Uranium shipment

Soviet contract nobody wants

THE French ship *Mont-Louis*, sunk in 60 feet of water in the world's busiest seaway, the English Channel, with a 250-ton cargo of uranium hexafluoride bound for the Soviet Union, is an embarrassment to Europe — not just for environmental reasons (and the danger may anyway be much less than has been claimed) but because nobody in Europe wants to carry on with the roughly thrice-a-year trade that the *Mont-Louis* was plying.

"We tried to cancel the contract last year", says Jean-Claude Magnac, secretary-general of the French nuclear fuel cycle company, COGEMA, "but the Russians wouldn't have it".

The origin of the agreement in 1973 was that Europe seemed set for a vast pressurized water reactor (PWR) construction programme. PWRs need slightly enriched uranium (2-3 per cent) and Europe at that time had no major enrichment capacity. A facility, called Eurodif, was planned, but environmental opposition was so great that it was feared it might be impossible to construct, says Magnac. So France, Belgium, the Netherlands and West Germany signed a deal with the Soviet Union to enrich uranium that they would supply (as hexafluoride).

The deal was for the Soviet Union to provide a certain amount of enrichment (measured in units called "swus", for "separation work units") over the period 1973-85. But then came the embarrassment: Eurodif was constructed after all, while France and to a lesser extent Belgium were the only countries to go ahead with a large PWR programme. According to a spokesman for the Belgian utilities, "we just don't need the Russian swus now".

But the Soviet Union, during renegotiation last year, insisted on fulfilling the original contract, to provide a certain total of swus. Since that seemed unlikely to be reached by the 1985 end-date envisaged in 1973, this entailed actually extending the contract at a lower rate of supply — to 1995, said the Belgian spokesman, until the original swu total is reached. Meanwhile, Eurodif is working well under capacity, though less because of the Soviet supply than the shortage of European PWRs. Belgian reactors, for example, have a demand for 650,000 swus a year, while the Soviet supply is less than a tenth of that.

According to Magnac, the supply to France is also a small proportion of French requirements. None of the trade involves enrichment to military grade levels, he says, so there is no conflict with the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, to which the Soviet Union (but not France) is signatory. It is simply a commercial nonsense to which Europe is tied by a business contract.

Robert Walgate

Medical education

New "private" school to open

BRITAIN's first independent medical school will become a reality in September, after delays caused by problems in finding a suitable site and, more seriously, a lack of funds (see *Nature* 304, 576; 1983). The Hunter School of Medicine, which will admit its first students in January 1985, is a non-profit making body with the status of a registered charity. It will occupy the premises in London occupied until now by Bedford College, which has merged with Royal Holloway College, another college of the University of London. The Hunter School is to share the premises with Rockford College of Ohio in the United States.

Supporters of the project feel that there are fundamental faults in the present method of selection and training of medical students that are unlikely to be rectified within the present teaching system. Because, they argue, universities admit students solely on the basis of academic standing, well balanced, broadly educated students able to communicate easily and sympathetically with their patients are "selected out" in favour of those more interested in medicine as a purely scientific discipline. Furthermore, courses are too information-oriented and, in wholeheartedly embracing the new high-technology medicine, have paid too little attention to the human aspect of doctor-patient relations.

The new medical school will charge its students (30 British and 20 foreign each year) £7,500 in annual fees. This income will provide for the day-to-day running of the school while capital funds will come from charitable sources. A public appeal is to be launched to raise £5 million to buy buildings and provide scholarships and bursaries and there will be a student loan scheme.

The Hunter School will attempt to select its students on the basis of a range of desired qualities including adaptability, personality, humour, a willingness to take on responsibility, a genuine interest in medicine and, of course, the ability to carry through an arduous programme of medical training. It is hoped that, by accepting only

students over twenty-one who have completed some form of training since school, the task of selection will be made easier.

The curriculum will involve the teaching of computer science, information technology, ethics, psychology, medical administration, community medicine and other subjects commonly considered of secondary importance. The Hunter School takes the view that proficiency in these areas is vital to doctors working in sophisticated modern hospitals.

As a new medical school (the first in London for a century), the Hunter School will need to have its courses approved by the General Medical Council, but it is hoped that by the time the first graduates emerge into the outside world, the qualifications conferred by the school will be recognized. There is however, a European Community directive requiring medical teaching facilities to be supervised by a university, but Professor C.A. Pasternak of the Hunter School's board of management, an advisory body, is confident that this should pose no serious problem since use will be made by the Hunter School of facilities at other teaching hospitals connected with universities.

Marcus Chown

UK medical research

Funds scarce

THE UK Medical Research Council (MRC), in common with its counterpart the Science and Engineering Research Council, is now in the distressing position of having to refuse funds for research judged by peer review to be of the highest merit.

Applications for research grants are graded by the grant awarding bodies with an alpha, beta or gamma. Alpha research proposals are those to be supported "at all costs" and gamma denotes a proposal to be rejected outright.

MRC figures show that the percentage of alpha money approved (for research programmes of three and five years' duration) for the 1983-84 award session has dropped to just 53 per cent from the previous year's level of 87 per cent. The money requested for alpha research proposals has risen in the intervening year from £48.7 million to £58.6 million, but only £31.4 million has been awarded in 1983-84 against £42.3 million the year before.

In 1982-83, over 20 per cent of those applications rated alpha by the Science and Engineering Research Council (see *Nature* 26 July, p.267) were not supported whereas no alphas went without funds and many betas also received money until 1978-79.

Marcus Chown