

safeguards inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), on their visit at the end of last month, to inspect fuel rods discharged from a working reactor. The point is important because even external inspection can tell whether fuel rods have been handled so as to maximize the amount of fissile plutonium (^{239}Pu) or whether, instead, they have been used to extract as much power as possible (in which case ^{240}Pu predominates). And there are two explanations of North Korea's refusal; either North Korea has been making military plutonium and wishes not to be found out, or it is innocent, but wishes by its refusal to create the impression that it has a nuclear bomb or even several.

Whatever the truth, North Korea's refusal is an infringement of its obligations under the NPT. Moreover, the timing of this latest trouble for the NPT could hardly be worse. Just about a year from now, the United Nations will be convening the review conference of the treaty members at which it is hoped to win general agreement for the continuation of the treaty. It will hardly be a happy augury for the outcome of that meeting if one of the treaty's signatories is, at the same time, being subjected to the United Nations sanctions that the United States seems ready to demand from the Security Council. There are two further complications. China, whose position on North Korea as a stripling nuclear power is far from clear, may yet veto joint action by the United Nations. And North Korea's threat to regard sanctions as "an act of war" cannot altogether be dismissed as empty.

The most serious worry, which will not quickly go away, is that North Korea is now more isolated from the rest of the world than it has ever been. It is a backwater in a region of almost spectacular economic growth. Even China, its ally in the Korean War of the 1950s and its doctrinal supporter until recently, has opted for economic improvement. South Korea, the other side of the demilitarized zone surrounding the armistice line (there is no peace treaty), must seem from Pyongyang to be a constant reminder of how different things might have been in the North. Yet, incredible as it may seem, there is something in the view that the government of North Korea is crucially, if partially, sustained by remittances of cash from the Korean community in rich Japan.

Given all the difficulties of the region, the safe and even civilized solution is to make it palatable for North Korea to end its isolation from the rest of the world. One obvious difficulty is that it is a Marxist dictatorship of the old-fashioned kind. Another is that its government is hardly on speaking terms with most others. The exception is China, which is why there are the strongest possible reasons for asking that China should take the lead in making North Korea honour its treaty obligations and then persuading it to join the world around it. To risk a Chinese veto of a sanctions proposal in the Security Council would have the opposite effect.

Why should North Korea be offered kid-glove treatment it clearly does not deserve? The truth is that the maintenance and, ideally, strengthening of the NPT is a more important goal than the equitable distribution of big-power punishments for bad behaviour. It is not as if North Korea is the only problem to be dealt with before next year's conference.

Apart from the familiar issues of the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent, the eventual fate of fissile material from Russia and the other ex-Soviet republics, the international community has to devise a regime for keeping out of harm's way huge quantities of other people's fissile material. It has just a year in which to do the job. The danger is that the time available will be frittered away in bothering about North Korea and its malevolent intentions. That would be to throw out the baby with the bathwater. □

Charitable research

British charities will not, after all, have to vouch for the quality of what their dependent researchers publish.

THE British Charity Commission has wisely backed away from a proposal it aired two months ago that seemed to require charities making research grants to vouch for the authenticity of publications arising from work carried out with their funds. The occasion was the continuing fuss about an article in *The Lancet* in 1990 pouring cold water on claims by the Bristol Cancer Health Centre that alternatives to conventional treatments for some types of cancer had proved beneficial (see *Nature* 367, 100; 1994). The published account of the research is now acknowledged to have been misleading, to say the least. The commissioners' first reaction was to say that the charities supporting the research should have taken responsibility for accounts of it eventually published.

That, of course, would be unworkable, as seems now to be recognized. In a set of guidelines put out last week, the Charity Commission recognizes that charities should stand in relation to research just as do public grant-making agencies in Britain. In other words, there are contractual relationships between the source of funds and both the recipient researcher and the researcher's institution. But it is for the institution, which is usually the researcher's employer, to be responsible for the proper conduct of the research, and for journals to ensure the quality of what is published. The Charity Commission promises a consultation paper on these and other issues.

So far, so good. Indeed, there are probably many British charities that will benefit from being told in plain language that research proposals should be sent to referees when the trustees themselves are not expert in the field concerned. But it must be hoped that the version of the guidelines eventually agreed will be appropriately flexible. The great value of independent charities in support of research is that they are often able and willing to back projects that do not survive the solemn processes of peer review, or which are structurally unusual in being devised to persuade others with longer purses to spend even more. Charities are also willing (rightly) to back what is sometimes called 'action research', perhaps mounting projects that appear to be socially valuable well in advance of the point at which they can be assured of success. What the Charity Commission now has in mind as guidance is generally correct, but it will be unfortunate if its eventual guidelines are too prescriptive. □