

Democratic Brazil says no . . .

São Paulo

BRAZIL's president, Fernando Collor de Mello, last month destroyed a secret nuclear test facility that his military predecessors had built in the Amazon and so quashed all rumours that Brazil intends to develop nuclear weapons. Before setting off on a trip to Europe and the United States, where he was to address the United Nations assembly, Collor went to the site where a 320-metre-deep shaft had been drilled in preparation for an underground nuclear test and sealed the shaft for ever.

In keeping with his media-conscious style, Collor dropped two shovels full of lime into the pit, located in the Cachimbo mountain range, in the state of Pará, near the border with the states of Mato Grosso and Amazonas, deep in the rain forest. The secluded nuclear weapons test site was built in the early 1980s, and remained secret until newspaper reports began to appear in 1986. The Cachimbo proving ground is managed by the Brazilian Air Force.

The Air Force, along with the Navy and Army, had nuclear research projects independent from the government's official programme to develop nuclear power reactors with West German help.

NON-PROLIFERATION TREATY

But the German agreement came to nothing, and the military met with mixed results. The Navy is far ahead of its sister services, with a uranium enriching plant in Iperó, in the state of São Paulo. The Army programme is, however, more worrying, because while the Navy says it needs plutonium to power a nuclear submarine, the army can want plutonium only to make a bomb.

Physicist José Goldemberg, secretary for science and technology and long-time opponent of the nuclear deal with West Germany, said that Collor's action showed once and for all that Brazil does not want to explode nuclear devices. But the controversy is not yet over. It is now becoming clear that someone in the recent past had intended to build nuclear devices, given that they had gone as far as to prepare a place for the tests. The opposition parties are now demanding to hear the whole story.

The best known 'green' representative, São Paulo's social democrat Fabio Feldmann, says that he intends to find out what happened even if he has to sue the armed forces on the ground of "contempt of Congress", an action which the new constitution makes possible.

Ricardo Bonalume

. . . South Africa thinks again

Cape Town

SOUTH Africa's Minister of Foreign Affairs Pik Botha said last week that South Africa may at long last be prepared to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), provided that other states in southern Africa will also do so. Botha's statement, made on the first day of the annual meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna, was the most explicit commitment yet by the South African government to sign the NPT and succeeded in staving off a resolution to expel South Africa from the agency, for the fourth consecutive year.

The statement will help the African states who pressed for the continent to become a nuclear weapon-free zone at the recently concluded NPT conference in Geneva.

Mozambique began the process of accession to the NPT on 12 September, and diplomatic efforts are now being made to coordinate a commitment to sign by Zimbabwe, Zambia, Angola, Namibia and Tanzania. Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland are not considered to have the potential to develop nuclear weapons.

Botha also said that talks on a comprehensive safeguards agreement for South

Africa's nuclear facilities may soon be concluded. South Africa's single nuclear power station at Koeberg, outside Cape Town, has been under IAEA inspection since it began operating in 1984, but the new commercial uranium enrichment plant at Valindaba, which supplies the reactor's fuel, is not.

A separate pilot enrichment plant of Valindaba has caused most international concern because it has been thought capable of producing the highly-enriched uranium needed for nuclear weapons. But the plant was shut down last February and has now been dismantled.

The chief executive of the Atomic Energy Corporation, Waldo Stumpf, denies that the closure of the pilot plant was linked to the NPT negotiations, and says that the plant was no longer needed because sufficient material for the country's SAFARI-I research reactor (also under IAEA inspection) has been produced, and because the commercial plant is now running satisfactorily. The magazine where material from the pilot plant is stored could be inspected by IAEA, but the possibility remains that it does not contain all the nuclear material produced during its lifetime.

Michael Cherry

Pyrenean bears bait French hunters

Paris

JUST weeks after France ratified the 1979 Bern Convention on the protection of endangered species of plant and animal, the authorities already have a fight on their hands over the fate of the Pyrenean bear — one of the 680 endangered species listed in the convention.

Bear-hunting has been outlawed in the French mountains since 1962. But local farmers — who consider the animal a pest — have been able to hunt its principal prey, the wild boar, and to fell trees, destroying its habitat. As a result, the population of Pyrenean bears has fallen from 170 in 1940 to 10–20 today. Under the terms of the convention, protection must be given to the habitat of listed species. So, despite fierce opposition, the secretary of state for the environment, Brice Lalonde, has banned all hunting from a 6,500 hectare zone where up to 13 bears, including one cub, live.

Lalonde has also offered the forestry

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Under threat — protection measures for the Pyrenean bear may not be enough.

office compensation to delay logging in this area for a year. The move has outraged local farmers. Some would be happy to see the bears disappear altogether. Every year, they say, sheep, goats and cattle are destroyed by bears. But, as the hunting season opens, the nation's two million bloodsports enthusiasts — who will go for everything from thrushes to deer — are also angry because they believe that their chances of bagging wild boar will be hampered by the new sanctuary zones. Environmentalists want to make sure Lalonde enforces the new measures but, given the opposition, it seems unlikely that he will go the whole hog and introduce new bears to the region, as the Bern convention proposes.

Peter Coles