

German reactor closed

Munich

THE second of three pillars supporting the German national nuclear power programme toppled last week as the German government decided to abandon its prototype fast-breeder reactor at Kalkar.

Research and Technology Minister Heinz Riesenhuber made the surprise announcement of dropping Kalkar last week after meeting with representatives of the builder of the plant, Siemens AG, and the three utilities that were going to operate it. Now those utilities are expected to try to turn the 300-MW plant, located 70 km west of Düsseldorf near the Dutch border, into an oil-burning facility in order to recoup some of their losses.

The Research and Technology Ministry, which paid more than 40 per cent of the DM7,000 million (about \$4,300 million) it cost to build the plant, will not be so lucky. All its investment must be written off as loss. And Belgium and the Netherlands, which each paid DM470 million before pulling out of Kalkar in 1983, are in the same boat. Riesenhuber said he no longer expected them to ask for their money back.

Before unification, West Germany derived roughly 38 per cent of its electricity from nuclear power, and for years it had planned to become independent of other countries by building its own fast-breeder and reprocessing facilities. But in 1989, Germany decided to abandon its controversial nuclear fuel reprocessing facility at Wackersdorf, which had already cost the government and utilities over DM2,000 million. It shifted its reprocessing needs to the French facility at La Hague. The latest decision leaves Germany with power reactors and nothing else.

The Kalkar plant was effectively completed by 1986. Riesenhuber blamed the Social Democratic (SPD) government of the

Land of North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), in which the plant is located, for refusing to license it despite a clean safety record in the pre-operative phase. SPD has an absolute majority in NRW and has opposed nuclear power since the Chernobyl accident in 1986. The NRW government issued 17 partial licences before refusing in 1987 to issue the final licence for nuclear operation. The licensing procedure has been stalled ever since, during which time the reactor has cost Bonn DM10 million a month to maintain.

In capitulating to the SPD instead of taking the licensing decision to court, the centre-right coalition in Bonn recognized the power of SPD, the second largest party following Helmut Kohl's Christian Democrats, to influence Germany's nuclear course. This could become significant in deciding whether to build new nuclear generating capacity for the energy-poor eastern regions of Germany. The loss of Kalkar moved the chairman of VEBA AG, a parent company of one of Germany's largest utilities, to announce that he would not try to obtain permission to build or operate a nuclear plant in eastern Germany without the explicit approval of SPD.

Siemens and the Swedish-Swiss conglomerate Asea Brown Boveri are seen to have the inside track on construction of new plants in eastern Germany, which could rejuvenate an otherwise nearly stagnant European market for new nuclear plants.

The government decided to abandon Kalkar during coalition negotiations following elections on 2 December 1990. Riesenhuber had promised a final decision by the end of 1991, when public funds were due to run out. It was a surprise that the decision came so early in the year; the move was apparently justified by the shortage of funds brought about by reunification.

Steven Dickman

ANTARCTICA

Reprieve for French polar expeditions?

Paris

THE French minister for overseas departments and territories (DOM-TOM), Louis le Penec, has promised that the French polar expeditions (EPF) will not have to close their research base in Antarctica next year as feared.

A cash crisis in the ministry, worsened by recent budget cuts, had threatened that EPF's annual grant of FF26 million would have to be cut to FF20 million (see *Nature* 349, 553; 14 February 1991, and see page 299). This, said EPF's secretary, Bernard Morlet, would not be enough to enable both the 1991-92 summer and winter programmes to go ahead. And it could mean closing the Dumont d'Urville base for a year.

But last week, saying that he was "astounded by the various reports concerning

the future of EPF", le Penec announced that he would "reequilibrate" funds for EPF "in order that the 1991-92 winter programme may be launched without delay".

At EPF, however, it appears that the DOM-TOM promise has still not been translated into cash. "We are still a long way from our goal", says Morlet. Meanwhile, the ministry for research and technology (MRT) — which co-funds Antarctic research — is still at loggerheads with le Penec over DOM-TOM's contribution to the French polar research budget. There are fears that, if the Dumont d'Urville base is not closed, sacrifices will have to be made elsewhere. The clash, at a time when France is trying to expand polar research, is adding fuel to efforts to give MRT entire responsibility for financing Antarctic science.

Peter Coles

NEWS IN BRIEF

US opens pockets to protect species

Washington

FOR nearly a decade, the mantra of the ecology community has been the same: biological diversity worldwide is threatened and requires protecting in developing countries. Finally, it appears, the message has got through, at least in the United States. US public and private funding for projects to preserve biological diversity has increased by two-thirds in the past two years, according to a new report* by the World Resources Institute (WRI). Federal funding for biodiversity research climbed to \$23.1 million in 1989, an increase of 16 per cent over 1987. And for the first time, WRI found that contributions from private foundations have nearly matched the federal totals, with a total of \$21.4 million in 1989 — a 750 per cent jump over two years.

Thirty-eight per cent of the 1989 funding supported research programmes on maintaining a healthy mix of plants, animals and natural habitats in developing countries. Another 25 per cent went to species and site-management projects, whereas 'debt-for-nature' swaps accounted for about 5 per cent of the funding, WRI found.

C.A.

*Investing In Biological Diversity — US Research and Conservation Efforts in Developing Countries, World Resources Institute, March 1991.

New president

Boston

AFTER a prolonged selection process, Harvard University chose a new president last week: Neil Leon Rudenstine, a literary scholar and former administrator at Princeton University. Geneticist Philip Leder is known to have been a top contender for the job, and it is widely speculated that a deadlock in the search committee between Leder, Rudenstine and a handful of other finalists forced the panel to postpone their decision for weeks. Leder would have been the first scientist to head Harvard in nearly 40 years.

Rudenstine, meanwhile, brings to the job a background in the humanities and a proven record as an administrator. His style is said to be "conciliatory", and he is seen as a popular choice among students. He will succeed Derek Bok who steps down this June after two decades as Harvard's president.

S.S.

CORRECTION

The article on the European Research Conference "Gordon conference clones" (*Nature* 350, 179; 21 March 1991) may have created the impression that the conferences have not yet begun. In fact, the so-called "pilot phase" of the conferences, run by the European Science Foundation (ESF) with some support from the European Communities (EC), began in 1990 with six conferences and continues in 1991 with 23 more.