Europe's Space Plans on Hold

Munich—The European Space Agency (ESA) ended its first council meeting in 4 years last week with the grim realization that the agency cannot afford the ambitious manned space program Europe has been pursuing. Although France still wanted to push forward, the financial problems caused by German reunification forced ministers from the 13 ESA nations to agree to postpone for 1 year any decision to proceed with construction of the Hermes space shuttle and the Columbus space station module. So dismal are the financial prospects that ESA ministers even decided to seek outside help to keep the program going—with the Soviet Union and Japan at the top of the list.

In an ironic twist, given that European politicians regularly criticize the United States for its inability to commit space funds more than a year at a time, ESA's tight finances also forced a change in planning. In the future it will review its budget every year, just like the U.S. Congress, and not every 4 years as in the past.

Despite that change, and a decision to cut the 1992 ESA budget by 5% to $3.1 billion, ESA was eager to reassure U.S. space officials that it intends to fulfill its international commitment to build and operate Columbus as part of the space station. "The last thing we want," said Gottfried Greger, co-director of the space program coordination division at the German Research and Technology Ministry, "is for the Americans to think we are pulling back our support. That is definitely not the case."

Over the next year, ESA will try to find ways to make Hermes and Columbus more cost effective. But the delay in deciding whether to start construction may add as much as $300 million to the cost of the Hermes project alone, by ESA estimates, making it even more difficult to proceed in the future. Under current budget conditions, Hermes and Columbus will be "impossible for us [Germany] to finance," says Greger. Given new cost estimates for Hermes and the amount Germany now says it can contribute, the 9-year program will be $3 billion more than Germany can afford, even with the optimistic assumption of zero inflation.

That means that the only way to continue the projects—aside from finding unexpected savings within already tight budgets—is to "get support from elsewhere," German Research and Technology Minister Heinz Riesenhuber told *Science* at the end of the meeting. "If we want the shuttle to actually fly, we cannot cut it back too far," he said. "But our own resources are limited."

But Riesenhuber did not appear overly optimistic about the prospects for finding more support. He admitted that Soviet participation in a European space program would have to wait until it is clear who controls the Soviet space facilities. "We don't even know who will be in charge of [the Soviet launch center at] Baikonur," he said. Baikonur lies in the breakaway republic of Kazakhstan.

A senior German space official, who did not wish to be named, added that it was unrealistic for ESA to expect much financial support from Japan, which has its own space flight program. He revealed that Germany has already asked Japan more than once if it would like to cooperate in the Columbus program, because of overlap between it and Japan's plans for a space station module. The answer, he said, has always been no.

Only development of the Ariane V launcher, ESA's space science programs, and the British-led Polar Platform Earth Observation Mission (POEM-1) escaped postponement at Munich. For Hermes and Columbus the key date will now be the next council meeting, scheduled to take place in Spain in December 1992. ■ STEVEN DICKMAN

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New Window on Biological Defense

If you are working with hazardous organisms in a high-containment laboratory, should you be required to report on the environmental risks of an experiment before starting it? The answer from now on—if your funding comes from the U.S. Army's biological defense program—is yes. Thanks to a court settlement reached last week between Jeremy Rifkin's Foundation on Economic Trends and the Department of Defense, all biological defense work that goes on in high-containment (BL-3 and BL-4) labs will be subject to public review for environmental risks. And don't imagine that just because your funding comes from the National Institutes of Health or the Department of Agriculture (USDA) you're off the hook. Rifkin's attorney, Andrew Kimbrell, says he is going to push to have the same requirements apply to you.

The court settlement is the late-ripening fruit of a suit Kimbrell filed back in 1987. It began when Rifkin and Kimbrell accused the Pentagon of failing to live up to promises made in an earlier case—specifically, failing to release information about biological defense research taking place at U.S. Army labs and contract research centers.

On 19 November, the foundation and the U.S. government declared a truce. Kimbrell agreed to allow the suit to be dismissed "with prejudice," meaning it will not be appealed. And the attorney for the Justice Department, Charles Findlay, agreed to a 12-point stipulation, basically an agenda for paperwork. It requires the military to respond to negative findings in a safety review by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. And it lays out an extensive list of environmental assessments (EAs) and impact statements (EISs) to be written on a host of centers within the next year.

The Army has agreed, for example, to write complete reports on the old and new labs at Dugway Proving Ground in Utah; the Army Medical Research Institute of Chemical Defense at Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland; the Salk Institute's Government Services Division in Swiftwater, Pennsylvania; and the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research in Washington, D.C. In addition, unless they are covered by other environmental assessments, the Army will also have to publish reports on experiments being done under contract at the Yale Arbovirus Research Unit in New Haven, Connecticut, at the Southern Research Institute in Birmingham, Alabama, and Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. The Army may ask for exemptions for some of these, but it has agreed that for the next 3 years, it will send Rifkin's foundation advance notice of every such request. Kimbrell says the disclosure requirement for BL-3 and BL-4 research "sets a standard that we are going to hold NIH and USDA to."

There are at least two ways to interpret every agreement, and the Army sees this one as containing less than the foundation claims. Says U.S. Army spokesman Major Rick Thomas: "We had already begun doing most of these EAs....There's really nothing in the settlement that we were not doing or planning to do already"—except for the agreement to notify the foundation of proposed new projects and requests for exemptions.

As for Kimbrell's threat to try to extend the provisions to other biomedical research, NIH's chief safety officer, Robert McKinney, is not panicking. He thinks NIH work is covered by a broad impact statement filed long ago. What would he do about a challenge from Rifkin and Kimbrell? "Let 'em come," he says. "We'll let the judicial system take its course." ■ ELIOT MARSHALL