ESO negotiates with Chile over agreement on telescopes

Santiago & Munich. The European Southern Observatory (ESO) is renegotiating a 29-year-old treaty with Chile, host country for its 15 telescopes at La Silla, in the hope of reaching an agreement that will not disrupt the construction of the Very Large Telescope (VLT) at a second site in the northern Chilean desert. This month the two sides will meet in Santiago

review process and reduce the scientific return from the instruments. Officials say that the 25–30 active Chilean astronomers are too few to make good use of the time — which would amount to 18 days every six months — and that its member countries, each with many more potential users, already receive less time than they would like.

The negotiations are the result of an investigation by the lower house of parliament into the acquisition of land for the VLT. Last month, legislators voted unanimously to support its conclusion that the ruling junta donated the land illegally and declared that parliament must give its approval to any future transaction. The legislators also endorsed the idea of a

10 per cent share of the viewing time and threatened to terminate the treaty unless the new terms are more favourable. The government has not as yet responded to the report.

ESO says that it acquired its 700 square km atop Paranal legally and that any blame rests with the previous government headed by General Augusto Pinochet. In fact, says ESO's spokesman Richard West, "we bought the land twice", because it was easier to settle a belated claim from a second person rather than taking the matter to court. "This shows a little about the confusion of who owns what in Chile", says West.

The first unit of the VLT should be ready in 1996, with the entire package of four, 8-meter mirrors completed around 2001.

In a related matter, ESO is wrestling with allegations of unfair labour practices brought by a trade union formed in 1991 for Chileans working at La Silla. ESO, which offers its European employees higher pay and better benefits as an inducement to work in Chile, recognizes only the existing union formed 25 years ago.

Meeting this week, the ESO council was expected to prepare a negotiating stance for the next session on 18 June. Chilean scientists are optimistic that ESO's new director, Riccardo Giacconi, will prove to be more flexible than his predecessors and that an agreement can be reached before the end of the year. A new president of Chile will be elected in December, and the legislature is expected to adjourn several weeks beforehand.

Jeffrey Mervis & Alison Abbott

US asked to help in reunification of German science

Washington. Germany wants US scientists to take part in collaborations to help rebuild the research base of the former East Germany. "We hope that the United States will show as much goodwill to East Germany now as it did to West Germany after 1945", said Gebhard Ziller, the top civil servant in the German Federal Ministry of Research and Technology, addressing some 300 scientists and industrialists meeting last week at the US National Academy of Sciences.

Ziller concedes that deals between American researchers and their counterparts in East Germany will take time and that the first priority is to make contacts. But Robert Nowak, chief scientist for Dow Chemical of Midland, Michigan, expressed concern that not enough large US companies have shown any interest in such research collaborations. "I think we're missing the boat", he said.

German officials hope that the new German-American Academic Council (see *Nature* 362, 779; 1993) will provide a "major stimulus" for such collaboration after its 30 members are selected and meet later this year. But no US money has yet been made available to help fund the council, which has been promised DM18 million (US\$11.5 million) over the next four years from the German research ministry.

The restructuring of research institutes and universities in the new *Länder* has resulted in a hundred new establishments and research teams, each keen to pursue international collaboration. But officials concede that the situation in industrial research is "alarming": a work force still 90 per cent state-subsidized has already been slashed from 100,000 to 15,000 and is expected to fall further.

Kurt Biedenkopf, prime minister of Saxony and one of the most respected politicians from eastern Germany, painted a grim picture of academic institutions and said that scientists and engineers had been treated more favourably by the old regime than other academic sectors. "The really important thing is the rebuilding of the humanities, because there is nothing", he said. "The real devastation took place in the heads of people."

Colin Macilwain

Historic vote

London. The first contested presidential election in the 205-year history of the Linnean Society of London has been won by palaeontologist Brian Gardiner of King's College, London. The challenger, geneticist Bryan Clark of the University of Nottingham, received 33 votes to Gardiner's 75 in last week's election.

H.G.

"We want to be shown the respect that a host country deserves."

Maria-Tereza Ruiz
University of Chile astronomer

for the second time as they work against a deadline of 1 September set by the Chilean parliament when it asked for the 1964 treaty to be renegotiated.

Chile wants to heal a festering wound to its national pride inflicted during an era when its politicians were flattered by any attention from Europe. That attitude has changed since the military dictatorship was replaced in 1990 by a civilian government and Chile began to reassess its links with the rest of the world.

Most Chilean astronomers believe that the current agreement fails to serve them well, and that it must be modified to give Chile a share of viewing time on the largest ESO telescopes and comparable pay and career opportunities for technical and scientific staff from Chile. They would also like ESO to support programmes to increase the size of the astronomy community and to become more active in public education.

"We have taken the position that it is reasonable for Chile to receive a minimum amount of time on the ESO telescopes and that Chilean science should benefit from its existence", says biochemist Jorge Allende, president of the Chilean Academy of Sciences. Adds Maria-Tereza Ruiz, an astronomer at the University of Chile, "we want an agreement that satisfies both sides. We want to have the VLT in Chile, and we also want to be shown the respect that a host country deserves."

ESO has historically resisted the idea of any guarantee of viewing time (the most commonly cited figure is 10 per cent) on the grounds that it would subvert the peer