

Offshore blast causes alarm

Tokyo

AN undersea volcano burst into life last week only a few thousands metres off the shore of a large resort city 100 kilometres from Tokyo.

The eruption, which broke through the sea surface near Ito on the Izu Peninsula southwest of Tokyo, is the first in history to occur so close to the main island of Honshu. It began in the early evening last Thursday and lasted only a few minutes but was witnessed by many in Ito and by millions on national television. Camera crews were in the city because a spate of earthquakes has rocked the area in the past few weeks.

The Izu Peninsula rides on the edge of the Philippine plate which plunges beneath Japan and is one of the most earthquake-prone areas of the world. The area has dozens of volcanoes both on land and under the sea but none is thought to have erupted in the past few thousand years.

Tremors began in the Ito area in late June and by last week more than 20,000 earthquakes had been detected, including two measuring 5.5 on the Richter scale which caused landslides and a few minor injuries. Some experts predicted that a major earthquake might be imminent.

Instead, after a brief lull in seismic activity, strange booming sounds were heard emanating from the ground in the neighbourhood of Ito on 11 and 12 July. The Volcanic Eruption Prediction Liaison Council interpreted the sounds as being

caused by rising magma. The next day, the eruption began.

Spectacular video pictures of the event were taken by a Maritime Safety Agency patrol vessel, the 2,600-ton *Takuyo*, which was surveying the area only 500 metres from where the eruption broke through the sea surface. Following a submarine explosion which rocked the vessel, the sea bulged upwards and turned black from a plume of volcanic material. Moments later, steam and smoke burst through the surface in an eruption about 100 metres wide and 30 metres high. Five minutes later the sea was calm again.

Only shortly before, the *Takuyo* had detected a mound about 25 metres high on the sea floor at a depth of about 100 metres at the site of the eruption. A subsequent survey revealed that the eruption formed a crater in the mound about 200 metres across.

Minor tremors continued to jolt the city of Ito, and several hundred residents living near the shore were quickly evacuated to higher ground because of fears of further eruptions and possible tidal waves. Police closed shoreline roads leading into the city and telephone lines to Ito were jammed by calls from anxious relatives. Earthquakes continued to shake the city on Friday and a plume of brown water was seen at the site of the eruption. The Volcanic Prediction Council is warning that further eruptions may be imminent.

David Swinbanks

IMAGE
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REASONS

Moments after the *Takuyo* had passed the spot, the sea erupted. Inset map shows that Tokyo is not far away from the explosion, marked X. Photo: Kiodo News.

Australia's network

Sydney

AUSTRALIA is to set up an academic research computer network. The Australian Academic and Research Network (AARNet) will be funded by the universities, rather than by a separate agency as has been usual elsewhere. Each university will pay between A\$25,000 and A\$50,000 according to size and needs.

"In Australia there have been no government organizations with either the money or the interest to take on a project like this. Real network developments have really flowered in the last five years — Australia will now be a part of that," said Professor Ken McKinnon, chairperson of the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, which gave its blessing to the plan last month.

T. E.

Cut-price fingerprints

New Delhi

THE Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB), an Indian government laboratory in Hyderabad, hopes to provide DNA fingerprinting services to customers in India and abroad at a price much cheaper than the fees currently charged for similar service by British and American companies. It is the first biotechnology-based service commercialized by India.

CCMB director Dr Pushpa Bhargava DNA fingerprinting was used for the first time in India last month to settle a drawn out paternity case in Madras. The Bureau of Police Research and Development under the Ministry of Home Affairs will set up a \$6-million independent facility to exploit the technology for forensic science.

Services will be provided free for government agencies but a fee varying from \$30 to \$150 dollars will be charged for others. With only a handful of private companies in the world offering DNA fingerprinting services, Bhargava hopes that the low-cost Indian facility will attract orders from overseas.

K. S. J.

Laid to rest

Munich

AFTER a six-month investigation, an independent commission has identified five slides, six paraffin-mounted tissue samples and several other bodily remains in the collections of the University of Tübingen medical faculty that might derive from Nazi execution victims. University leaders, supported by the Ministry for Science and Art in the *Land* of Baden-Württemberg, decided in January to bury all body parts that are even suspected to derive from Nazi victims. The commission determined that it is impossible in many cases to trace the origin of slides or body parts. In cases where there is doubt about the origins of the remains, they will be given a respectful burial at 'Burial Ground X' of the Tübingen city cemetery.

S. D.