news in brief

MRC staff committee prepares for budget fight: Responding to a leak in *The Observer* (3 June) predicting extensive cuts in UK science in this week's budget, the Medical Research Council Staff Side Committee initiated actions last week to try to prevent the cuts. Petitions and telegrams from every MRC unit have been sent to Neil Macfarlane, Minister of Science, protesting cutbacks in research funding. Eight of the nine trade unions represented on the staff committee supported a move for an immediate meeting with Macfarlane but the minister refused the request calling it "premature". Staff side initiatives to make joint representations to the government with MRC management were similarly rebuffed last week. In a letter, MRC management rejected the possibility of joint action opposing budget cuts saying that management and staff should act independently since the two have different views. The full staff side committee will meet 20 June to make its long term plans to prevent damage to medical research in the UK.

US scientists report successful laser fusion tests: Scientists at the University of Rochester in New York suggested last week that the highly successful results of a series of experiments on a laser fusion energy system might bring forward the date at which break-even in fusion energy—the point at which the energy produced by the system equals the energy inserted—can be achieved.

The experiments were carried out using a six-beam ZETA laser system, the first stage of a 24-beam system scheduled to begin operation later in the year. Using a laser power level of 1.65×10^{12} watts, the experiment generated more than one thousand million neutrons, at temperatures of 67 million degrees. "This is between five and ten times the amount that was expected," Dr Moshe Lubin, director of the university's Laser Energetics Laboratory, said last week.

When the full 24-beam system is in operation, it is hoped to be able to produce 30 to 40 terawatts ($\text{watts} \times 10^{12}$) of power. "The success of our first experiments means that it may be possible for us here at the Laser Energetics Laboratory to help the national programme move up the date that is projected for breakeven. That event is presently estimated to occur in the 1984 timeframe," said Dr Lubin.

Third World energy experts to confront the West: A symposium to be held in London 20–22 June will provide a forum for 30 spokespersons from the Third World to confront "the dominance being exercised by developed countries in science and technology, monetary expenditure, and planning and policy." The conference, titled Third World Energy Strategies and the Role of the Industrialised Countries is being organised by Ariane van Buren and Gerald Foley of the International Institute for Energy Development and is designed to give experts from the Third World a chance to address influential figures from western aid agencies and development banks in the areas of nuclear power, the role of multinational oil companies in development and the desirability of the alternate technologies currently in western vogue as being "appropriate" for the Third World. Papers will be pre-circulated and speakers will be restricted to five minute presentations thus allowing for up to one hour of debate. The papers and debates will be published. Sponsors of the meeting include the UK Ministry of Overseas Development, Atlantic Richfield, and the Beiger Institute of the Swedish Academy of Sciences.

UNCTAD bodes ill for UNCSTD: The increasing economic crisis facing the developed capitalist countries has produced a complete deadlock at the fifth UN Conference on Trade and Development. Four weeks of negotiations at Manila among 5,000 delegates from the world's rich and poor nations costing an estimated £100m have failed to reach agreement on any restructuring of the western world's economy. "The resolutions passed commit us to absolutely nothing" said one western delegate. Third World countries attempted to change current practices of the International Monetary Fund, to install a system of trade preferences and multilateral trade negotiations for developing countries and to break the industrialised nation's monopoly on shipping. Final resolutions condemned protectionism in trade against Third World products, provided for short and long term "action programmes" and expressed a need to progress towards an aid target of 0.7% of GNP. But several countries, including the UK, said they could make no commitment due to current cutbacks in public spending. The failure of the rich nations to yield to Third World demands for economic change reduces the possibility for effective action to be taken at the UN Conference on Science, Technology and Development to be held in Vienna in August.

India extends ban on wildlife export: The Union Ministry of Commerce has restricted wildlife exports to only 21 live species of birds, one live species of animal and products of six other animals, on the recommendation of a sub-committee of the Indian Board for Wildlife which examined the existing export policy from an ecological viewpoint. The only animal species that can now be exported is the striped squirrel; allowed bird species include myna (other than hill myna), parakeet, and two Himalayan species known for their colourful plumage—Sibia and Siva. Among the allowed animal products are the skins of common fox, hill fox, jackal and jungle cats, and peacock feathers and porcupine quills. The new policy follows an import-export order of January 1978 which banned most of the wildlife in demand abroad, and the recent revision will further hit the trade. The bird trade is worth 80 million rupees annually, the major portion being export: according to a recent report of the Royal Society for Protection of Birds, 4.5 million birds used to be exported from India every year. Export of munias, constituting 70% of the total bird trade, was banned last year, and the ban on the export of rhesus monkey (about 20,000 annually) and on the lucrative trade of pelts and furs of cat family and skins of lizards have drastically affected the animal trade. But there has been a concurrent increase in poaching and smuggling of wildlife and their products. Recently a global racket involving the

exchange of wrist watches and other luxury items for snake skins was uncovered in Bombay. So although conservationists and naturalists are pleased by the recent directive—except for jackal skin, an animal fast decreasing in number—they feel much more rigorous policing is required.

from Dilip M. Salwi,
New Delhi.

"Keep your part of the bargain.
Throw out the wrist watches!"