



## Successful First Light for the VLT Interferometer

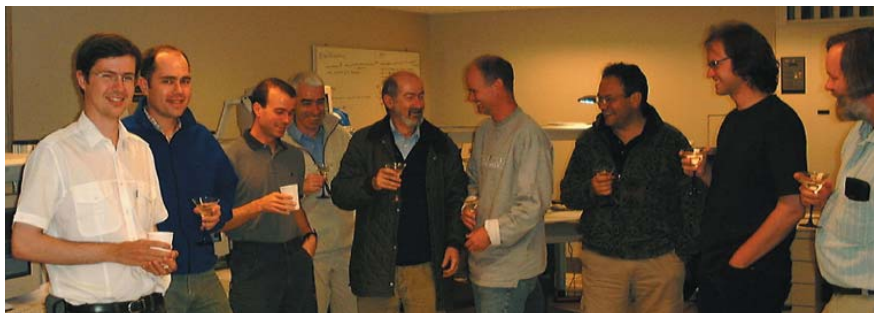
C. CESARSKY, ESO Director General

Another momentous event took place recently at Paranal when the “First Fringes” were obtained for the VLT Interferometer, more than two weeks in advance of the planned schedule. As will be known, everything went extremely well and it was possible to do right away some real physical measurements as a most visible proof to the scientists and the public of the effectiveness of the VLTI concept. (See the article on page 2 and ESO Press Release 06/01.)

In fact, it seems that we have become used to this kind of positive experience at ESO, following the effective start-up of the four Unit Telescopes during the past years. We must not forget, however, that to do interferometry means to enter into an entirely new world where state-of-the-art astronomical technology is pushed to its utmost limits. I doubt that many people outside the inner circle fully appreciate what kind of skills and efforts it has taken to reach that momentous event when, on March 17, 2001, the first light from the bright star Sirius was directed through the complex VLTI optics to the VINCI instrument in the Interferometric Laboratory. This would never have been possible without the enormous dedication of a large number of people at ESO, in collaborating astronomical institutes and, not least, within European industry. All astronomers should be thankful for their hard work which led to the beautiful performance of all elements, in particular the Delay Lines and VINCI, already at the moment of VLTI First Light.

It gives us all great confidence to see how these first observations were immediately followed up by on-line determinations of angular diameters of several other stars, including – I guess not quite by chance – for the first time ever of that of one of the stars in the Southern Cross that is depicted in the ESO logo!

European astronomy can be proud of these early achievements and I have little doubt that interferometric observations will in due time become as common and easy to perform as normal observations are now at the VLT and other ESO telescopes, thanks in particular to the implementation of very user-friendly VLTI software. Indeed, I believe that this now opens fantastic perspectives in virtually all fields of modern astronomy and that we are now entering an era in which “stars will never be point sources anymore”!



Celebrating the moment of “First Fringes” at the VLTI. A number of people have, with their talent and determination, made this achievement possible. See the list of authors of the article on page 2 and the names in this caption. At the VLTI control console (left to right): P. Kervella, V. Coudé du Foresto, P. Gitton, A. Glindemann, M. Tarenghi, A. Wallander, R. Gilmozzi, M. Schoeller and W. Cotton. Bertrand Koehler was also present and took the photo.