

# ET is no laughing matter

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BANGALORE, October 13:

**W**HAT will we do if we were to suddenly find that we are not alone? Television has been getting us accustomed to visitors from other worlds but the discovery of aliens, when it really comes, "could cause panic and economic chaos and topple governments." The detection of extraterrestrial intelligence, which has long fascinated astronomers waiting for the right radio signals, seems to have now also gripped sociologists and what is more, political leaders such as the US President, Mr Ronald Reagan and the Soviet President, Mr Mikhail Gorbachov.

## DRAFT AGREEMENT

That the issue is not just about perfecting new scientific techniques and developing more sensitive and powerful signal receivers was established when the international astronomical congress was today presented with a draft international agreement by an American delegate, concerning the detection of extraterrestrial intelligence.

Mr Michael A. G. Michaud, director, office of advanced technology, US department of state, who presented the draft agreement, said search efforts suggested that, if any radio signals from extraterrestrial intelligence did exist, the probability of our detecting them was increasing.

Mr Michaud highlighted the need for a code of conduct for the search of extraterrestrial intelligence and an agreed post-discovery regime so that the human species could deal with the aliens suitably. The genuine fear of those like Mr Michaud is about the horrendous consequences that may follow from an unauthorised reply to a

signal from the aliens! Or, for example, imagine some university don without consulting the state department leaking out to the world press the first evidence of intelligent signals from the other worlds!

The proposed agreement on detection among research institutions and researchers — not among governments — would ensure that the priceless information is released only as per agreed principles. The draft agreement also seeks to ensure that the first information report on the detection of aliens is properly verified by independent observers so that the credibility of the scientific community is maintained.

## RADIO TELESCOPE

The astronomical congress also heard several scientists reviewing their search for extraterrestrial intelligence. An Indian contribution was from Dr Govind Swaroop of the Tata-Institute of Fundamental Research, Bombay, who pointed out that the proposed giant metrewave radio telescope (GMRT), being set up near Pune to study problems in astronomy, could also be used for the search for extraterrestrial intelligence (SETI).

A team from the Jet Propulsion Laboratory described the research work under the NASA SETI sky survey. This programme includes all-sky and targeted searches. Another paper was from the SETI Institute in Los Altos in the US and one giving the progress of work in the Soviet Union.

So, ET is no longer a laughing matter. In Argentina, a SETI programme has been launched because such an effort was lacking in the southern hemisphere. If only the aliens knew how much trouble the human species is taking to detect their signals, they might even de-

cide to visit the planet earth. They do not have to face disbelief when they descend on earth. An Italian sociologist told the astronomical congress that a large percentage of humans now believed in the existence of extraterrestrial intelligence. During his short stay in Bangalore, he even picked up a newspaper advertisement in Binatone TV, with an extraterrestrial being popping out of the TV screen. He showed this as one of his slides to prove the point.

## PUBLIC OPINION

The Italian scholar, Dr Roberto Pinotti, in his paper on "ETI, SETI and today's public opinion," said that science fiction and popular interest in UFOs as visitors from outer space "played a major role in the average man's acceptance of the reality of extraterrestrial life."

He quoted several public opinion surveys showing that among American adults the proportion of believers in ETI has gone up over the years. Curiously, America women are more sceptical than men.

The Italian scholar quoted extensively from the speeches of Mr Reagan referring to the "threat to this world from some other species from another planet." Mr Gorbachov had said that the US President had mentioned to him about the two nations joining forces to repel an invasion by extraterrestrials and "I shall not dispute the hypothesis, though I think it is early yet to worry about such an intrusion."

The Italian scholar said the ETI concept might be used in politics too. One can wait and see whether at the next astronomical congress in Beijing, the Soviet delegation comes out with a matching response to the American delegate's draft agreement.