IN BRIEF

Windscale inquiry dates

Mr Justice Parker, who was appointed along with two assessors to conduct the inquiry into British Nuclear Fuels Ltd's plans for an oxide fuel reprocessing plant at Windscale, is to conduct an informal preliminary meeting open to the public and press to discuss the programme and procedure for the inquiry. The aim of the meeting, on 17 May in Whitehaven, Cumbria, is to allow all concerned parties to make representations on these matters ahead of the main inquiry, which opens on 14 June also in Whitehaven.

Them and us

The difference in attitude towards foreigners between the general manager of R&D at ICI and the Chief Scientist at the Department of Industry (DoI) is that the former thinks of them as 'us' and the latter as 'them'. Duncan

Davies, who made the transition from one to the other when he left ICI at the end of March, last week expressed his regrets at losing some of his former international involvement. Talking of British industry, he said that the 'entrance fee' for innovations—the initial investment to develop an idea into a marketable product—had increased by several orders of magnitude over the past twenty years. To ensure that it is recovered, better planning was needed at the initial stages of a project. Highly trained scientists and engineers, he said, should also be trained to judge the potential of an idea in the marketing as well as the scientific world before committing industry to a large investment which it might otherwise lose.

RGO exhibition

The Royal Greenwich Observatory at Herstmonceux has put together, out of

its own resources, a small exhibition on the castle and its environment and the work done by the observatory. The castle already has numerous visitors to the Isaac Newton Telescope and to the spacious grounds; they will now be able to visit the exhibition as well.

Chemical hazards report

A report published recently by the Chemical Industries Association's Safety and Health Council (CISHEC) provides the industry with details of a technique to combat potential hazards in existing and new large-scale chemical processes. The technique, known as a Hazard and Operability Study, involves systematic study of every part of the proposed process and speculative consideration of the consequences of every possible deviation from the norm. Remedial action for every potential hazard is then noted. (*A Guide to Hazard and Operability Studies*, CISHEC, £4.50.)

MANKIND has always suffered from disasters. The archetypal catastrophe was the flood, described in the Hebrew scriptures and in various middle eastern legends. Only eight individuals out of the whole human population were said to have survived to repopulate the globe with their progeny and that of the other animals saved from drowning in Noah's ark. Then in the second millennium BC the Aegean island of Santorini exploded, burying its cities in debris, and causing a tidal wave which may have ended the Minoan civilisation in Crete. This view was held by the leading Greek archaeologist, Professor Spirodon Marinatos. Shortly before his death in 1975 I heard him speak of his studies and demonstrate his excavations on Santorini. With all the signs of disaster around him he communicated his enthusiasm even when addressing a largely English-speaking audience in Greek; almost the only words I actually understood were *καταστροφή* and *κατακλάσμα*.

No one else was left to organise an expedition to help in Noah and his family's rehabilitation, and the more fortunate populations on the shores of the Mediterranean were not in a position to feed and house any survivors in Crete. Today, however, with improved communications, the rest of the world soon knows of disasters in remote corners of the globe: funds are raised and expeditions with food, medical supplies and means to improvise shelter are rapidly dispatched to try to reduce the misery of the victims. It is some-

times ironical to note that there may for generations have been chronic shortages of all the necessities, with thousands of preventable deaths each year, in these same areas, and that

Publish or perish **KENNETH MELLANBY**

world opinion has remained unmoved until a spectacular flood or earthquake has occurred. Then financial and material aid has poured in, making at least some of the population (perhaps the least deserving members) richer than ever before.

Aid for the victims of disasters has not always been appropriate in kind, nor has it always been administered efficiently. Various international agencies have built up a corpus of information, but this is not readily available to those wishing to help.

For this reason the London Technical Group has launched a new quarterly *Disasters: The International Journal of Disaster Studies and Practice*, aimed at educating scientists and relief workers. It says it will describe both successful and unsuccessful experiments in disaster relief.

The first number reports on a UNESCO conference on the assessment and mitigation of earthquake risk. There are articles on the drought in the Sahel and on emergency shelters. Various useful equipment is described. Perhaps the most interesting contribution is a letter based on experience of the Skopje earthquake in 1963 in Yugoslavia, which shows how the local population, with the materials already available, produced effective makeshift shelters long before expensive and inferior emergency houses could be shipped from abroad. This is one instance of how aid can be misused due to the ignorance of the well meaning. If future issues can keep up this standard, the journal deserves to succeed.

Our attitude to disasters, which we share with the insurance companies, has curious theological implications. A colleague, a member of his parochial church council, was active and successful in raising money to repair a mediaeval church whose roof suffered in the gales of January 1976. At the end of the year, surveying the relatively favourable balance sheet, he informed his somewhat surprised rector that everything should be satisfactory for the next year or two, "unless we suffered from another act of God".