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European fighters: American again?
The Defence Ministers of Belgium,
the Netherlands, Norway and Den-
mark last week came out in favour of
the General Dynamics F-16 as the
joint replacement for their fleets of,
initially, F-104G Star fighters. The ministers said in a communique after four hours of talks on April 3 that in terms of operational performance and programme cost the American aircraft had undisputed advantages over the other contenders, the Dassault Mirage F.1E and the Saab Viggen Eurofighter.

The ministers again stressed the im-portance of picking a common replace-ment and said that their Governments should now have sufficient information to make final decisions by the end of April. In spite of the communique, however, many doubts are still being expressed as to whether a joint solu-tion will be arrived at and the ministers admitted that "the evalua-tion of other aspects, particularly in the industrial and economic field, is still continuing in some countries."

The Belgian Defence Minister, Mr Paul vanden Boeynants, made it clear that his country was one of those re-ferred to when he said that the American offer raised industrial and economic problems for Belgium which would have to be discussed by the Cabinet before any decision was made. He agreed that the financial and oper-ational advantages of the F-16 were un-qualified. "But there is a small though remote chance for the Mirage," he said. Many observers feel that Belgium will still in fact be forced diplomatic-ally to buy French.

Norway's Alv Fostervoll was clear about his country's preference after last week's talks: "We recognise that the F-16 is the most suitable aircraft for the environment in Norway—and wc will buy the F-16 if the other countries stand together." Dutch minis-ter Hcnk Vredeling was more cautious: he said that his country would have to weigh the consequences to the European aircraft industry if the American offer was taken up.

First reaction to the communique from officials in Washington was that

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In a Flight safety feature next week J. M. Ramsden examines one major airline's method of monitoring aircrew health. The issue will also contain a profile of Braathens SAFE, the Norwegian scheduled carrier.

it was welcome but part of it was interpreted as meaning that the four countries would be seeking more economic concessions from the United States. The officials indicated that the USA had gone about as far as it could in its offer.
Both Sweden and France have modi-fied the terms of their offers since further price guarantees were sought at the end of February. Saab's latest offer to the Netherlands gives a 102-aircraft programme cost of DF2,248 million, DF193 million less than pre-viously. Saab, Volvo and L.M.Ericsson are guaranteeing a parallel industrial programme worth DF2,300 million. The offer to the Belgians gives a 116-aircraft cost of BFr36,750 million, BFr3,500 million lower than before. The parallel industrial programme would be worth BFr55,000 million. Saab says that the corresponding re-duction in the price of the Eurofighter for the Netherlands would be 48 per cent and for Belgium 73 per cent.

Mr vanden Boeynants called a press conference after meeting his counter-parts in Brussels on March 23, 24 and 25 and gave some of the cost figures for the F.1E and F-16 which had not previously emerged. The conference was called to deny reports in the Flemish weekly Knack that vanden Boeynants had manipulated the price tenders in order to make them appear more favourable to the F.1E.

The Belgian minister said that if 116 aircraft were ordered the cost would be BFr34,710 million for the F-16 and BFr34,329 million for the F.1E. The Mirage prices are guaran-teed by the French Government and payable in Belgian francs. The American aircraft would have to be paid for in dollars except for the part built under licence in Europe.
Mr vanden Boeynants said that originally the costs had been tendered as BFr32,148 million for the F-16 and BFr39,842 million for the F.1E. Then the American price went up while the French knocked off BFr249 million as a monetary adjustment, BFr3,062 million by forsaking part of the French industry's profit, BFrl,674 million from the selling price and BFr528 million for reimbursement of industrial in-vestment which Belgium would nor-mally have provided. At the conference the minister said that Belgium had had no new contacts with the Americans since their last "take it or leave it" offer.

Considerable controversy is expec-ted to continue throughout this month, particularly in Belgium and the Netherlands. Member of Parlia-ment and former Belgian Defence

Minister Guy Cudell, now chairman of the parliamentary defence committee, has recently said that Belgium should buy the Mirage as the only possible European option — memories are strong of recriminations following the Sabena decision to replace Caravelles with Boeing 737s rather than Mercures. Arguments are expected in the Dutch Labour Party congress scheduled for later this week because of a recent poll which showed 42 per cent of members in favour of the Netherlands quitting Nato. Defence Minister Vredeling is known to be hesitant about the Starfighter-replace-ment decision until the outcome of the congress is known.

Soyuz-Salyut flight halted
An attempt to ferry two cosmonauts to the Salyut 4 space station on April 5 ended prematurely when the launch vehicle's third stage developed a fault and apparently went off course. The flight was immediately cancelled and the spacecraft, crewed by cosmonauts Col Vasili Lazarev and Olcg Makarov, recovered safely south-west of Gorno-Altaysk in Siberia. The mission would have been designated Soyuz 18 had it been successful, but in the event the Tass statement noting the mishap men-tions neither a Soyuz nor a Cosmos designation.

Mr Geoffrey Perry, head of the Kettering Tracking Group, told Flight that he had been alerted to the imminence of a Soyuz flight when he observed that preparatory adjustments had been made to the orbit of Salyut 4 on March 22. On that day the space station had been raised slightly in order to stabilise the ground track, re-sulting in a new period of 91 • 3min. For a 60-day mission a launch time of HOOhr GMT would give the best light-ing conditions for landing; the Ketter-ing Group observations indicated a lift-off time of 1102hr GMT.

Spacecraft commander Lazarev and engineer Makarov flew on Soyuz 12 in September 1973, the first mission of the modified vehicle following the Soyuz 11 depressurisation accident two years previously.
Russia is clearly anxious to prove the suitability of the Soyuz-Salyut com-bination for long-duration flights, both to make more effective use of the space station as a military and scienti-fic platform, and to verify the design of a second-generation space station known to be under development along with a new launch vehicle. Last January cosmonauts Gubarev and Grechko in Soyuz 17 made a 30-day flight, Russia's longest manned space mission, and the probability of a 60-day voyage this year was forecast in Flight for March 13, page 414.