Japanese honours

Prizes, prizes, prizes . . .

Tokyo

THE first recipient of Japan's new International Prize for Biology is an Englishman: Professor Edred Corner, formerly holder of the chair in tropical botany at the University of Cambridge and now, at almost eighty years of age, in active retirement.

The prize was established this year to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the accession of the Emperor, himself a noted amateur marine biologist with his own research laboratories. At ten million yen (US $50,000) in cash plus a medal and a gift from the Emperor, the prize is meant to rank among the international heavyweights. Indeed, to show its importance the Crown Prince, the Prime Minister and the Minister of Education, Culture and Science all turned out to make speeches at the award ceremony. The Emperor too received Professor Corner (who has met him informally in past years) in formal audience at the Imperial Palace.

It is hoped that the prize will become the "Nobel Prize" of biology. This year, the field chosen for the prize was taxonomy; what it will be next year has yet to be decided. But whatever is chosen, it will be critical to the long-term future of the prize that links are made to a vigorous international network of people willing to recommend candidates.

Professor Corner is the author of several standard works of tropical botany much used by Japanese and other researchers visiting South-East Asia and was responsible for a new classification of the genus *Ficus*; he is also a key figure in the establishment of the modern taxonomical systems for fungi.

Although the International Prize for Biology must rate as Japan's most distinguished award, it is not the only prize being given away in Tokyo this week. Professor Carl Sagan is also receiving Y10 million as part of the Honda Prize set up by the Honda Motor Company. The prize is for "ecotechnology" and Sagan receives it for his contribution toward "ecotechnological exploration of space, as well as toward establishment of a theory of technological development for the new era of civilization based on a more cosmic viewpoint".

There has been a miniature boom this year in establishing new prizes. In the spring, it was the new "Japan prize" which at Y50 million rivals the Nobel Prize financially and is intended to reward applications of basic science (see *Nature* **315**, 616; 1985). A few weeks ago it was the turn of the Kikawada Foundation. This again went to an Englishman, Professor Christopher Freeman, deputy director of the Science Policy Research Unit at the University of Sussex.

But while Japanese companies are generously giving out prizes to foreigners one after another, they are having less luck in finding an agreeable reason for the failure of Japanese scientists to collect top international prizes. Eight officials of the Nobel Foundation, including board chairman Sune Bergstroem, visited Kyoto last week where they received the special prize of the Kyoto Prize. Speculation that the visit would help more prizes to come to Japan, rather than the United States and Europe, were quickly squashed, however. Committee members pointed out that science is international, and that language and distance from Sweden are no barriers to receipt of a prize. An explanation of why a Japanese scientist has never received the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine is rather to be sought in lack of basic research effort. And that might suggest that the new foundations would have served their country better by making up for the lack of funds available for original research in Japan rather than seeking glamour from abroad. **Alun Anderson**

NIH veto doomed

Washington

CONGRESS seems likely shortly to overturn a presidential veto of the controversial reauthorization bill for the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The bill, which was vetoed by President Reagan on 8 November, would establish a new National Institute of Arthritis, Musculoskeletal and Skin Disease and a new centre for nursing research. It also lays down guidelines on, among other things, how NIH should use peer review for grant applications and on fetal and animal research.

The House of Representatives has already voted by a large majority to overturn the veto; the Senate seems to be in like mind, but a vote will probably be delayed until President Reagan returns from his summit meeting in Geneva.

The President also vetoed an NIH authorization bill last year, but this year's version has commanded stronger support in Congress. Many of the line-by-line budget recommendations in last year's bill have been dropped. And President Reagan has no objection to the creation of the arthritis institute, having directed NIH to go ahead and create the new institute anyway. It will be formed by partitioning the existing National Institute of Arthritis, Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.

But the proposed centre for nursing research and a requirement that NIH spend not more that 5.5 per cent of its income on administrative expenses are regarded by the White House as unacceptable. Nevertheless, NIH officials say, many of the administrative recommendations in the bill are likely to be incorporated into NIH practice even if the presidential veto stands. Tim Beardsley

French defence

Smaller warheads planned

FRANCE is to develop new miniaturized nuclear warheads to "punch holes" in other people's defence systems, according to the French Minister of Defence, Paul Quilès. In a rare public account of French nuclear policy, Quilès said last week that he had set the Commissariat á l'Energie Atomique several ambitious targets to be achieved by 1994, when the first of a new series of nuclear submarines will come into service.

The miniature warheads are among these objectives, and seem to be a kind of French response to US plans to develop defences against ballistic missiles, the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI). The more attention the superpowers pay to strategic defence, Quilès said, the more necessary becomes "the penetration capacity of our missiles . . . to our policy of nuclear dissuasion".

Quilès nevertheless repeated last week his government's opposition to SDI. The period when the Soviet Union and the United States were installing the new technology would be a "particularly critical time" for world security, while SDI would be ineffective against the short and medium range missiles aimed at Europe. But it is plain from what he said that France is most of all concerned that the new interest in strategic defence will permit an improvement of the conventional Soviet anti-ballistic missile system already deployed around Moscow. The use of "stealth" technology, both miniaturization and the use of non-reflecting radar coatings, is a natural countermeasure.

In passing, Quilès has also explained French sensitivity about the present programme of nuclear testing in the Pacific, indirectly responsible for the sinking of the *Greenpeace* ship in New Zealand and, ironically, for the resignation of Quiles's predecessor, Charles Hernu. France is obviously committed to a new programme of warhead technology, for which testing is considered essential. In France, there appears to be no opposition to the programme.

From what Quilès said last week, it also seems that the French navy rather than the air force will be the spearhead of the new strategy. Noting that the mere presence of British nuclear submarines in the South Atlantic had kept the Argentinian navy in port during the Falklands war, he announced that France would add another nuclear submarine to the six ordered since 1984. But Quilès effectively squashed air force hopes to build a new land-based strategic missile, saying that the resources would be better spent on the improvement of submarine missiles. The existing "park" of 18 missiles in Haut-Provence will, however, be retained. **Robert Walgate**