IN BRIEF

Explosions treaty delay

Work has been completed on the final draft of a US-USSR treaty limiting the size of so-called peaceful nuclear explosions, but President Ford has delayed signing the treaty to keep it from becoming an issue in some key Republican primary elections. Formal signing ceremonies, which were to have been held last week in Washington and Moscow, were dropped when Mr Ford suffered a string of defeats at the hands of Ronald Reagan, his right-wing challenger. Anxious not to give Reagan yet another foreign policy issue to snipe at, Ford decided to delay the signing until after the crucial May 18 Michigan primary. The irony in all this, however, is

that so far the treaty has been attacked almost solely by liberals who regard it as a sham in terms of arms control.

Nuclear trade moves

US pressure for the severest curbs on the sale of nuclear reprocessing and enrichment technology is expected when the "Group of Seven" (now swollen to ten) nuclear powers meets secretly in London next month. Reports indicate that US delegates will move to dissuade West Germany and France from going ahead with plans to export to Iran and Pakistan. They may also press for a cancellation of the West German-Brazilian deal agreed last year. Meanwhile, Congress is expected

to approve a request from the American General Electric Company to export two nuclear installations to South Africa.

New USSR group

A new dissident group, headed by physicist Yurii Orlov, has been formed in Moscow. The group aims to monitor the implementation in the Soviet Union of the Helsinki pledges on human rights. Dr Orlov was quickly arrested and informed that he and the other members of the group would be liable to legal action if they persisted with this "unconstitutional activity". Released after an hour, Dr Orlov stated that the group would continue to function.

Our authorities are right to be concerned about the risk of rabies being introduced into Britain. In recent years the disease has spread rapidly over Europe, and has now reached the coast of France just across the English Channel. All dogs entering the country have to spend 6 months in quarantine so those already infected may be detected; the main risk, however, is thought to be that a pet dog incubating rabies might be smuggled into England, either on a small boat which eluded the customs or, tranquillised, in the boot of a car. Our officials are increasingly alert to the danger, and heavier penalties are being given to those caught trying to evade the law, but the risk cannot be completely eliminated. It is also possible that rabies could reach Britain by other means. We do not have vampires, which are notorious carriers in Central America, but even the apparently harmless insectivorous bats, which are known to fly across the channel, are able to carry the virus. It would even be possible for a fox to swim the channel.

In France foxes have been the main carriers of rabies, and would probably be the greatest danger in Britain. There are therefore plans to kill all the foxes living in an area around any focus of rabies which might occur. Now that the fox is becoming a common suburban denizen in Britain, its potential as a disease carrier is increasing. So is the task of control if this becomes necessary. Foxes likely to endanger city dwellers live in overgrown cemeteries and disused railway embankments, and their elimination will be very difficult. On the other hand in rural areas, where foxhunting is popular, there should be less trouble. Contrary to the view put out by supporters of foxhunting, there would be little difficulty in

killing off every fox in their territories in a few days using gas, shooting and poison. Foxhunting is only a method of culling the surplus population, and mainly serves to conserve the species in many areas. The sport would have to be stopped if rabies appeared in the countryside, as the hounds and, in

Shooting the rabids **KENNETH MELLANBY**

turn, the hunters, would be at risk if they chased a rabid fox.

Wildlife conservation would suffer greatly if rabies became a serious problem in Britain. Not only foxes but many other animals, particularly carnivores like stoats and weasels, might be a danger, and there would be attempts to exterminate them. As there is already considerable pressure on these species in Britain, further persecution would probably be effective, and the whole balance between predators and their prey would be upset. The result might well be an unwelcome population explosion in undesirable species like the rat. The effect on the countryside might be

serious.

So far our preparations in Britain have been to stockpile vaccine and serum, to protect animals and to treat humans should rabies appear, and to make plans to try to wipe out foxes and other wild animals. Surely we should immediately devote our attention to our domestic pets? Although an infected fox might appear unnaturally tame, and infect a child (particularly one interested in wildlife) who played with it, a rabid dog would clearly be a much greater danger. While I would not wish to interfere with the right of the responsible pet lover to keep a dog, I think that we should take immediate action to eliminate the large numbers of uncared for, stray and feral dogs which are already a real danger to children and even adults in many parts of the country.

It is estimated that less than half the six million dogs in Britain are licenced, even though the fee remains ludicrously low at 37½ pence. These dogs will be more difficult to eliminate than foxes, so we should start at once. At present there is no requirement to licence a puppy under six months old. so many pets are bought for children only to be turned out when they become larger, hungrier and less attractive. Hundreds of thousands of animals are abandoned when their owners go on holiday. A vigorous campaign to destroy all unlicensed dogs, and a much more expensive licence, required even before a puppy could be acquired, would go far to solve the problem. Even without the risk of rabies a reduction in the number of unwanted dogs would make our cities cleaner, more hygienic and safer—and would cut down the need for expensive imports of high protein dog foods which might reduce hunger in other parts of the world.