

European Southern Observatory ends building row with Chile

Munich. The Chilean senate has ratified an agreement with the European Southern Observatory (ESO), based in Garching in Germany, bringing to an end a six-year dispute over the construction on Mount Paranal in northern Chile of ESO's Very Large Telescope (VLT). This had been threatened by a land dispute and arguments about the rights of Chilean astronomers to privileged viewing time (see *Nature* 374, 755; 1995).

The agreement, which supplements ESO's original agreement to develop telescope sites in Chile, confirms ESO's immunity from both local and national laws, in recognition of its status as an international organization. This means that it cannot be required to stop building work, as it has been in the past, while the local land dispute — or other similar conflicts — continues in court. In turn, in addition to ensuring privileged viewing time, Chilean scientists will benefit from agreement by ESO that it will respect national labour laws conferring collective bargaining rights. □

Malaria vaccine claims disputed

London. Studies in Thailand have found "no evidence" that the anti-malaria vaccine SPf66, developed in Colombia by the physician Manuel Patarroyo, is effective against the disease. Earlier trials in Colombia and Tanzania had indicated an effectiveness of 34 and 31 per cent respectively. But a larger study carried out in Thailand by Thai, British and US researchers, and involving 1,221 children between the ages of 2 and 15 living in a remote refugee camp, divided into two groups, has now found that roughly the same number of children in each group developed malaria, and that the severity of the infections was also broadly similar. According to the researchers, writing in *The Lancet* (348, 701; 1996) last week, the results, which corroborate a smaller trial in the Gambia last year, suggest that "there appears to be little justification for further trials with this vaccine". □

Solar summit attracts few stars

Paris. The first UN world summit on solar energy opened in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe, on Monday (16 September). The meeting, which is being organized by Unesco, hopes to create and find funding for a World Solar Programme 1996–2005, which would support renewable energy projects designed to provide cheap energy in remote rural areas. About 2.4 billion people live without access to electricity. But only nine heads of state turned up for the summit — hosted by Robert Mugabe, president of Zimbabwe — five of them from Africa, while many others sent only energy or science ministers, or local diplomats. □

Drug companies plan venture fund

Basel. The Switzerland-based pharmaceutical companies Ciba-Geigy and Sandoz, which are to merge into a single company called Novartis later this year with a reduction of 10,000 jobs world-wide, are setting aside SFr100 million (US\$82 million) as start-up venture capital for any scientists wishing to turn entrepreneur. François L'Éplattenier, former head of research at Ciba-Geigy and a member of the Novartis board of directors, will administer the funds. Further details of who will be eligible, and what type of venture will be supported, will be announced next week. □

Skull of 'Xhosa king' is European

Cape Town. A self-styled South African chief, Nicholas Gcaleka, has been charged with fraud for failing to pay grocery and other bills. The charges came shortly after the completion of tests revealing that a skull claimed by Gcaleka to be that of the

late Xhosa King Hintsa in fact belonged to a European woman.

Gcaleka travelled to Scotland earlier this year and returned with a skull that he claimed was that of King Hintsa. The king was shot at point-blank range on the orders of Colonel (later Sir) Harry Smith, while pleading for mercy during the frontier war in the Eastern Cape Province in 1835. But on Gcaleka's return to South Africa, the Xhosa royal house confiscated the skull, and handed it over to scientists for forensic tests.

Independent morphometric analyses by Phillip Tobias, professor emeritus of anatomy at the University of Witwatersrand, and Vincent Phillips, professor of oral pathology at the University of Stellenbosch, indicate that the skull is that of a female of Caucasoid descent. The skull is to be returned to Scotland. □

Israeli woman wins embryo case

Jerusalem. A woman whose husband left her after his sperm was used to fertilize her eggs *in vitro* can try to have the frozen embryos brought to term in a surrogate mother, Israel's Supreme Court ruled last week. The 7:4 decision, with the majority basing its arguments largely on ethical rather than legal grounds, ended a five-year legal battle between Dani Nahmani, who had argued that he could not be required to father a baby by a woman from who he is now estranged, and Ruti Nahmani, who claims that the frozen embryos represent her only chance of becoming a mother. □

Rabbit virus set for release

Sydney. The lethal rabbit calicivirus (RCV) disease is to be released in Australia in a nationwide campaign to reduce the annual A\$600-million (US\$472-million) damage that rabbits cause to agriculture. A release at 280 sites has been announced by John Anderson, the federal minister for primary industries, after a year-long controversy following the accidental spread of the disease from test sites on a supposedly isolated island off the mainland in South Australia.

Scientists are still uncertain how the disease has been able to spread so fast. The Division of Wildlife and Ecology of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) conducted the field tests, which were welcomed by farmers but opposed by some groups that cited warnings by two US researchers that the virus could jump the species barrier. No evidence for this has been found in laboratory tests with both native and introduced species. □

Altai objects to spacecraft debris

Moscow. Russia's Security Council, headed by General Aleksandr Lebed, has received a letter from the Altai Republic State Ecological Committee asking it to evaluate the potential dangers of rockets launched from the neighbouring 'cosmodrome' Baikonur (now in Kazakhstan), which either fall back to Earth or burn up in the atmosphere over Altai territory. According to a recent study, 1,250 tonnes of metal parts have fallen on the republic's two regions, which have a combined area of 7,400 square kilometres. This airborne 'garbage' is toxic because of the rocket fuel it contains, and therefore presents a threat to ecological security of the region, according to local officials. □

Less cash from French AIDS event

Paris. French AIDS associations and researchers have been dismayed to learn that the amount of money raised by this year's Sidaction — a fund-raising event involving all national television channels — amounted to just FFr65 million (US\$13 million), compared to FFr300 million in 1994. Some of the blame is being attributed to militants from the pressure group Act Up, who were responsible for aggressive outbursts during the televised show. Others attribute the event's poor returns to its emphasis on the need for donations rather than attempting to inform viewers about the AIDS issue, as well as a general decline in interest in AIDS among the public in France. □