

## Disarmament plea

# Anti-missiles not cricket

THE banning of the US anti-missile system recently announced by President Reagan has been called for by 244 Soviet scientists and academics, including officials of the All-Union and Republic Academies of Sciences. Although this is not the first time that such an appeal has been made by Soviet scientists, in the past such documents have dealt with a particular sector of warfare (nuclear or chemical). The Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies now contend, however, that President Reagan's proposed system effectively adds a new sector to the arms race, by strengthening first strike capacity to a point where the United States could win a nuclear war by a preemptive strike, without necessarily risking its own destruction.

The scientists' document does not spell out the situation so plainly. It simply claims that President Reagan's proposal to create "defensive weapons" is simply a bluff. Such a weapon, it says, can do "virtually nothing" for a country subjected to "sudden massive attack", and the President simply wants "destabilization of the existing strategic balance". It draws attention to the "authoritative and responsible statement" already signed by representatives of the academies of sciences of many countries, including the Royal Society (United Kingdom) and the Académie Française, supporting the view that there is "no effective means of defence against nuclear war".

One of the signatories, Dr Georgii Arbatov, director of the Institute of the United States and Canada of the Soviet Academy of Sciences and widely regarded as an unofficial spokesman for the Kremlin on North American matters, said on the English language service of Moscow radio that the proposed American "defensive" system "absolutely derails the whole process of arms control" and that, furthermore, the system, based on computer response, would be too prone to technical failure, which could have tragic consequences. Moreover, he warned, although the American President might suggest that, once a fool-proof anti-missile system is worked out, the Americans would share it with the Soviets, the Soviet Union did not intend to "wait twenty or thirty years for American generosity". He appeared to be echoing the words of General Secretary Yuri Andropov, who last month warned that "all attempts to achieve military supremacy over the Soviet Union are in vain".

In spite of Mr Andropov's warning, Soviet politicians and columnists continue to urge the need for arms limitation. The 56 official slogans for this year's May Day celebrations include two appeals to the peoples of the world to halt the arms race and to prevent a nuclear catastrophe, and a call to the people of Europe not to allow the

deployment of new American missiles in Western Europe.

In the celebrations of Cosmonautics Day (12 April), Cosmonaut Shatalov reiterated Andropov's commitment to resisting the attempts of any foreign power to achieve military supremacy, said that the Soviet Union has "always urged and continues to urge" that space initiatives should be "exclusively peaceful". (This is, on paper, true; in spite of Western evidence to the contrary, the Soviet Union has always denied allegations of involvement in a space-weapons programme, hunter-killer satellites, beam-weapons and the like — although the best Western estimates put the military contribution to Soviet space funding at around 60 per cent.)

Forecasting that within the next ten years the Soviet Union would maintain permanently staffed space-stations on a shift system "just as we now send various scientists to the Antarctic", Shatalov called for all work in space to be "directed towards the more rational utilization of natural resources of our Earth, and to help people on Earth live still better". **Vera Rich**



**PROFESSOR Richard Norman, FRS, of York University, is to be Chief Scientific Adviser to the Ministry of Defence from September. As such he will be responsible for advising the Secretary of State for Defence, the Rt. Hon. Michael Heseltine, on all scientific aspects of defence.**

**Professor Norman, aged 51, has held the Chair in Chemistry at York since 1965. He has worked on applications of electron spin resonance spectroscopy in elucidating structures of organic radicals and mechanisms of reactions, and is author of two textbooks on organic chemistry.**

**The post is normally held for 5 years. Professor Norman said last week that he was looking forward to an "enormously challenging job" in which he would deal with the entire spectrum of science. He succeeds Professor Sir Ronald Mason, also a chemist, who has returned to the University of Sussex.**

Tim Beardsley

## French universities

# Protests hit their targets

THE Government of France backed away at the weekend from the most rigorous interpretation of its intentions for higher education. Riotous demonstrations last week by students in Paris seem painfully to have reminded ministers of the upheavals of 1968. And the prospect of strikes planned for this week by the hospital doctors prompted the Prime Minister, M. Pierre Mauroy, to say on 29 April that the new regulations affecting medical students would not take effect until the academic year beginning in 1984.

The political future of the Minister of Education, M. Alain Savary, now the sole architect of this further round of university reform, is now under a cloud, his defensive interview with *Le Monde* on 30 April notwithstanding.

The issue underlying the events of the past three months is the government's ambition to limit access to the successive stages of higher education in France. Medical education has been particularly affected by a decree, issued last December, by means of which the transition from the second to the third stages of medical education, essentially from pre-clinical to clinical education, would be restricted by tougher and more formal examinations.

Law and economics students were persuaded onto the streets in Paris last week by a similar provision in the proposed law on university reforms that would restrict students' transition from the first (two-year) cycle of university education to the second. Article 13 of the draft law, which has not yet been debated by the National Assembly, would have the numbers of students making this transition restricted by the capacity of university departments to educate them as well as by the opportunities for professional employment after graduation.

The promise that last year's decree will not begin to apply until 1984 means that medical students will not be affected until the end of this decade, by which time there will no doubt be room for further negotiation.

Whether the government's concession on that front will also mollify the law and economics students who seem to have taken the lead in last week's demonstration is not yet clear, but the debate in the assembly will provide further opportunities for compromise without loss of face by the government.

Another disputed issue is the government's plan to encourage entry to universities without a formal school-leaving qualification (*baccalauréat*). Although students qualifying by means of work experience now amount to 12 per cent of the total, many hold that the government's plans mean a devaluation of *le bac*. □