

Aborigines halt Woomera teams' supernova observations

Sydney

A GROUP of desert-dwelling aborigines has derailed US and West German plans to use rocket-borne X-ray and ultraviolet observations of the supernova in the Large Magellanic Cloud. Both teams had planned to use the Woomera rocket range, but half of the 260-km target zone overlaps with land belonging to the Maralinga Tjarutja aborigines. The aborigines have now refused permission for anybody to enter to recover spent rockets or scientific instruments.

The Maralinga Tjarutja people are resolutely denying access despite assurances from the Ministry of Defence in Canberra that members of the tribe would be allowed to accompany recovery parties to ensure the sanctity of their sacred sites. They are also unmoved by the information that their settlement is well outside the target area and by the assurances of the

science minister, Mr Barry Jones, that nobody has ever been injured by any of the more than 800 rockets launched from Woomera since the early 1950s.

The aborigines have bitter memories of past experiments. They were forcibly evicted from their lands for British nuclear tests between 1956 and 1963. They were allowed back only three years ago, when the South Australia state parliament added to their title to the land the right to govern access to it.

According to the Maralinga Tjarutja solicitor, Mr Darcy O'Shea, the plan for Woomera seems like "a rerun of the 'it's only desert' mentality of the 1950s". He says that the aborigines consider it incompatible with their ownership of the land that part of it should also be part of a rocket range.

Negotiations between the Ministry of Defence, on behalf of the Ministry of

Science, and the Maralinga Tjarutja people are continuing. It may be possible for the rocket observations to be carried out by using less than ideal trajectories which avoid the tribal lands.

Supernova 1987A has given Woomera a new lease of life. The fortunes of the facility reached a low point two years ago, when more than 130 buildings, including the missile-test workshop, were sold off. Activity at Woomera was at a peak in the mid-1960s, but the range was last used in March 1979. Much of the facility has been in mothballs ever since.

Although formal contracts have not yet been signed, the British Skylark rocket that West German scientists plan to use for X-ray observations of the supernova is already on a ship. Launch is planned for mid-August. West Germany is considering a five-year programme of observations.

The United States, represented by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, plans a series of eleven launches beginning in mid-October, with a possibility that the programme would continue for ten years. US balloon-borne observations of gamma-rays have already begun from Australia's launching station at Alice Springs.

Charles Morgan

UK advanced information technology further delayed

London

A DECISION on the future of Britain's national programme of research and development into advanced information technology is to be further delayed because the government has decided it cannot accept all the recommendations contained in a report it commissioned to consider a successor to the five-year, £350-million Alvey programme.

But a commitment has been given for a further national programme. The government will now set up another committee, called IT '92, to consider the findings of the report on a post-Alvey programme, produced by a committee led by Sir Austin Bide. The Bide report was published in November, and a decision on its recommendations had been expected soon after last month's general election. Last week, Mr John Butcher, under secretary of state at the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), said the government did not accept the Bide report "lock, stock and barrel".

The report had recommended a £1,000-million collaborative programme, with the government providing £425 million for a five-year effort focusing largely on the applications of information technology in user industries. About £300 million of the government contribution would be put into the research effort, with 50 per cent funding for industrial partners and 100 per cent for academic research, as with the

Alvey programme. The total research funding would amount to £550 million. The applications scheme would receive £125 million from the government, with industry's contribution bringing the total to about £500 million.

A review of Alvey achievements was published last week in advance of a two-day exhibition later this month, at which some 90 projects will be displayed to persuade customers of the programme's success. The Alvey programme was started in 1983 to develop precompetitive collaborative research in the enabling technologies in response to increased overseas efforts on information technology research, particularly in Japan. The Ministry of Defence, DTI and the Science and Engineering Research Council together provided £200 million, with industry's contribution at £150 million. More than 200 industrial projects have been approved, typically consisting of two or three companies with one or two academic institutions.

Butcher says the success of the programme has confounded its early critics: despite the 'precompetitive' nature, many of the projects had led to products or the prospect of products, and investment in exploitation of the research was four times greater than the original investment.

Alvey's director, Brian Oakley, says that the role of academic researchers in the new programme is likely to be "very different" and that many scientists involved in Alvey's basic research will return to their long-term work. **Simon Hadlington**

No amnesty for Chernobyl operators

London

THE Chernobyl operators responsible for the disaster will not benefit under the forthcoming amnesty to mark the seventieth anniversary of the October Revolution, according to Evgenii Smolentsev, deputy chairman of the Soviet Supreme Court. Interviewed by the official Soviet news agency TASS some three weeks before the trial of the Chernobyl operators was due to open, Smolentsev explained that the amnesty will not apply to people guilty of "particularly dangerous crimes against the state", such as espionage, smuggling, treason and banditry. This category, he noted, also covers the neglect of safety procedures where there is danger of an explosion, a classification which clearly covers the Chernobyl catastrophe.

The neglect of safety procedures at Chernobyl was, of course, established almost a year ago by the special Soviet government commission of inquiry, and in that respect the main concern of the trial is to apportion the degree of guilt among the accused. Nevertheless, at least one of the operators directly responsible for the explosion is known to have paid for his folly with his life, and it is not inconceivable that the court's verdict might have left the dead to carry the burden of blame. The timing of Smolentsev's remarks, which seem to take the guilt of the living accused for granted, seems curious.

Vera Rich

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