

news in brief

British Association meets on UNCSTD: As preparations mount for the UN Conference on Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD) in August, the British Association for the Advancement of Science is organising a one-day public symposium on March 8 to allow 'non-government bodies' a chance to express their opinions. Seven main speakers will put points of view ranging from that of the UN, from Guy B. Gresford, who is Deputy Secretary General UNCSTD, New York, to the 'trade union view' by Barry Sherman, Director of Research at ASTMS. Sir Ieuan Maddock, who will also chair the meeting, presents 'a British scientist's view', while the multinational companies will be covered by Mrs Doreen Wedderburn of Unilever and chairman of a CBI working group. Professor A. H. Bunting (Reading University) and Adrian Moyes of Oxfam are scheduled to present the reaction of the late-developing countries and the 'very poor' to science and technology; while Professor Robert A. Shaw, who holds the chemistry chair at Birkbeck College, London, will speak on the educational consequences of UNCSTD, in a talk that will undoubtedly range well beyond its title.

The BAAS seems confident that the meeting will be both lively and useful. With this line-up of speakers and the quality of contributions expected from the floor, a forum of this kind should be the best way of putting across the 'unbiased opinions'—in a BAAS phrase—of British scientists to the British UNCSTD delegation. (Further details from the symposium secretary, 01-734 6010 extension 377.)

Accident delays European Space Launcher: Development flights of the European Space Launcher, Ariane, have been delayed five months due to failure of a safety device on 28 November 1978. An ignition delay in the combustion chamber caused an excess of hydrogen to build up which resulted in a "violent ignition", according to ESA. The explosion caused extensive damage to the propulsion system requiring the launcher to be dismantled and refurbished. But initial fears that the stage or propulsion design might have been responsible were unfounded. An inquiry conducted by the project team found that a malfunction of a hydrogen flow monitor was responsible. The new dates for the first four development flights are: early November, 1979; early March, 1980; June, 1980; and October, 1980 (unchanged). The revised schedule permits the first operational flight to go ahead as scheduled in December 1980.



US scientists urge further intensive study of Mars and Venus: Mars, Venus and the Earth should receive the major focus in exploration of the inner solar system for the next decade, according to a report published recently by the National Research Council, the study section of the US National Academy of Sciences. "The comparative planetology of these bodies is a key to understanding of the formation of the earth, its atmosphere and oceans, and

the physical and chemical conditions that lead to the origin and evolution of life", the report says, although it adds that the atmosphere-free terrestrial planets, namely Mercury and the Moon, are "complementary bodies of high scientific interest".

As for further missions to Mars and Venus following the Viking missions of 1977 and the current Pioneer missions, the report says that studies should be initiated to develop the special technology needed for the return of samples, as well as *in situ* experiments. In an "overview" section of the report, the committee says it is deeply disturbed by the near-term outlook for the US planetary programme, and that the struggle in 1978 to obtain approval of the Jupiter Orbiter Probe, after a three-year hiatus in planetary mission starts, was a reminder that a national policy for planetary exploration was still to be defined.

The report also says that in view of the lack of direct and substantial information on Soviet plans for planetary exploration, and because of the limited extent of past scientific exchanges, "it appears desirable to establish a much improved vehicle for discussion of US-USSR interests in planetary exploration".

US to assess environmental impact of foreign projects: All US federal agencies must in future prepare an assessment of the likely environmental impact of any new project to be carried out in a foreign country, following an executive order signed last week by President Carter in Washington. Projects that could be affected by the order include the construction of a nuclear reactor in the Philippines, which critics claim to be dangerously near an earthquake fault, and US participation in spraying Mexican marijuana fields with the herbicide paraquat.

The presidential order follows almost a decade of dispute over whether the National Environmental Protection Act of 1969, which requires environmental impact statements on federal projects within the US, was also intended to cover projects carried out overseas. The Council on Environmental Quality has always maintained that this was, indeed, the intention of the US Congress in passing the Act; in contrast, the US State Department has claimed that carrying out such an assessment would be a violation of the sovereign rights of other countries. Dr Charles Warren, chairman of the Council on Environmental Policy said that the order was a response to a growing worldwide concern that governments are undertaking major actions without enough consideration of the consequences.

Libyans deny A-bomb intentions: Libyan officials have denied charges by the US Federation of American Scientists that the country intends to acquire nuclear weapons. According to Mr Ahmed Shehata, head of the foreign affairs office of Libya's ruling People's Congress, Libya has "neither the time nor the potential" to acquire nuclear weapons itself, although it believes that the superpowers should curb any further transfers of nuclear-weapons technology to Israel, South Africa or Rhodesia. The charges were made after a trip to Libya two months ago by FAS secretary Dr Jeremy Stone.

Birmingham University challenges smallpox trial: Birmingham University has won leave to apply to the High Court to quash its prosecution over the smallpox case. The university claims the trial has been prejudiced by the premature release of the Shooter report on the incident.