news in brief

Watches warning: Stricter control of some digital displays for liquid crystal watches has been urged by the UK's National Radiological Protection Board following publication of its first consumer products report. The board began testing devices which could expose the public to radiation in 1976 and its report concentrates on two main devices — ionisation chamber smoke detectors and liquid crystal digital watches that contain gaseous tritium light sources. Most of the smoke detectors, were found to be satisfactory, and where problems were detected, the board reports that these have now been identified and solved. However, in some watches, the tritium light displays — which eliminate the need for batteries — were found to leak "significant" amounts of tritium when subjected to fairly violent tests. In some cases, this reached as much as 10,000 times the recommended limit for radiation emission. The board described this as "clearly unacceptable", although in reality it is unlikely that watches would be subject to the tests' stringent criteria. Nevertheless the board urged that greater care be taken in manufacture and added that in cooperation with the Federal Office of Public Health in Switzerland — where many of the light displays are made — a new set of guidelines was now being drawn up.

Mystery leak: Reports of a leak of radiation apparently emanating from the Israeli Embassy caused the London Fire Brigade's Chemical Incident Squad to go into action last week. When they reached the scene, however, the radiation had stopped. The radiation burst was picked up by monitoring apparatus on a fire appliance at the Old Court Place fire station next to the embassy. After two hours, it stopped, but resumed again for a short time later.

An embassy spokesman said they were "totally mystified" by the incident. There was nothing in the embassy that could be a source of radiation. The only possible culprit, a small X-ray machine used for examining suspect parcels, had been checked, and was found to be in good order. Fire Service headquarters at Lambeth were unable to comment on the type of radiation discovered. A Home Office scientist, however, told *Nature* that the only radiation-sensing devices carried on fire appliances were gamma-ray dosimeters and survey meters.

Helium supplies in danger: The US Department of Energy spends \$400 million a year on research into helium related technologies, and in hearings before the Subcommittee on Energy and Power of the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, helium was touted as the key to a "supertechnology" which could help mitigate the energy shortage through its use — as a liquid — to cool metals to superconductive state.

However, the supply of helium is in danger. Scientists said some 13 billion cubic feet of helium are released into the atmosphere each year as a waste product of natural gas extraction. The National Research Council estimates that at this rate, US supplies of helium (approximately 718 billion cubic feet) will last only another 30 years. The subcommittee wants Congress to pass the Helium Energy Act to enforce the conservation of helium.

Carcinogen data criticised: In an editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the editor, Dr William Barclay, criticises scientific reports of carcinogens and the tests on which they are based. He accuses the media of encouraging "the chicken little phenomenon", heightening public anxiety by a constant barrage of news stories citing substances in general use as carcinogens, based on evidence which "is often tenuous and unconfirmed". Dr Barclay also castigates the methods of testing these substances, on the grounds that dosages used often exceed any that man might be exposed to. He also claims that the results of tests are finally evaluated by "persons of questionable expertise in the field of tumour histopathology".

UK chemical companies get drug warning: Chemical companies throughout Britain were being warned by the Royal Institute of Chemistry last week about some of their products that have been revealed as basic ingredients of a powerful hallucinogenic drug, known as BZ, which is said to be 100 times more potent than LSD. The move follows a campaign by the National Society for Crime Reduction and Social Justice — who are sponsored by the Church of Scientology — who have called for Government restrictions on the sale of the chemical ingredients of BZ, or 3-quinuclidinyl benzilate as it is properly known, and its inclusion within the Misuse of Drugs Act. The society says that the synthesis procedure for BZ is at present freely available from the British Patents Office and can be manufactured for less than £100. The group also wants the Ministry of Defence to release details of its experiments using BZ on soldier volunteers to provide public information about the drugs' lasting effects. They claim that BZ was originally developed in the US and tested as an incapacitating agent by the military and the CIA.

Pugwash council urges SALT ratification: The council of the Pugwash conferences has urged the rapid ratification of the SALT II nuclear weapons treaty by the US and Russia. "This step is essential for the avoidance of nuclear war and for enhanced international security", urges a prepared statement released after the council's recent meeting in Mexico City. Although it admits the treaty does not halt some strategic nuclear weapons now being developed, the council stresses that SALT II opens the door to further lowering of the level of nuclear confrontation and substantial cuts in nuclear weaponry. "In the interests of world peace, we urge the earliest ratification of SALT II and the immediate beginning of negotiations on SALT III", it concludes.

Three tears for the crocodile: The Indian government has launched a massive programme to save the crocodile from extinction, following an investigation by Dr H.R. Bustard of the Food and Agriculture Organisation into the declining population of the three varieties of Indian crocodile. One effect of this decline is a sharp rise in the population of predatory varieties of fish like the catfish which has led to a decreased yield of edible fish.

The Indian Government has therefore undertaken, on a priority basis, a project for crocodile breeding at several centres, including Hyderabad and Madras in the south and Orissa and West Bengal in the east. About a dozen officers are now being trained in the technique of capturing reptiles at the Central Crocodile Breeding and Management Training Institute, Hyderabad. When the hatchlings have grown to a length of about three feet, they are released into a reservoir. The Orissa Government has inaugurated a project for rearing gharial (above), one of the crocodile varieties, at the village of Tikerpada, with two villagers as guards. The nearby Sartkoshia Gorge area, of about 950 sq. km, has been declared a crocodile sanctuary. Another sanctuary is being set up at the Similipal tiger reserve, where again it is hoped to breed crocodiles in captivity.

The need for sanctuaries underlines the critical position facing Indian crocodiles. Quite apart from its skin, used for making shoes and fancy bags, crocodile meat is a valuable commodity, for Indian tribesmen believe it to be a cure for asthma.

from Javid Hasan in Bangalore