why wait until disaster stares these governments directly in the face? Why not find a way out of the mess before it actually exists? The US administration has shown signs of willing in this direction, although the Secretary of the US Treasury's plan for dealing with international debts (which would have the commercial banks lend more, but with an implicit government guarantee) will not be generally acceptable. A better and more durable plan is needed. That is what Tokyo should be for. □

What's in a name?

The latest name for the AIDS virus is in trouble before the christening is over.

EVERYTHING about Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) seems to be controversial. That will be many people's reaction to the report (see p.3) of the arguments that attend the launching this week (see p.10) of the proposed name for the causative virus. The Varmus committee which has laboured for more than a year on the design of a single name to replace the two now in common use will get none of the thanks it deserves for the trouble it has taken. The most serious danger now is that an important field of investigation already too much soured by contending passions will be further embittered by personal considerations. Everybody's interest is that a corrosive rivalry between research groups should be mollified.

The identification of the virus responsible for AIDS is in every sense a remarkable piece of modern history, the significance of which for the treatment of disease is not yet fully appreciated. AIDS as a recognizable disease is barely five years old. Its recognition as an infection, first on epidemiological grounds, is naturally more recent. The first published evidence that a virus is responsible is due to Dr Luc Montagnier, at the Institut Pasteur in Paris, and consists essentially of a number of clinical cases and an electron micrograph including virus-like particles. Soon afterwards, Dr Robert Gallo and his associates at the National Cancer Institute (NCI) of the US National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, were able to publish evidence that virus-like particles isolated from patients with AIDS are indeed able to infect other lymphocytes in culture; with his then recent interest in human retroviruses infecting lymphocytes fresh in his mind, Gallo was naturally tempted to think of his virus as one of a series (of which there were then already two). This is how the Pasteur virus and the NCI virus are differently named; Montagnier's is called LAV (for lymphadenopathy-associated virus), Gallo's HTLV-III (for human T-cell lymphotropic virus). Further investigation, which has been breathtaking in its speed, shows the two viruses to be essentially identical, give or take the replacement of a sizeable percentage of the bases in the nucleotide sequence of the virus.

This would not be the first time the same organism has been discovered independently by two different routes. In the past, there has even been confusion of this kind about the naming of chemical elements. Ultimately, of course, there is usually a felt need to make sense of such confusion. What the Varmus committee has been doing, on behalf of the International Committee on the Taxonomy of Viruses, is to force the pace a little, to bring order to a field in which disorder appears rife. The snag is that this laudable attempt should have coincided with a serious dispute between the French and US groups. The two groups have been edgy about each other's proprietary interests in the discovery for some two years. Last year, after techniques for the diagnosis of AIDS antibodies were developed separately in Paris and Bethesda, the Pasteur Institute filed a claim against its US colleagues (or, strictly, against the US Department of Health and Human Services) on the grounds that US reagents were developed with the use of French material. The matter has been made to seem worse (but it may be only an appearance) by the discovery that one of the electron micrographs in Gallo's first paper about the virus was mistakenly an image of the French virus.

Trying to win agreement on a common name at a time like this is therefore a little like trying to win agreement on a national anthem in the middle of a civil war. It was courageous of the Varmus committee to attempt the task. (A letter from Gallo and his associates explaining how the mix-up happened, and remarking on some of the attendant issues, will appear in *Nature* next week.) Meanwhile, the committee's chances of winning acceptance for its proposals have been diminished by Montagnier's premature announcement of what the Varmus committee had decided. The issue has nothing to do with the recommended name but with the circumstances: bearers of important news are supposed to run on an inside track. It is understandable that Gallo should now be unwilling to use the recommended name for any but generic purposes; he was probably a reluctant member of the naming committee from an earlier stage.

There is nothing much that can be done about all this. It will not make sense to hope that there can be agreement on a common name for the virus that causes AIDS if one or other of the principal investigators in the field should decline to use it. Even if one should be compliant and the other should demur, enforcing commonality would be a disservice. That is why *Nature* will not attempt to lay down the law, but instead seek only to ensure that its readers are not confused. We shall (like our readers) wait and see. Meanwhile, the biomedical research community should do more than it has done so far to resolve the issue that has arisen. The Montagnier and Gallo groups stand out among several working in basic research laboratories that have thrown light on the way that AIDS infections work. Neither has yet cured a patient, but each has given hope to many. In passing, they have given everybody good cause to believe that the investigation of novel infections is now well within the competence of well-organized laboratories. It would be shabby, even disgraceful, if the contribution of these two men and their associates were not widely recognized, even by the principals. That is what the community owes its heroes, or near-heroes: for in this case, that of an infection for which there is still no therapy, the real heroes are the physicians who must deal with patients in ignorance of what may yet be possible. And, of course, the patients themselves. □

Cloud over Chernobyl

The first Soviet nuclear accident to be made public may bring unlikely comrades together.

LAST weekend's nuclear accident north of Kiev is a sobering reminder of the problems of running high-technology enterprises safely. The fact that the first sign of trouble was reported not from the Soviet Union, but more than 1,000 miles away, in Sweden, suggests that the Soviet managers of the plant that released the cloud of activity should have had a better telephone system at their disposal or that there should have been somebody able by other means to tell Sweden about the cloud of radioactivity on the way. Neighbourliness requires no less.

The important question, when the dust settles, is not so much how accidents like these can be prevented, but how we can learn to live with them safely. For, from time to time, even with nuclear plants (which go wrong less often than other kinds of machinery), accidents will happen. There is nothing particularly secret about the Chernobyl plant, whose general characteristics have been declared by the Soviet Union to the International Atomic Energy Agency at Vienna; it consists of six reactors, two still under construction, in which the neutron moderator is graphite and the coolant consists of steam (also a moderator). On paper, such a plant should have a degree of built-in safety. (Let coolant escape, and the chain reaction should be less efficient.) But something went wrong. The Soviet Union's neighbours have a right to know what it was, and also a right to some assurance that the same will not happen a second time. □