

news in brief

Profit plummets after nuclear problems: Siemens, the West German transnational electrical company, has had a first quarter slowing of its sales, orders and profits because of difficulties with its subsidiary, Kraftwerk-Union, a nuclear contracting firm. Losses in KWU caused by problems in Iran, Brazil and a partial freeze on nuclear construction at home have offset an 8% increase in new orders for the rest of the Siemens group. Failure to authorise new power stations is "driving West Germany to catastrophe", said Dr Bernhard Plettner, Siemens chairman. As a way out, Siemens is trying to win a contract in Argentina to build a second nuclear plant in addition to a KWU facility in operation there since 1975. But as part of the deal, the Argentine government is demanding additional facilities to enable it to produce plutonium. The Bonn government faced severe criticism from the US for making this kind of arrangement with Brazil last year.



Swiss to vote on reactor safety: Radical new licensing measures for reactor safety to be inserted into the Swiss constitution will be voted on by the electorate on 18 February. The referendum includes: proposals for autonomous regional approval within a 30 km radius of all proposed sites; accident compensation without limits; 25-year operating concessions for both plants and the associated storage of waste; requirements that all catastrophe precautions be made public; cessation of construction or operation if at any time safety guarantees are withdrawn; and a bridging rule that will require existing plants to re-apply for approval under the new rules within three years. The result of a five-year effort by a coalition of Swiss anti-nuclear groups, the campaign got boosts from a successful site occupation in 1975 at Kaiser Augsp near Basle and the emergence of a strong women's contingent opposed to nuclear power. Swiss authorities believe that if the vote goes in favour of the proposals, three plants—at Leibstadt, Kaiseraugst, and Graben, where local opposition is particularly strong—will be blocked. The bridging rule could mean that existing plants at Beznau, Muehleberg (pictured above) and the brand new 920MW plant built by the West German firm KWU at Goesgen could be closed.

Energy conservation month: October 1979 has been designated International Energy Conservation Month by the International Energy Agency (IEA). The 19 member states of the IEA are organising a variety of events to take place during October with the aim of increasing public awareness of the need for energy conservation. Several international conferences are being organised including one on the use of urban waste heat in Tokyo last October, one on energy management to be held in Birmingham, UK on 9-11 October, one on the energy conservation policies in several countries to be held in Sweden and one on the use of solar-heated water to be held in Spain.

In its national programme, the UK is laying particular emphasis on energy management, an area in which it feels it has gained some expertise in recent years. During October it will also be relaunching the "save-it" campaign for 1979-80 at a cost of £2 million and publishing the report of the Advisory Council on Energy Conservation.

Spain will promote the month by organising a bicycle

day' and in Switzerland local authorities will be able to measure heat losses from buildings by means of aerial photographs. In general, the Mediterranean members of IEA such as Italy, Spain and Greece are hoping to demonstrate the uses and importance of solar power while some of the colder countries, for example, Denmark and Canada are laying more emphasis on conservation in buildings.

Aid to Vietnam: Vietnam's scientists, known to be desperately short of scientific equipment, are to be helped by a British charity. Medical and Scientific Aid for Vietnam has collected £8,000 to buy equipment for biologists in Vietnam. A spokesman said the money was raised in a year. Of the £8,000, £2,500 was provided by another charity, War on Want. The money has been used to buy gel electrophoresis and column chromatography equipment for work on protein separation; a spectrophotometer for routine analysis; and some general laboratory glassware. These items will help equip one of the country's newest laboratories—that of biochemistry and food chemistry in the Vietnam Scientific Research Centre in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon). The laboratory is doing agricultural research and scientists will be investigating disease resistance in rice as well as looking at cheap sources of nitrogenous fertiliser.

Bombay magnetic observatory threatened: Construction of India's largest fertiliser complex at Thal-Vaishet threatens the Colaba-Alibag magnetic observatory 5 km away. It is feared that magnetic observations taken over a continuous span of 133 years will be disrupted by electrical interference from the plant. Dr Stuart Malin of the International Geological Survey described Colaba-Alibag as "probably the most valuable magnetic observatory in Asia", but added that "the fertiliser factory is undoubtedly more important to India than the observatory". The factory has been opposed by the Save Bombay Committee, a group concerned with the pollution risk to 37,000 people 10 km downwind from the site. The committee will take the case to the Bombay High Court.

Bangladeshi centre for appropriate technology: Bangladesh is to set up a National Centre for Appropriate Technology at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) that will cost \$4 million and will be completed in two phases: the first in 1980 and the second in 1985.

The broad objective of the centre is to identify, develop and adapt technologies appropriate to the basic needs of the people of Bangladesh. Its studies are to be sponsored by government, autonomous bodies, private organisations and international agencies. It will provide training and research facilities and will maintain contact with similar organisations throughout the world.

Its major task will be to co-ordinate activities between scientific institutions and organisations in Bangladesh. Agriculture is the first area it will be considering. It is proposing to set up regional centres at the Agricultural University, the Academy for Rural Development, the Agricultural Institute, the Rice Research Institute and at three engineering colleges. It will monitor the diffusion of technology to the regional centres. Networks of institutions are also to be set up for industry, communications and energy with the new national centre as the focus.

The centre will also work on the design and fabrication of new products and the modification and adaptation of imported goods. Its aim is to provide government with policy alternatives on the import, adoption and adaptation of foreign technology.