

## European research

# Milan the spur to new collaborations?

Brussels

THE European Commission sees this week's summit meeting at Milan, where the French Eureka proposal is certain to have at least a brief hearing, as an opportunity for persuading the members of the European Communities to take a more serious interest in cooperative research and development. But Mr Jacques Delors, president of the Commission, and his technology commissioner, Karl Heinz Narjes, are keeping an open mind on how collaboration might develop.

Delors wants flexibility above all, for which reason he is keeping up his sleeve several different legal frameworks for technological collaboration. One possibility is that the existing Euratom treaty might suffice, another that there might be a new treaty along similar lines. But that, everybody agrees, would take too much time. The Commission seems to be saying that it merely wants the member states to agree to collaborate, leaving the details of collaboration to be worked out later.

According to Delors, money is all important. He insists that there should be a "critical mass" of funds for research and development. Part of his ambition is that member states should come to regard common spending on research as the European equivalent of US spending on military developments, where commercial beneficiaries are not expected to repay the public investment.

One mark of members' commitment will be whether they agree to the 14.9 per cent increases of the Communities' research budget marked out for 1986. Narjes believes that research and development will have to take a larger slice of the Communities' budget in future years, perhaps between 6 and 8 per cent of the total by 1990. Whether the member states will happily accept the implication of increased budget contributions to the Community is another matter.

Responses so far from member governments have been mixed, according to Narjes, who sees European initiatives in research and development as essentially collaboration on projects to which industrial companies would contribute, as in existing collaborations. While some governments are concerned at the prospect of Community control of common projects, the Commission notes that British companies have shown more interest than their government in the proposed collaborative programme, Research in Advanced Communications in Europe (RACE).

In its optimism, the Commission does not expect that its plans to expand col-

laborative research will founder on the expectation of member states of a return proportional to their individual investments. But changes will be needed in what governments expect. And there will also have to be more decisive steps towards the creation of a Europe-wide system of standards and a greater degree of cohesion so that it would be more difficult than at present for competitors elsewhere to "pick off" European states one by one.

Narjes does not expect more from this week's summit than agreement among the member states to settle on two or three projects for further collaboration by the end of 1985. He has a shopping list of areas in which collaboration might be sought,

ranging from large computers and superchips to high-speed trains and biomolecular engineering to particle beam physics and optical communication. The Commission would like to see the French Eureka project subsumed in an agreement that Europe's collaborative research programmes should be expanded.

Pragmatically, the Commission says that the legal forms of novel collaborations will be decided only after specific programmes have been agreed. One obstacle ahead, according to Delors, is that Europe's technical labour force is ageing more quickly than that of the United States and Japan. The Commission's ambitious plans are in part intended to be a spur to the training of more skilled technologists, if only because partners in the new collaborations that may come into being will know that they will benefit only in proportion to the numbers of people able to help exploit the results of research and development programmes.

Anna Lubinska

## Chemical weapons

# US moratorium to end

Washington

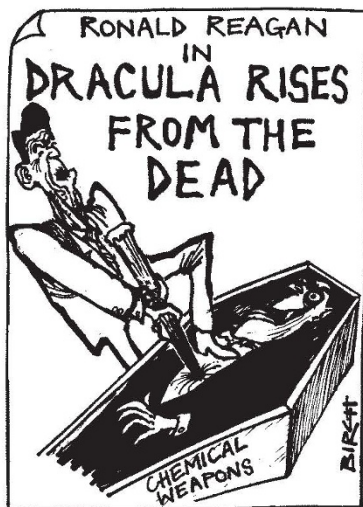
THE US House of Representatives voted last week to end a 16-year moratorium on the production of chemical weapons. Actual production of the new "binary" weapons, which contain two relatively non-lethal chemicals that are mixed together in flight to produce nerve agent, could begin in December 1987.

The Reagan administration, arguing that current stockpiles of nerve-gas shells

sions, however. Funds for production would not be released until 1987, and only after the President certifies that the weapons are needed. Supporters also accepted an amendment that would require the NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) allies to declare their willingness to have the US weapons deployed in their countries before production could begin. However, even opponents of the new weapons expect that amendment to be dropped by a House/Senate conference which must meet to reconcile differences between the two houses' bills. Congress will still have to agree to appropriate the funds for production.

The House bill authorizes an initial expenditure of \$124 million; the Senate bill, \$163 million. Critics have said that the total cost of carrying out the Pentagon's production plan could exceed \$4,000 million.

Stephen Budiansky



are deteriorating and do not represent a "credible" deterrent, had repeatedly sought congressional approval for the new weapons over the past three years. In close votes, the House had repeatedly rebuffed the President. This time, however, heavy White House lobbying paid off. The Republican-controlled Senate had already approved the proposal.

Supporters did make several conces-

## Nature in Japan

NATURE announces an international conference to be held in Tokyo next year, on 22-24 January 1986, on the theme *Molecular biology becomes biotechnology*. Speakers at the conference will include ten from the United States and Europe and an equal number from Japan. The conference, which will interest molecular biologists in academic and industrial laboratories, is in the series which includes this week's conference in London and that, in conjunction with the University of California, San Francisco, to be held in San Francisco next October. Further details may be had from *Nature's* offices in London and Tokyo. □