

Hackers revealed as spies

Munich

AN unprecedented blend of computer crime and espionage came to light last week when West German police arrested eight men on charges of providing passwords and other data from Western military computer systems to Soviet-bloc intelligence agents.

The 'hackers', all between 25 and 35 years old, were arrested after two of them had confessed and after police had searched a dozen houses and flats in Hanover, Hamburg and West Berlin. The group included the West German accused of breaking into hundreds of US computer systems last year apparently seeking classified information (see *Nature* 333, 105; 1988). The man, named as Marcus Hess, was not prosecuted in West Germany because of lack of evidence. The US Federal Bureau of Investigation also produced no arrests.

West German authorities refused to reveal the identity of the systems broken into by the hackers, but a report on the West German television network Norddeutsche Rundfunk said that they included a US Department of Defense database, a computer of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and a computer at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in the United States. The television network reported that computers at European

research institutes and defence-related companies were also entered.

Astronomer Clifford Stoll first spotted the attempts by West German hackers to obtain access to secret information while at the Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory in California. Stoll, now at the the Harvard Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics, said last week that the intruders obtained "sensitive but not classified information" from the US Department of Defense's Optimus database and elsewhere. He says that the hackers learned of US nuclear and biological warfare capabilities and also discovered the passwords of many computer systems.

Police confiscated computers and floppy disks, but released seven of the eight suspects because there was no fear of them fleeing or destroying evidence. The suspects face a maximum sentence of five years in prison.

West German federal prosecutor Alexander Prechtel of Karlsruhe has sought to play down the seriousness of the offence for Western security. But he said the authorities "did not have all the facts" about the penetration of the computer systems. The US Department of Defense has not made public any information about breaches of security in the incident.

West German Interior Minister Friedrich Zimmermann said the case was an "important success" for West German security forces. He said measures were being taken at military and industrial computers to prevent further intrusions. But Prechtel fears that hackers will continue to develop their techniques faster than computer systems managers can determine new ways to stop them.

While the hackers can be prosecuted under West German espionage laws, there are no statutes explicitly covering unauthorized access of computer systems in West Germany. This hindered the prosecutors' case against Hess in 1988.

Steffen Wernery of the Chaos Computer Club in Hamburg, which has not been implicated in the spy ring, said that a West German intelligence agency (*Bundesverfassungsschutz*) had approached him and other members of the club to try to win their support. In an interview for the radio network Deutschlandfunk, Wernery criticized the behaviour of the agency, saying that its "crass tactics" would scare potential informants away.

Stoll praised some hackers, including West Germans, for their contributions to knowledge about computer systems. But he criticized the unethical behaviour of others. "They don't realize that they're destroying their own playground", he said. "They cause immense damage to thousands of network computer users" by creating a fear of linking up to international systems.

Steven Dickman

Are the good times here again?

Sydney

AUSTRALIAN science has suddenly become popular in political circles. The government is providing an immediate infusion of funds for research, and has vowed to develop a major policy statement on science and technology.

The newly favourable wind appears to stem from the response of the increasingly vocal research community to a review by an interdepartmental committee (IDC) of the resource and policy needs of Australian science. The IDC presented its report to the cabinet last December. Although it has not been made public, it apparently offered little respite from the spiral of declining support for research (see *Nature* 337, 6; 5 January 1989).

Researchers' protests have been effective; Mr Barry Jones, Minister for Science, the was instructed to make a more favourable submission to the cabinet.

One immediate result is that the government has agreed to allow the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO), the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organization (ANSTO) and the Australian Institute of Marine Science (AIMS) to retain all their external earnings. This will result in an increase in CSIRO's budget of A\$2.1 million for 1988-89, rising to A\$6.6 million and A\$11.6 million in the two following years.

The government will also provide A\$8.5 million for 1988-89 to improve equipment at government research facilities. The bulk (A\$5 million) will go to CSIRO; the rest will be divided among AIMS, ANSTO and the Defence Science and Technology Organisation.

As suggested by the IDC review, the government will also establish a science coordinating committee to oversee scientific issues spanning a number of government departments. This committee will be chaired by a chief science adviser reporting directly to Jones.

In April, the government is planning to release its major statement incorporating the IDC report, the Smith report into university research requirements, the McKinnon report into marine science and a review of agricultural research.

Responsibility for the new science policy will rest with Jones, for whom the new developments represent a personal resurgence. Jones's ministerial influence declined when the formerly independent Department of Science which he headed was abolished (see *Nature* 328, 286; 23 July 1987). But with Jones playing a larger role in determining policy, Australian researchers are cautiously optimistic that the importance of science and technology is being recognized by the government.

Tania Ewing

UNIVERSITIES

MIT president to quit

Boston

PAUL E. Gray, president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), announced last week that he will resign in July 1990, the tenth anniversary of his appointment. Following tradition, Gray is expected to become chairman of the MIT Corporation, replacing David S. Saxon, a former president of the University of California, who plans to retire.

Carl M. Mueller, a retired bank executive, will head the search committee for a new president. Mueller was also the head of the committee that hired Paul Gray and he participated in the selection of Gray's predecessor, Jerome Weisner. All five presidents since 1940 have been graduates of MIT.

Gray, an electrical engineer who holds three MIT degrees, has held office during a period when the university has consolidated its stature in areas outside engineering. Biology and biomedical research have particularly thrived in the past decade. Gray helped to negotiate the present relationship between MIT and the well-endowed Whitehead Institute for Biomedical Research.

Seth Shulman