

West Germany's nuclear-fuel transport scandal has long half-life

Munich

THE latest — and largest — in a series of scandals involving the nuclear industry continues to reverberate throughout West Germany. The scandal, now being called "Urangate" by some, has grown to such proportions that it casts a long shadow over the future of the West German nuclear programme.

In a rare show of interparty unity, the Social Democrat Party (SDP) joined the governing centre-right coalition in the Bundestag (parliament) to create a committee that will investigate charges of bribery and irregularities made against the nuclear transport company Transnuklear (see *Nature* 331, 6 and 331, 106; 1988). The committee, which has the legal power to prosecute, was formed after weeks of prodding by the environmentalist Greens.

The committee's first task will be to investigate rumours that weapons-grade nuclear material from West Germany has gone via Belgium to Libya and Pakistan in violation of the international nuclear non-proliferation treaty. The rumour has been denied by all three countries.

One reason that the rumour caused such consternation was that it appeared to explain the huge sums (DM21 million) involved in the bribery scandal. The reason for the size of the payments is perhaps the most intriguing missing piece to the Transnuklear bribery puzzle.

The scandal has already triggered protests. Police broke up on 22 January a five-day blockade of a federal storage site in Lübeck where 21 tonnes of uranium hexafluoride were waiting to go to Sweden.

Uranium hexafluoride is a raw material

for nuclear fuel elements. A group of about 50 farmers blocked the gates to the temporary nuclear waste storage site at Gorleben for a day on 22 January to protest against the illegal storage, revealed earlier in the week, of barrels of waste which were starting to break open.

The scandal has given a big boost to the anti-nuclear Greens — a "qualitative leap" according to Green Bundestag member Otto Schily, the only Green member of the investigation committee.

The complete West German nuclear programme will depend on transport of fuel elements between regular nuclear power stations, breeder reactors and reprocessing plants. But the impact of the scandal may be sufficient to halt further construction on the as yet inoperative fast breeder at Kalkar and reprocessing plant at Wackersdorf, each the first of its kind in West Germany. The Bundestag committee is expected to produce its final report by the end of 1989. **Steven Dickman**

● The experimental breeder reactor at Kalkar is facing new difficulties. The plant's principal owner, Schnellbrüter-Kernkraftwerksgesellschaft (SBK), surprisingly withdrew on 11 January its application for a licence to load fuel elements into the still incomplete reactor. Instead, SBK is asking for approval to make a variety of safety improvements at the plant. Licensing authorities from the West German of North Rhine-Westphalia see the move as a ploy to gain the "overall approval" that the authorities have consistently withheld (see *Nature* 326, 534; 1987). Construction costs for the 300-MW plant have exceeded DM 7,000 million. □

Synchrotron budget

THE European Synchrotron Radiation Facility has agreed on a budget for 1988 of 108 million French francs, leaving open the extent of British participation in the seven-year project. Construction is to begin this year in Grenoble, France, on the synchrotron, a joint project of ten European countries. The United Kingdom is willing to provide no more than 10 per cent of the funding, but West Germany and France are insisting on a higher UK contribution (see *Nature* 330, 513; 1987). The facility should be completed by 1994. **S.D.**

Superconductor plans

A THREE-YEAR, £16-million national programme of superconductivity research has been announced by Britain's Department of Trade and Industry. The programme is one of the first manifestations of the government's recently declared intention to stimulate research collaboration between private companies. Successful proposals will receive half their funds from the DTI, which has earmarked £8 million for the scheme. **S.L.H.**

More on R&D in UK

A SURVEY of industrial expenditure on research and development in Britain in 1986, published last week by the Department of Trade and Industry, shows an increase in spending of about 10 per cent compared with 1985, to £5,700 million, a rise in real terms, after allowing for higher costs, of about 7 per cent. The proportion of funds provided by the government remained static, at 23 per cent, while industry funding fell from 66 per cent in 1985 to 64 per cent in 1986. The amount of funds from overseas increased from 11 per cent to 13 per cent. Between 1985 and 1986 the total number of people employed in industrial research and development increased by only 1,000, to 174,000, compared with 195,000 in 1981. **S.L.H.**

King Faisal prizes

PROFESSOR Janet Rowley, of the University of Chicago, is co-winner of this year's King Faisal International Prize in the field of medicine. She is the first woman to receive a King Faisal Prize since the five awards, worth £60,000 each, were introduced in 1983. She shares the medicine prize with Dr M.F. Greaves, of Britain's Imperial Cancer Research Fund. The science prize is shared by Professor Ricardo Mileli, of University College, London, and Professor Pierre Chambon, of the CNRS molecular biology laboratory at Strasbourg. **S.L.H.**

Correction: Not Antarctic

In last week's article by Philippa Lloyd (*Nature* 331, 201; 1988) the headline should, of course, have referred to an Arctic expedition. □



SIXTEEN years after it was abandoned in the Antarctic wilderness, a transport plane used in 1971 as part of the US National Science Foundation's Antarctic Program has been flown back to its base at McMurdo Sound. The extremely dry and cold Antarctic environment has preserved the aeroplane in perfect condition beneath snowdrifts that reached close to the top of its tail fin. It took a team of engineers a month to dig the plane — an LC 130 Hercules — out of the snow. Another five weeks were needed to re-install the engines and flight controls that had been stripped from the plane. It was abandoned after a crash landing. Ten million dollars was spent on the recovery mission, far less than the \$35 million needed to buy a new plane. The Hercules, which arrived at McMurdo base two weeks ago, will now go to Christchurch, New Zealand, for further repair work. When back in action it will bring NSF's Antarctic fleet to a total of seven Hercules. All are equipped with skis so that they can land on glacier ice and snow and they are used to ferry scientists and equipment to and from New Zealand and between Antarctic bases. □