

news in brief

Western nations increase proportion of R & D funds spent on military research: The proportion of research and development funds spent by the United States and Western Europe for military purposes increased from 38.5% to 39.2% between 1975 and 1977, according to a report published last week by the US Arms Control Association and the Institute for World Order. The amount of money spent on military research increased from \$12.8 billion to \$15.4 billion, says the report, which points out that the global expenditure on military purposes exceeded the rate of inflation for the seventh year, reaching a total of \$425 billion.

The report says that the R & D component of military spending is significant not only for what it has produced, but also for the continuing momentum that it gives to the arms race generally. "The steady improvement in technology has made the pace of national military spending essentially independent of the existing threat to the nation."

"In the superpower competition, each side considers it essential to develop and produce whatever is technologically possible, on the grounds that the adversary may do so. R & D is the instrument through which 'antagonistic cooperation' between the two leading adversary nations ensures a never-ending escalation of arming."

World Military and Social Expenditures 1979, by Ruth Leger Sivard. Single copies \$3,50. Available from Work Priorities, Box 1003, Leesburg Va. 22075, US.

Czechoslovakia considers ecology of uranium mining: Czechoslovakia's Minister of Energy Vlastimil Ehrenberger announced last week that the country's uranium industry had met all its increased production targets. Attention was also being given to the ecological aspects of uranium mining. In a 40-minute speech on the state of the energy industry, he told the Chamber of the People that new uranium ore deposits now ensured a "reliable base" for the country's nuclear energy industry. A large ore-processing plant, built with Soviet assistance was operating in North Bohemia. Exports of uranium to the Soviet Union were well up to target, and a scheme is being worked out for the future of the uranium industry after 1980, when the agreement signed in 1945 for supplies to the Soviet Union, runs out.

Rattled: Pennsylvania rattlesnake steaks are no longer on the menu at Dominique's restaurant in Washington DC. The rattlesnakes have been spared as the result of a letter to the restaurant's owner by C.K. Dodd, an endangered species herpetologist at the US Department of the Interior. But Mr Dodd's intercession on behalf of the Pennsylvania rattlesnakes may have cost him his job. US Secretary of the Interior, Cecil D. Andrus, a patron of the restaurant, apologised to the owner Dominique D'Ermo, for his employee's action assuring D'Ermo that the snake "is not listed as either threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act"; and Mr Dodd received a four page letter of dismissal.

The most serious charge against Mr Dodd seems to be that he wrote his letter on Department of the Interior Stationery. He admitted that he might have been at fault, but claimed "Even if it is against the rules most people would get a simple slap on the wrist or a reprimand". He plans to appeal. *Anne Norman*

Vietnamese claimed to use poison gas: US representative Jim Leach released a report last week which claims that a number of Hmong refugees had witnessed or had been victims of seven poison gas attacks in the past year. The Hmong are a hill tribe in a remote area of Laos. They were an ally of the French and then the Americans during the wars in Indochina. According to the report, refugees from the tribe described poison gas attacks in which gas was dropped from planes in bombs or sacks which exploded 200

to 300 metres above the ground. Dozens of villagers were killed or have become ill as a result of them. The Vietnamese Embassy in London told *Nature* that the report was untrue and was an attempt to discredit the Vietnamese government "Only the US has used poison gas against the people of Indochina."

FOE takes action against "Tories cold war":

Friends of the Earth in UK are launching a major campaign to force the UK government to supply adequate heating for its citizens this winter. Calling Britain's insulation standards a "national disgrace", FOE is critical of the lack of government incentives to provide insulation for



houses and of the failure of the government to live up to its election promises. "It is ironic that in International Energy Conservation Month, the government is actually cutting its energy conservation programme while at the same time it is embarking on a potentially disastrous major expansion of nuclear power." On 18 October a FOE team will instal insulation in a London home to make it "the best insulated flat in Britain" as a demonstration project to kick off the campaign.

US firm cited for causing fertility hazards: The US Department of Labour's Occupational Safety and Health Administration last week cited the American Cyanamid Company for violating health standards by threatening the child-bearing capacity of female workers at a chemical factory in West Virginia. Last year the company admitted that it had refused to let women work in the plant's lead pigment section unless they had been sterilised, since it was concerned that the work might result in harming fetuses or affecting the women's fertility. The company says that it offered the women other jobs, although possibly at lower pay; however four women at the plant disclosed that they had been voluntarily sterilised in order to keep their jobs.

Announcing that a fine of \$10,000 was to be levied on the company for violating health and safety standards by creating such working conditions, Dr Eula Bingham, head of OSHA, said that the agency was "breaking new ground" in its actions. "What this citation is saying is that companies are required to make the workplace safe for men and women. Part of making it safe is making it safe for reproductive capacity," Dr Bingham said.

The citation requires American Cyanamid to stop insisting that female workers working with highly toxic lead be sterilised.

Socialist countries discuss joint research: Representatives of the Academies of Science of the Comecon bloc met in Tallin (Estonian SSR) last month to discuss the main directions for joint research for 1981-85. According to the protocol of the meeting, joint research is to be extended in the fields of petrochemistry, quantum chemistry, mechanics, machine-design and technological processes. A longer-term draft cooperation programme in the natural sciences up to 1990 was also discussed. The meeting formally welcomed the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (represented by its National Centre of Scientific Research and Committee of Social Sciences) into the multilateral scientific cooperation agreement of the Academies of Sciences of Socialist Countries of 15 December, 1971.