IN BRIEF

JET: Costly hold-up?

Confirming the loss of members of his group to the United States, Dr Paul Rebut, the French scientist who heads the design team based at Culham working on the European fusion project JET, was quoted as saying last week that even if a decision on the site of the next stage of the project was taken now, it could take up to a year to re-form the team.

Dr Rebut's comments, in an interview with the *Oxford Mail*, followed the news that the EEC Council of Foreign Ministers had not even discussed the subject, let alone come to a decision, when it met last week. The subject did not appear on the agenda because meetings between representatives from Britain and Germany, the countries with the strongest candidates for the siting of JET, had not taken place as planned since the last Council meeting in July. A high level Anglo-German meeting in Bonn set for 9–10 September was cancelled because of the kidnapping of Hans-Martin Schleyer. The ministers will meet informally on 8-9 October, and formally on 17–18 October.

NERC report, appointment

Like the UK SRC, the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) last week published its report for the year to March 1977 and acquired a new chairman. A feature of the report is a 6-page description of the contribution NERC research can make to solving problems of energy and the environment; in particular, on the controversial issue of disposal of high-level radioactive waste, the report says the funds needed are "many times greater than the very modest sums" with which NERC is undertaking current studies.

The report also shows that the main bulk of the £26.675 million spent on NERC's scientific programme went on studies of the earth (42.2%) and the sea (32.9%). Commissioned research totalled nearly £15 million.

The man who will succeed Sir Peter Kent as chairman of NERC is Professor J. W. L. Beament, the insect physiologist.

Dirty development

KENNETH MELLANBY

MANY observers thought that the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Environment, in Stockholm, Sweden, was marred by the evident differences of opinion between the rich and poor nations on their priorities. The delegates from the so-called developed countries in Europe and North America were enthusiastic about controlling pollution (even when their governments were not always effective in carrying out these intentions). Many speakers from the poorer countries, now optimistically called 'developing', said that increasing their productivity and raising the standard of living of their citizens was more important. They pointed out that Britain and other comparatively wealthy countries had done little to control pollution during their industrial revolution, in the nineteenth century, and to impose unrealistic and expensive standards on those who were just setting out on the same road would hold them back unnecessarily.

It is encouraging to find that this view is not universally held. I am just back from Mauritius, where I was invited by its government to advise on environmental problems and their control. Mauritius, known to many only as the former home of the extinct dodo, and the place where the most valuable postage stamp was printed, is a volcanic island in the middle of the Indian Ocean. It covers some 760 square miles and has over 800,000 inhabitants. It was first a Dutch and then a French colony, until captured by the British in 1810. It remained a British colony until 1968, when it became an independent state, a member of the Commonwealth. Its main income is from sugar, and some 54% of the island's surface is covered by sugar cane. It is a net food importer, and attempts to reach greater self-sufficiency by the diversification of agriculture are being made, though little good land remains uncultivated. Industrial development, particularly of light industries, has recently made some progress, and is said to produce nearly a quarter of the island's income.

As yet Mauritius has no really damaging pollution problems. It would be hard to produce serious air pollution in a small oceanic island in the region of the trade winds. There is some smoke from factories, dust from stone crushers, and road safety is often impaired by the smoke screens from badly maintained diesel lorries and buses. The beaches of white coral sand, the main tourist attraction, are clean except near settlements and sewage outfalls. However, there are many at present trivial nuisances which could soon grow into environmental dangers. Refuse, likely to increase with population and a growing GNP, is seldom collected and never dealt with hygienically. Much is thrown into streams, the one place where the maximum damage will occur. Factories are surrounded by noisome piles of uncollected debris. Some people exhibit a genius for doing the most damage with the smallest amount of a pollutant. Thus a small tea factory in a sparsely inhabited hilly area has a leaky pipe from its oil tank. A few gallons seep out each year into the adjoining stream, half a mile above the intake for the local water supply. Garages always seem to empty their used sump oil into the nearest river.

Thus with a growing population, rising incomes and more industry the future for Mauritius could be a dirty one, unless immediate steps are taken to preserve the environment. Some encouragement can be obtained from the sugar industry, which could be a major polluter. The largest and best-run factories have remarkably little harmful impact on the environment, and the others are improving. The industry clearly knows what needs to be done. None of the other problems is insoluble—and success will be easier the sooner vigorous action is taken. In all developing countries prospects are better than they were some years ago. The most valuable aid that the developed countries can give is knowledge of how they have got over the abuses of the nineteenth century. They must show that with modern industrial development, pollution control need not be unduly expensive, and that early action can be an excellent investment.