

Eastern bloc trade

Comecon sets store in science

A NEW "comprehensive programme" for scientific and technical progress is to be drafted as a result of the Comecon summit in Moscow on 12-14 June. The summit, officially the 38th (extraordinary) meeting of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA), held out this new programme as a basis for developing a "coordinated and, in some cases, a uniform" scientific and technical policy, to provide "the speediest solution through joint efforts" of the most important problems of science and technology on "mutually advantageous terms". A number of bilateral and multilateral cooperation agreements will in due course be drawn up to implement the programme.

Joint research ventures as a basis for integration of the socialist economies have from the beginning been hailed as an aim of Comecon. Such projects have not always proved easy. In spite of frequent official denials, there is a widespread belief in the European Comecon countries that the junior partners have had to bear far more than their fair share of the costs of the *Interkosmos* space programme. Poland, with its extensive coal deposits, has no great enthusiasm for the development of nuclear power to which the Eastern bloc as a whole is committed.

The strength of the Polish commitment to nuclear power has varied cyclically over the years, seeming weakest at periods of political "liberalization". Romania, with indigenous oil supplies, committed itself to a massive development of the petrochemical industry — Mrs Elena Ceaucescu, the wife of the president, is herself a petrochemist — and now has to import equipment to meet a capacity which has proved unnecessarily large. The underlying fear, among Comecon scientists, is that joint projects lead to the smaller members being assigned the dull and routine aspects of work, while the interesting and prize-winning aspects go largely to the Soviet Union.

In practice, the complete integration of the Comecon economies appears to have been indefinitely deferred. Speakers at the press conference which followed the summit spoke of the "harmonization" of economic policies. The real issue facing the Comecon leaders (nine party leaders and a deputy for Dr Fidel Castro) was the pooling of resources and efforts in various key areas. These include: energy production and use, including the "predominant development" of nuclear power stations and the fuller utilization of non-conventional energy sources; electronics, microprocessors, computers and robot technology, including the establishment of a "unified component base" for electronics; specialized chemicals, including plastics, chemical fibres, catalysts; "progressive technologies" for food production; and

specialized equipment for mining and civil engineering. In spite of the formal stress on science as well as technology in the official communiques, these documents only made the most oblique references to the research base, and there was no suggestion of building further joint research establishments in the tradition of the Dubna nuclear research institute or the high magnetic field/low temperature laboratory at Wroclaw.

Vera Rich

More on creationism

Washington

THE effort to repeal Louisiana's creationism-teaching law came to an end last week, for the time being at least. The state's House of Representatives voted 61-26 against the repeal motion, leaving intact the 1981 law requiring "equal time" for the teaching of evolution and creationism. The Senate had earlier approved the repeal motion by 21 votes to 16.

Repeal proponents had been counting on at least tacit support from the state's popular and flamboyant governor, Edwin Edwards, who has been trying to attract biotechnology companies to the state. In the end, however, Edwards was unwilling to help the repeal effort. Proponents say they were also hurt by a sophisticated advertising campaign that included the mailing to representatives of hundreds of telegrams, many apparently signed by persons of questionable existence, urging retention of the equal time law.

The stage is now set for a legal challenge to the law to go to trial, perhaps in January. The American Civil Liberties Union, which won a similar case in Arkansas in 1982, is arguing that the law is an unconstitutional violation of separation of church and state.

Stephen Budiansky

AIDS

Test companies chosen

Washington

THE companies selected to produce the diagnostic blood test for acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) have now been announced by the US Public Health Service (see *Nature* 14 June, p.577) and, as expected, are a mixture of the big and proven on the one hand and the small and innovative on the other. The five are Abbott, Litton, DuPont, Travenol-Genentech Diagnostics and Electro-nucleonics.

Each will pay the federal Treasury 5 per cent of net sales of the test kits, most of which will be used to test the 12 million units of blood processed each year in the United States.

The five companies were chosen from among some 20 applicants, which were

Israeli science

Ministry's fate in voters' hands

THE general election in Israel on 19 July, due to the collapse of the right coalition government earlier this year, will coincide with the second anniversary of Israel's Ministry of Science — and may settle its future. The only minister so far, Dr Yuval Ne'eman, is not only a noted nuclear physicist but also a prominent politician with hawkish views on West Bank settlements and the campaign against terrorism.

Since the right coalition government included, and to some extent depended, on the right-wing Tehiya party founded by Dr Ne'eman, some doubt whether the ministry would survive under a left coalition government. And although Mr Shimon Peres, the Labour-Alignment Party leader, has expressed a strong commitment to science, that does not necessarily imply, Dr Ne'eman's critics say, a commitment to a science ministry.

Dr Ne'eman himself is convinced that the record of the past two years has clearly demonstrated the need for such a ministry. His office, he said earlier this month in Tel Aviv, had helped with foreign relations in science and, in particular, with the setting up of bilateral international research and development agreements, which he had negotiated with his opposite numbers.

During his two years in office, moreover, Dr Ne'eman says that he has been able to help prop up the tottering finances of the universities by supporting research in university laboratories — a not inconsiderable contribution, since at least twice during the past two years, there has been a serious threat that lack of funds would force the universities to close down.

Now, the ministry has identified three main priority areas — information science

judged on their ability to produce virus, manufacture radioimmunoassays, distribute and market test kits and apply recombinant DNA techniques. Each has been provided with a 20-litre sample of Dr Robert Gallo's cell line, used to mass-produce the virus, and technical assistance from Gallo. In return the companies are subject to some unusual requirements, particularly regarding safety. Public Health Service inspectors will be allowed to examine their safety practices at any time. And the safety data that they must submit with their New Drug Applications — required by the Food and Drug Administration before the test can be marketed — will be pooled among all five companies, a departure from the normal strict secrecy that surrounds proprietary data.

Stephen Budiansky