

Bioweapons treaty in limbo as US blocks verification plan

Geneva A conference aimed at reviewing the Biological Weapons Convention got off to an unpromising start last week, as the United States reaffirmed its opposition to attempts to equip the treaty with a verification protocol.

Negotiations to introduce a procedure for verification, which began in 1995, broke down this July in the face of US opposition (see *Nature* 412, 365; 2001). Although a strong consensus emerged last week that more needs to be done to prevent the acquisition of biological weapons, the United States did not change its stance on verification, arguing that the surprise inspections of labs allowed under the protocol would harm US biodefence establishments and biotechnology companies.

The United States instead proposed new export controls, stronger national bioterrorism laws and a code of conduct for scientists. John Bolton, US under-secretary of state, also took the unusual step of directly accusing Iraq, North Korea, Iran, Libya and Syria of infringing the treaty. Iran, Iraq and Libya denied the accusation, and Libya added that the allegations could damage the chances of reaching a consensus at the conference.

Ombudsmen to bring order to research misconduct

Amsterdam Research ombudsmen who will investigate breaches of research ethics have been appointed by 13 Dutch universities, together with the country's Royal Academy of Sciences and the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research, a government-funded body that distributes research funding.

The ombudsmen will tackle accusations of misdemeanours such as the manipulation of research data and plagiarism, and will report to their institution's board of governors. Although the governors will decide on the action to be taken, an appeal court, the National Body for Scientific Integrity, is also being established as part of the royal academy. All parties in a dispute will have the option of asking the court to evaluate their institution's handling of the case.

Telescope revamp gets the go-ahead

Washington Plans have been approved to expand the ability of the Very Large Array radio telescope to image distant objects. The National Science Board, the governing body of the National Science Foundation, has recommended funding of US\$58.3 million for the project over the next decade. Canada and Mexico also plan to fund the expansion.

Based in New Mexico, the instrument's 27 dish antennas make it the world's most



Farther horizons: expanding the Very Large Array will boost studies of how stars and planets formed.

powerful and widely used radio telescope. The expansion will include replacing ageing parts on the 21-year-old telescope with modern technology. A committee of the National Research Council, the operating arm of the National Academy of Sciences, last year endorsed the revamp, saying that it would be essential for future studies of star and planet formation, black holes and the origins of the modern Universe.

Patent office closes the book on microarray dispute

Munich The final stage of a long-running battle over microarray patents has been settled by the European Patent Office.

The British company Oxford Gene Technology (OGT) had been in dispute with US firm Affymetrix over the latter's GeneChip technology, used to determine which genes in a cell or tissue are switched on. OGT claimed the technology breached patents that it owned. Affymetrix and five other companies, including Abbott and Roche, had in turn challenged the validity of OGT's patent.

Affymetrix withdrew its opposition to the patent earlier this year and agreed to pay licence fees to OGT (see *Nature* 410, 506; 2001). But opposition from the other companies continued, leading to the patent office hearing. Its ruling upholds OGT's patent but slightly limits its scope. For example, the patent applies only to microarrays made from plastic or glass. But OGT welcomed the decision, saying that it reaffirmed its position and will not in practice limit the patent.

Review finds malaise in UK computing

London Low academic salaries, outdated infrastructure and inadequate funding are eroding British research in computer science, a panel of international experts has concluded. The *International Review of UK Research in Computer Science*, sponsored by a group of governmental and computer-

science organizations, says that although the country's research is still strong, some fields are declining and others will follow.

Government funding of computer science is currently below international levels and discriminates against proposals in new areas, interdisciplinary projects and large experimental projects, the panel asserts. Two fields in particular need funds, it says — algorithmic and complexity research, which is growing in importance, and experimental computer systems research, which it says has been a strength but is now weakened.

► www.iee.org/policy/csreport/cs_report.pdf

Stamp of approval for Heisenberg's birthday

Munich The career of physicist Werner Heisenberg, who would have been 100 years old on 5 December, is being celebrated in his native Germany with the release of a commemorative stamp. This year could also see an end to the debate over the nature of a meeting between Heisenberg and Danish physicist Niels Bohr in 1941.

Heisenberg, who died in 1976, won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1932 for his formulation of quantum mechanics. During the Second World War, he headed Germany's unsuccessful attempt to produce a nuclear bomb and it was at this time that he visited Bohr in Copenhagen.

The details of their meeting were never recorded, and questions have remained over Heisenberg's motives for visiting his former colleague. The episode forms the basis of *Copenhagen*, a play written in 1998 by Michael Frayn. The Bohr family says that by the end of the year it will release 11 documents on the meeting that Bohr either wrote or dictated to others.

► www.aip.org/history/heisenberg

