

Hubble's new camera hit by problem with solid nitrogen coolant

[WASHINGTON] Engineers checking the refurbished Hubble Space Telescope have found a problem with the new Near Infrared Camera and Multi-Object Spectrometer (NICMOS) that may reduce its useful lifetime. The glitch has temporarily left the wide-field camera on NICMOS, one of three on the instrument, unable to focus properly.

The probable culprit is solid nitrogen used to cool the instrument's infrared detectors — the cryogen has expanded to the point where it has pushed a cold part of the Dewar flask in which it is stored into contact with a warmer part. Although the nitrogen is boiling away at an excessive rate, engineers hope that will ease the thermal contact and bring the camera's focus back to normal.

NICMOS was due to last four-and-a-half years, with its lifetime limited by the supply of cryogen. Project officials will not know for several weeks how much of the nitrogen will be lost, but hope to make up for any damage by rearranging observing schedules.

Indian space scientists 'seduced by commerce'

[NEW DELHI] The Indian government has been urged by the parliamentary committee on science and technology to take immediate steps to halt the departure of scientists and engineers from the country's space programme for more lucrative jobs in the private sector, particularly the computer industry.

The committee's comments follow a review of the activities of the Indian Space Research Organization, which concluded that the space programme had slowed down due to "young scientists and engineers leaving en bloc". As many as 560 scientists and engineers have quit the organization in the past six years, with 135 leaving in 1995–96 alone.

CJD experts warn of transfusion dangers

[PARIS] Blood from people at risk from transmissible spongiform encephalopathies should not be used for transfusion, according to those attending an international meeting of over 50 experts on Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD) convened last week by the World Health Organization. Three risk groups of donors were identified: people having a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy; those who received human growth hormone during the 1980s when the product was extracted from cadavers or dura mater transplants; and members of families where a case of CJD had occurred. Paul

Brown, a researcher at the US National Institutes of Health, presented results to the meeting suggesting that transmission could occur via blood in mice.

Czech academy reports successful slimming

[PRAGUE] The president of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Rudolf Zahradnik, last week reported to Vaclav Havel, the president of the Czech Republic, on the completion of the academy's four-year post-Communist reorganization. Since 1993, the academy has been considerably reduced in size, with the closure of 21 institutes and a halving of staff numbers to 6,400.

Slimmer is better, according to Zahradnik. "In terms of publications, the academy's research is more efficient than before", he says. As the final step in restructuring, the academy's general assembly last week voted to separate its two functions. A new independent Czech Learned Society is to be created, leaving the academy the sole task of running the 59 basic research institutes.

Marconi collection is withdrawn from sale

[LONDON] Following a series of protests, the collection of papers and radio equipment originally belonging to Guglielmo Marconi is to be withdrawn from sale and given to the Science Museum in London (see *Nature* 385, 669; 1997).

The collection, valued at £3 million (US\$4.8 million), will be made available for public access in Chelmsford, Essex, where Marconi built the world's first radio factory a century ago. This decision results from a deal struck between the electronics firm GEC-Marconi, the Science Museum, Essex County Council and Chelmsford Borough Council.

GEC-Marconi had planned to auction the 250 items of equipment and 750 letters and documents. Those opposed to the sale included Marconi's daughter Elettra.

Switzerland rejects ban on gene-altered food

[BERN] Switzerland has opened its doors to the immediate import of food containing gene-altered ingredients. It has rejected an appeal to ban the import of gene-altered soya developed by the US company Monsanto, despite protests from consumers and environmental groups. In line with draft directives of the European Union, of which it is not a member, Switzerland will now allow sale of such foodstuffs provided they are clearly labelled as containing gene-manipulated products.

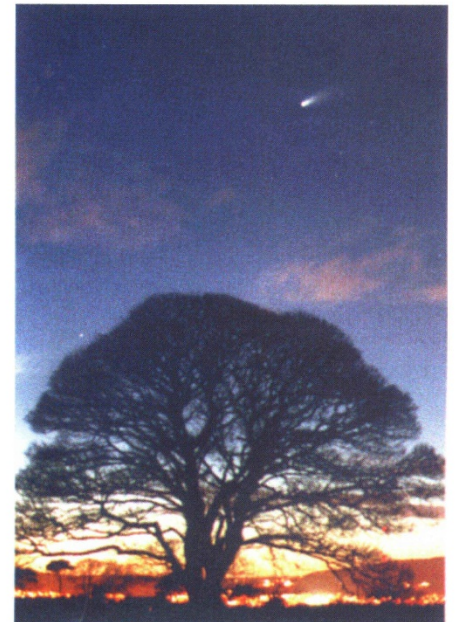
The decision by the Swiss Federal Department of Domestic Affairs on Monsanto's soya means that Swiss chocolate

manufacturers may now use gene-manipulated lecithin in their products. But the decision came just too late for some manufacturers which were caught — ironically just before Easter — using the product when it was still banned. They had to recall 500 tonnes from the market. Toblerone, which had to recall 350 tonnes, says it will no longer use gene-manipulated lecithin for chocolate for the Swiss market, because consumers clearly do not want it.

US academy to study fusion reactor plans

[WASHINGTON] The US Department of Energy has asked the National Academy of Sciences to study the scientific value of the proposed International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor project and to report back by December 1997. DoE wants an assessment of whether the proposed magnetic fusion machine will attain its technical goal of sustained ignition, and of how much new scientific knowledge will be gleaned from the project.

The outcome of the academy study is expected to influence strongly the level of support the United States will offer for the project, if it goes ahead after the design phase is completed in mid-1998. A separate technical assessment of the proposed reactor design being undertaken by the DoE's Fusion Energy Sciences Advisory Committee will be published later this month.



The comet Hale-Bopp, as it has been seen by millions around sunset in the Northern Hemisphere in recent weeks, when it has been easily visible to the naked eye. This photograph was taken by Alan Fitzsimmons of the Department of Pure and Applied Physics at Queen's University in Northern Ireland. It was taken near the Giants Ring, south of Belfast, and used a 15-second exposure with a 50-mm lens.