

Spy in the sky

Zircon, the controversial British spy satellite, may now be eavesdropping on the Soviet Union.

Duncan Campbell reports

The controversial and costly British spy satellite, originally known as Zircon, is in orbit—according to American space experts. They say it is likely to be one of two electronic eavesdropping satellites secretly launched by the United States over the past three months. The British and US governments refuse to comment on the launches. One satellite went up by Titan launcher on 4 September, the second by the space shuttle Discovery on 23 November. In each case, the satellites were described by the US Department of Defence merely as classified defence payloads.

The Ministry of Defence press office said last week: "We have no comment to make on these launches." But US intelligence satellite experts, including Dr John Pike of the Federation of American Scientists and Dr Jeff Richelson of the National Security Archives, Washington DC, say the mysterious 4 September launch was likely to have been the British spy satellite. "It doesn't fit any US programme."

The satellite's function, when in orbit, is to unfold a gigantic mesh receiving dish. The satellite orbits in an apparently fixed position over the Seychelles. From here, virtually the entire Soviet Union, as well as all of eastern Europe, is in the electronic view of the listening dish. Elaborate computer procedures are necessary to keep the satellite on station and to process the signals received. Zircon's ground receiving and control computer complex, codenamed Irano, is said to have cost £150 million alone.

Several features make the 4 September launch one of the most secretive ever carried out by the US. The satellite was launched under cover of darkness at 1.54am on US Labour Day. Labour Day is a national holiday and the timing ensured the US media took little interest. The launcher, a Titan 34-D, is used only for the heaviest payloads not carried by the space shuttle, indicating the satellite would be heavy and have an important military purpose.

The specialists noted it would be difficult to conceal the presence of a British team of specialists at Cape Canaveral to prepare for and monitor the launching and orbital manoeuvring of Zircon. Conveniently, however, the 4 September launch coincided closely with the launch of a civilian space probe, Marco Polo, with which many British scientists were involved. This could have assisted in providing "cover" for the British Zircon experts. The Zircon electronic eavesdropping ("sigint") satellite is a new project for Government Com-

munications Headquarters (GCHQ), Cheltenham. Its existence was first revealed by *New Statesman* in January 1987, after the government successfully urged the BBC to ban transmission of a BBC2 *Secret Society* programme. The programme revealed how the government had hidden the project from Parliament and the Public Accounts Committee.

Following delays and uncertainties, Zircon is likely to have cost considerably more than the £500 million originally budgeted. The funds required have been concealed in the costs of the Trident missile system. According to a former senior Ministry of Defence adviser, Zircon's costs are actually 5 per cent of the costs of the Trident nuclear programme.

Angered by the Zircon revelation, the Prime Minister ordered successive raids on reporters' homes, the *New Statesman* offices, and finally the seizure of films and tapes from BBC Scotland. After a public outcry, the material was handed back to the BBC who were eventually allowed to transmit the programme in September 1988.

At the time of the 1987 raids and parliamentary debates, the government claimed no decision had been taken to go ahead with Zircon. But this was contradicted by evidence that new factory facilities to build the satellite had been constructed. Government sources also claimed the project had been funded and approved outside normal Defence Ministry procedures.

Six months later, a leaked report in the *Times* claimed the Zircon project had been scrapped. The *Times* information was never confirmed, although several defence sources think it may have marked a decision to abandon the idea of producing an all-British electronic spy satellite and to purchase an off-the-shelf US version instead. Previously, GCHQ has worked extensively on US-provided satellite sigint data both in Cheltenham and at the giant US spy base at Menwith Hill, Yorkshire. At Menwith Hill, about 300 GCHQ staff assist a much larger US contingent to process intercepts from satellites Argus, Vortex and Chalet. Another satellite programme run from Menwith Hill is code-lettered YI.

A similar base at Bad Aibling, West Germany receives data from the latest US electronic spy satellite, Magnum. November's space shuttle launch carried Magnum, the second of America's new generation of listening satellites. Like the Titan rocket thought to have lofted Zircon, the Discovery shuttle took off without TV publicity and under cover of darkness. ●

