

news in brief

"Employers need freedom": Mr Mark Carlisle, UK Secretary of State for Education and Science has refused to establish an enquiry into the problems of short term contract researchers. In a letter to the Association of Researchers in Medical Sciences (ARMS) the minister's private secretary transmitted Carlisle's sympathy for those on short term contracts and his reluctance to see "good research wasted because it had to be ended prematurely". But, in accordance with current Conservative philosophy, Carlisle affirmed the importance of the employer in economic development. "On the other hand, the effective development of research is liable to be hampered unless employers have sufficient freedom to manoeuvre." An ARMS spokesperson said the government's response was "dismal."

Piperno hearing postponed: Extradition hearings in Paris for Franco Piperno, the Italian physicist accused of anti-government activities (27 September) have been postponed until 27 October. In the meantime, the French civil liberties organisation CINEL (Centre d'initiative pour des nouveaux espaces de liberté) has raised questions about the prison conditions of Piperno and another detainee, Lanfranco Pace. In Italy 60 Milan lawyers have issued a statement opposing the extradition. The lawyer's statement accuses the Italian authorities of not wanting a true public inquiry but instead "to submit (Piperno and Pace) to a long preventative detention in special well known prisons."

India-USSR to collaborate on solar energy: An Indian team of scientists which visited USSR in July has signed an agreement to collaborate with the USSR on a programme of solar energy utilisation. The programme envisages the development and testing of selective surfaces and solar collectors, solar thermoelectric generators and an autonomous power station using a Stirling engine. The joint work will be carried out at Central Salt and Marine Chemicals Research Institute, Bhavnagar; National Physical Laboratory, New Delhi; Kryzhizhanovsky Power Engineering Institute, Moscow; and the Institute of Physical Studies, Tashkent. *From Zaka Imam, New Delhi.*

New Finnish nuclear incident: Following recent difficulties with the Soviet built Loviisa nuclear power station, a radioactive leak occurred at the Olkiluoto-1 station, which is of Swedish origin. The incident on 29 August took place when the station was working at 65% capacity. A pipe in the reactor water purification circuit burst, and some 5 m³ of radioactive water escaped on to the floor. All safety systems worked satisfactorily, and, according to the Teollisuuden Voima (Industrial Power) Company which owns the station, the leak was immediately isolated and the station shut-down. After tests by the Radiation Protection Institute, the station was allowed to recommence operation on 3 September. The shut-down had no effect on Finland's plans for nuclear energy expansion. While Olkiluoto-1 was still out of action, the Council of States granted an operating licence of Olkiluoto-2 (subject to final checks). This second set is expected to commence generating at the beginning of 1980 and to reach full capacity by the middle of the year.

More Windscale troubles: Thirty people had to be evacuated from a low level effluent treatment plant on 12 September when radiation alarms sounded in the early morning hours. Plutonium was part of the radioactive airborne release but the details on levels or amounts is not known. A British Nuclear Fuels spokesperson said that tests have shown "no signs of harmful contamination". The cause of the alarm and the source of the leak are the subject of an internal inquiry. In the meantime the inquiries into the fire in the decanning cave last July in which 8 workers suffered radiation exposure (26 July) and the sump leak last March that discharged 30,000 curies under a temporary storage building (26 April) are "still proceeding."

IEA launches International Energy Conservation Month: International Energy Conservation Month for the 20 members of the International Energy Agency began on Monday. To increase consumer awareness of the need for energy conservation, the IEA member states are organising 30 international conferences and exhibitions to take place during October in different cities throughout the world, as well as individual national events including local meetings, exhibitions, demonstrations and competitions for school children. In addition, two countries, the US and Japan, are using the month to launch new legislation on energy conservation. President Carter, for example, is expected to announce the enforcement of the 55 mph speed limit and the issue of a gas mileage guide.

Plant physiologist expected to be named head of new US research foundation: Dr Nyle Brady, currently director of the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines, is expected to be nominated by President Carter as the director of the new Institute for Scientific and Technical Co-operation (ISTC), which will become the focus of US research efforts on issues directly related to the needs of developing countries. Two of Dr Brady's principal research interests have been the fundamental effects of lime in soil, and the physiology of the peanut plant (an interest which White House officials deny had any bearing on his appointment). Other research interests include the influence of fertiliser on the yield of rice, corn and coffee, and the influence of soil temperature on nutrient uptake.

Meanwhile the Senate appropriations subcommittee last week approved an allocation of \$19.75 million to the ISTC for the fiscal year beginning 1 October 1979, in addition to funds transferred from programmes currently under the Agency for International Development. However the institute's budget figure still has to be approved by the full Senate appropriations committee and by the Senate itself — at both of which stages it is expected to meet with opposition — before the institute can be assured that it will be allowed to start functioning.

US agrees to increase research cooperation with Japan: The United States and Japan have agreed to increase cooperation on scientific and technological research into non-energy fields, a move which follows an earlier agreement to cooperate on energy research. The broad framework for cooperation was agreed at a meeting in Tokyo last week between a US delegation headed by Dr Frank Press, director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, and a Japanese delegation headed by Mr Moyazaki, deputy minister for foreign affairs.

Following summit talks held last May, a communique was issued stating that the two governments "will study seriously the prospects for cooperative efforts in areas of basic and applied research", adding that promotion of joint cooperation was important in building up a partnership between the two countries for the 1980s.

No details have yet been announced of specific areas for joint research activities. However possibilities include, outer space development, and environmental and health research.

Bombay magnetic observatory may move: The Colaba-Alibag Institute of Geomagnetism, with its 133-year-old record of continuous magnetic observation, may be moved if electrical noise from a nearby fertiliser complex disrupts its function. A campaign (*Nature* 15 February) to have the fertiliser complex at Thal-Vaishet resited has failed, in part because the state government of Mararashtra opposed the move because of the loss of jobs resiting would have entailed.

A number of experiments on the effects of electromagnetic noise have so far proved inconclusive, however, and there is still the possibility that the observations will be unaffected by the plant's machinery.