltsin to the catastrophic situation in Russian science, and repeatedly demands that the cabinet honour its earlier promise to pay scientists' salaries in full. But its exhortations fall on deaf ears.

The unions are also calling for the reinstatement of Vladimir Fortov, who was sacked as minister of science and technology in April, although Fortov is understood to have ruled out a return to office. Izosim Molchanov, the sacked deputy minister responsible for science within the finance ministry, has also yet to be replaced.

At the last RCSC meeting, union members voted for a series of strikes outside government buildings in Moscow. Unless the government acts by the end of September, staff from research institutes surrounding Moscow will blockade three highways leading to the city. The strikes will culminate in a series of protests across Russia on 7 October.

The Russian cabinet's decision of 17 August to freeze all short-term payments has crippled the country's banking system and left citizens with effectively no access to their money.

Bank accounts have been frozen, partly because the banks are running short of money, but partly too as collateral against government debts, and partly because they have converted rubles into dollars to safeguard the value of their deposits. The closure of accounts means bills cannot be paid, depriving the government of its usual sources of revenue.

Shops are emptying quickly as those with cash rush to stock up on food before the next price rise.

Carl Levitin & Ehsan Masood

Hopes ride on manager with a scientist's mind

[MOSCOW] The hopes of an ailing Russia are riding on Yevgeny Primakov, the country's so-far scandal-free prime minister, who has combined his career in politics with success in several other fields.

A former economist, journalist, Middle East expert, head of two research institutes, spymaster and diplomat, Primakov caps his impressive range of expertise with Russia's highest scientific rank: that of academician.

Between 1962 and 1970 he worked as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, on which he later wrote his doctoral thesis. He was elected a full member of the Russian Academy of Sciences in 1989, the year he became head of the KGB.

He is well known politically for his analytic approach to problem solving. It is a skill that will be severely tested as he charts a course through Russia's financial crisis and attempts to reinstate – and, even harder, maintain – a regular flow of salaries to scientists.

Yuri Emel'yanov, a former senior member of Russia's scientific civil service, thinks Primakov will succeed where others have failed. Emel'yanov remembers Primakov's handling of conflicts while at the helm of two of the Russian Academy of Sciences' research organizations – the East Research Institute and the World Economy Research Institute – from 1970 to 1989.

"I witnessed how he solved some of the most

delicate problems arising in the scientific community," says Emel'yanov. "Each time he acted as any scientist should: analysing a problem in depth and trying to understand it in its broader context."

According to Vitaly Goldansky, a prominent Russian physicist, Primakov tends to draw on the advice of expert advisory committees, and will use his contacts from the world of research to gather around him some of Russia's finest experts.

"He is a born manager," says one of his subordinates. "It makes no difference for him what kind of organization he is running – a scientific institute, a foreign ministry, an intelligence service or a local hospital."

C.L.