

Nuclear weapons

Argentina backs away

PRESIDENT-elect Raul Alfonsin of Argentina, as one of his first acts, has ordered the drafting of a new law to control the country's nuclear energy programme. Foreign minister-designate Dante Caputo, speaking on Buenos Aires radio, said that the purpose of the law will be to study the organization of the National Commission for Atomic Energy (CNEA) "so that its activities may be in keeping with the policy of using nuclear energy for peaceful purposes". Mr Alfonsin has decided that CNEA should be "directly subordinated to the executive branch". The foreign minister, the presidential secretary-general and a presidential adviser will reorganize the structure of CNEA and work out a mechanism for the legislative control of the implementation of the government's peaceful nuclear policy.

The stress on Argentina's exclusively peaceful nuclear aims seems intended to allay international fears that the development of the gas-diffusion uranium enrichment plant at Pilcaniyeu might have sinister implications — particularly in view of the strict secrecy that has surrounded it.

According to the outgoing CNEA chairman, Vice-Admiral Carlos Castro Madero, this secrecy was necessary because of the "very tough policy against nuclear proliferation" inaugurated by the Carter Administration in the United States. Had the Argentines revealed that they were planning an enrichment facility of their own, they could have been blocked by an embargo on the supply of essential equipment. Castro Madero further hinted that secrecy had also been necessary because there would have been considerable scepticism that Argentina could succeed in such a project — and any delays and setbacks could have meant loss of face for CNEA. As for the idea that Argentina might make an atomic bomb, he told a television interviewer, that would be "the most absurd thing", wasting human and financial resources and "provoking other countries" to do likewise.

But Vice-Admiral Castro Madero has not always held that view. In 1980, he claimed that "with a little help", Argentina could have its own nuclear bomb. In April 1983, he commissioned a feasibility study on the construction of a nuclear powered submarine for the Argentine Navy (while admitting that the ultimate decision must be taken by the government and people of Argentina).

His resignation, shortly after the election of Mr Alfonsin and the announcement of the completion of the Pilcaniyeu project, raised international hopes that Argentina might soon decide to accede to the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Ironically, as fears of an Argentina nuclear bomb fade, rumours have begun to circulate that Brazil is working on such a

bomb. According to the newspaper *O Estado de Sao Paulo* of 9 December, Brazil will have "total technological independence" in seven years, and will concentrate on a "strategic" 20 to 30 kilotonne plutonium bomb, to be carried by a missile with a 3,000-km range. Commenting on the rumours, Waldir de Vasconcelos, chief of staff of the Brazilian armed forces, said that Brazil would research the "entire potential" of nuclear technology.

"Any country that wants to progress must carry out that research", he said, "and whoever manages to master nuclear technology can even manufacture a bomb." The production of a nuclear bomb would, he stressed, be a political decision, but he did not say whether such a decision had been taken.

Vera Rich

Minister recants

A PUBLIC apology was made last week by Jerzy Urban, the Polish Government's chief press spokesman, to the "BBC correspondent" in Warsaw for an "unjust attack" made a few weeks earlier, in connection with the documents which Polish scholars must sign before they can travel abroad.

Mr Urban's "unjust attack" was quoted on 5 December by the government daily *Rzeczpospolita*. Urban went on to say "Furthermore, the British press carried information, broadcast also by the BBC, that persons travelling abroad in fact undertake to present their attitudes in accordance with the *raison d'état* of the Polish People's Republic. And that such obligations have to be signed. This information is manufactured out of thin air."

On 13 December, however, Mr Urban said that "after further investigation of the issue it turns out that the research workers of the Polish Academy of Science who go on official visits abroad do, in fact, sign instructions which include such a sentence. My previous statement of last November was based on information from the Ministry of Science, Higher Education and Technology . . . I failed to notice that this ministry is not the only institution which sends research workers abroad, and thus made an unjust claim against the BBC."

Mr Urban (or his research team) has still, in fact, failed to get his facts right. Kevin Ruane, the BBC correspondent in Warsaw, had not, apparently filed the story at all. Mr Krzysztof Pszenicki, head of the Polish section of the BBC commented that he had seen no despatch on the subject from Kevin Ruane or from any other source, except for the report in *Nature* on 3 November, which was reviewed in the BBC Polish section's regular "Review of the Weekly Press".

Vera Rich

Information technology

Esprit foiled in budget impasse

BRITAIN and West Germany last week dealt a blow to Esprit, Europe's fledgling and belated effort to coordinate research and development in information technology. Esprit has been heralded by European industry as the best research plan ever to emerge from the Brussels-based European Commission, and it was due to receive first full funding next year; but after last week's meeting of European research ministers, it will get none, at least for the time being.

The problem stems from the earlier debacle of the European summit in Athens, where heads of state failed to agree on a permanent mechanism for reducing Britain's and West Germany's contributions to the Brussels budget. Net earners — notably France — from the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) were notably reluctant to make concessions on CAP, and the net contributors refused to budge without such concessions. So Britain and West Germany refused to support Esprit until the "overall shape" of next year's budget is agreed.

"It was just too soon after Athens", said a British government spokesman. "No-one had had a chance to draw breath." However, the research council did resolve the last remaining problems on the management and structure of Esprit, so there is now a neat "Esprit package" just waiting for funds. These could be released before the end of January, Britain feels, provided Esprit can be politically disentangled from other European issues.

Brussels observers, however, describe the British and German attitude as illogical. They appear to be playing the "Esprit card" to help win concessions on other issues, it is felt, but the ploy might rebound, as both countries stood to gain more from Esprit than other partners because their relatively strong information industries were likely to take the leading role in many of the Esprit projects.

Moreover, Brussels research commissioner Etienne Davignon offered a way out. He argued that as all members were agreed that Esprit had the highest priority, the Commission could find ways to support it by cutting or delaying other work, but British and West German representatives would not agree to this proposal.

According to the Commission, Esprit will have to be abandoned if there is no agreement before June, when the pilot phase ends. Industry cannot wait longer, Brussels says. In Britain this view is said to be somewhat exaggerated, but industry is certainly going to find it difficult to understand that while the 10 nations are fully agreed on the programme, the money ("a flea-bite on a gnat's elbow", according to a Commission man) is not going to be released.

Robert Walgate