

UK defence ministry plans renewed assault on Gulf War syndrome

London. Britain's Ministry of Defence has ordered a fresh study into claims that a group of armed forces personnel are suffering from Gulf War syndrome, a mysterious illness related to their service during the 1991 Gulf War.

Fifty-one-thousand British service men and women went to the Gulf. Seven hundred veterans have since complained of a range of illnesses including memory loss, skin complaints and chronic fatigue. Others have cited birth defects in 60 children born after the Gulf War as evidence that Gulf War syndrome exists.

A three-year epidemiological study, overseen by the Medical Research Council, will be commissioned to compare the health of Gulf veterans with a similar group of personnel who did not serve in the Gulf. A similar study will try to establish whether the defects in children born after the war is statistically significant.

An earlier examination of 350 veterans by the ministry found no evidence of a common syndrome, though some were found to be suffering from serious illnesses. The veterans initially suggested that the disorders may have been caused by chemical or biological attacks during the war. Another theory suggests Gulf War syndrome may be the side effects from the mixture of vaccinations given to protect against chemical and biological attacks. □

US–Russian projects announced

Washington. A joint oceanographic survey by the US and Russian navies, to be conducted in the Sea of Okhotsk in eastern Russia, and increased US government backing for a research fund to support scientists in the former Soviet Union, were two results to emerge from last week's sixth meeting of the Gore–Chernomyrdin Commission to promote economic and technological cooperation.

The National Science Foundation (NSF) announced that it will

contribute an additional sum, as yet unspecified, to the \$10-million Civilian Research and Development Fund (CRDF) established last year with matching funds from the US government and philanthropist George Soros. The NSF contribution will pay the expenses of US scientists in collaborative projects who are limited to receiving 20 per cent of the funds awarded under current CRDF grants.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) announced its own \$1-million contribution to the CRDF, to be matched by another \$1 million from a US defence conversion fund. The NIH is particularly keen to collaborate with former Soviet scientists who worked on biological and chemical warfare, and may be able to provide insights into emerging infectious diseases. □

Cell biologists celebrate prize

London. Three cell biologists have been honoured in the 1996 King Faisal International Prize awards for science and will share the \$200,000 prize. The winners, who each also receive a gold medal, are: Hugh Pelham, Head of the division of Cell Biology at the UK Medical Research Council's Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge; Günter Blobel, John D. Rockefeller, Jr Professor at the Laboratory of Cell Biology, Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Rockefeller University, New York; and James E. Rothman, Program Chairman in Cellular Biochemistry and Biophysics at the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, New York, USA. □

Top-up funds for EU research

Munich. The European Commission has put forward a formal proposal to the European Parliament and Council of Ministers for using 'top-up' funds for the fourth Framework Programme. It proposed that the funds should be used to support five task forces that were created by the commissioners for research, industry and transport last year to coordinate and strengthen European Union research activities in key areas, particularly those relating to transport.

In principle, an additional ECU700 million (US\$889 million) is

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