

noted by great warmth. The event is seen as initiating a new period in the relations between ESO and its host country Chile and the harbinger of closer scientific co-operation between Chilean and European astronomers.

The ESO Council meeting took place in Santiago on December 5 and 6, 1996. Mr. Henrik Grage was elected President of Council as of January 1, 1997, and Dr. Bernard Fort as Vice-President as of January 1, 1998, at the end of Dr. Jean Pierre Swings' term.

The Council approved the ESO 1997 budget as recommended by the ESO Finance Committee and discussed in the December 1996 issue of The Messenger. More detailed discussion of this and other Council actions will appear in the June 1997 issue of The Messenger.

Speech by the President of the ESO Council, Dr. Peter Creola

Paranal, December 4, 1996

Your Excellency, President of the Republic of Chile, Don Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle, your Majesties the King and Queen of Sweden, Carl XVI Gustaf and Queen Silvia, your Excellency, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Don José Miguel Insulza, Señor Intendente of the II Region, Don Cesar Castillo, honourable Senators, Ambassadors, authorities, colleagues of the ESO Executive and the ESO Council; friends, ladies and gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you on Cerro Paranal, the site of the world's largest optical observatory.

Our organisation's life in Chile started 33 years ago when the original agreement between ESO and its host country was signed under the government of President Jorge Alessandri Rodriguez, agreement which was to be supplemented later under President Eduardo Frei Montalva, who inaugurated in 1969 the La Silla Observatory with his son, now President of the Republic. For us it is then a special honour to welcome today members of both presidential families.

Nine years ago, in a historical meeting at the ESO headquarters in Garching, Germany, the 8 Member States of ESO united in the Council took the momentous decision to construct the Very Large Telescope. This decision followed a period of several years of intense discussions in the European Scientific Community; as well as in the various ministries and science committees of the ESO Member Countries.

The decision was not an easy one. Never before had a ground-based astronomical project of this size been pro-

posed. Never before had the scientific community of Europe, together with the funding authorities, dared to consider a ground-based research facility to study the cosmos of this complexity and cost. The positive decision to engage in this project for the 21st century started a highly elaborate process on many fronts. Within ESO a gifted group of scientists and engineers began to work on the technical implementation, invoking the latest technologies available anywhere in the world. In many cities all over Europe, industrial engineers and technicians began the construction of the complex parts which would later come together as the VLT at the Paranal Observatory. In the ministries in the Member Countries, we began the long process of ensuring the steady funding and political support for this European flagship project.

Now, 9 years later, we are close to the goal of our common dreams. Despite many obstacles, we have succeeded in keeping to the plan and in just a year from now, the first of the four 8.2-metre VLT telescopes will open its eye towards the sky.

This project would not have been possible without the close and continued, extremely positive collaboration, not only between the individual ESO Member States but, in particular, with the host country of this organisation, the Republic of Chile.

Mr. President, thanks to your personal support, the continued efforts of your government and of many other authorities in Chile, we have succeeded in transforming this mountain into what will soon become the world's most modern optical observatory. This process has not been easy, many areas have been

interlinked, and there were some stones on the road, pebbles as well as rocks, but we are now certain that soon Chilean scientists, together with their European colleagues, will reap the fruits of our joint labours. Thanks to this unique project, at the limit of today's technologies frontiers, Europe and Chile have come closer together than ever before.

The presence of ESO in Chile has given European scientists access to the clearest skies in the world and has provided Chilean scientists with the possibility to interact continuously with their colleagues in the front line of research and technology. We now look forward to the first exciting results from this collaboration at the Paranal Observatory. As I hear, there are already many discussions going on between European and Chilean researchers about how to best use this unique facility for the benefit of all involved.

The Members of the ESO Council and I are happy to be here today and to sense the enthusiasm which is evident in all quarters. We have no doubt that it was a wise decision by our countries to build the VLT and support this great project. The fruits will be not only in the fields of science and technology but, equally important, the understanding among peoples and nations will be furthered. It is a uniting aspect of all cultures to look up from our home planet towards the universe to admire its wonders and to grasp its origin and destiny. Our countries may be far apart in a geographical sense, but within this project we will labour together and thereby open new horizons for all of humanity.

Muchas gracias.

Speech by the Director General of ESO, Prof. Riccardo Giacconi

Paranal, December 4, 1996

Your Excellency President of the Republic of Chile, Don Eduardo Frei

Ruiz-Tagle, your Majesties, King and Queen of Sweden, Carl XVI Gustaf and Queen Silvia, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Don José Miguel Insulza, Señor

Intendente of the II Region, Don Cesar Castillo, honourable Congressmen, Senators, Ambassadors, authorities, Members of Council, friends