

# 'UFOs' might herald quakes

By GRAEME O'NEILL

Reports in the past week of "UFOs" in the night sky near Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory which have sent electronic devices haywire, may have a more down-to-earth explanation: they may be a portent of earthquakes.

Tennant Creek, about 500km north of Alice Springs, is Australia's earthquake capital. It has recorded more than 20,000 quakes since 1966, including the three most powerful quakes in Australia in 20 years which all hit during a 12-hour period in January, 1988.

There have been reports from around the world of eerie angloes, large glowing domes near ground level, and ball lightning or lightning flashes just before, during or after earthquakes.

Several people in the Tennant Creek area have reported seeing orange, red and green lights in the

orange, red and green lights in the sky during the past week and silvery, dome-like structures.

An earthquake expert, Dr Trevor Jones, of the Australian Seismological Office in Canberra, said yesterday that the Tennant Creek phenomena could not definitely be attributed to earthquakes, but cited a 1968 report by a Japanese scientist of glowing "domes" between 20m and 200m wide being seen around the time of a major earthquake.

The same report mentions red, orange and green lights in the sky, possibly reflected off high clouds, and the phenomena are often seen after the passage of a cold front when the following air is very dry and conducive to the build-up of static electricity.

Dr Jones said geologists have measured high voltages in stressed regions of the earth's crust, possibly due to a phenomenon called the piezo-electric effect. When compressed, certain quartz crystals emit small pulses of electricity. While voltages may be very large, the currents that flow from point to point are only weak.

One theory advanced by scientists who have studied earthquake lights is that they may be ball lightning - glowing plasmas of highly charged gas leaking from the earth's crust. Ball lightning manifests itself as spheres that may float or dart through the air.

Heat or dart through the air

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