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 proposed. 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

and colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for us to welcome your Majesties on this very special occasion: There are certain events in the development of science, which mark important achievements, or a new promising departure towards, as yet, unexplored regions.

More than 30 years ago, I had the privilege of being part of an astronomical project that soon thereafter succeeded in opening the X-ray sky for scientists.

More recently, I was fortunate enough to be associated with the development and launching of the Hubble Space Telescope.

Today, I have a feeling of excitement equal to that on those occasions, as the ESO Very Large Telescope becomes a reality. No other project in ground-based astronomy has been more ambitious, more complex and, indeed, more demanding in resources. Few other projects in the history of astronomy have had a scientific potential of similar dimensions. Just one year from now, the first unit telescope of the VLT goes into operation and astronomers of the world will begin to open new vistas in this fundamental science. The VLT will deliver sharper images than any other optical telescope and, thanks to the enormous area of its mirrors, it will collect more photons and, therefore, reach fainter and more distant objects than any existing facility, either on the ground or in space.

As we are now approaching the end of the construction phase, astronomers in Europe, Chile and elsewhere, are preparing the exciting research projects they will soon undertake with their new observatory. Many of these will take us way beyond current horizons and will enable us to search for the answers to some of the deepest questions mankind has ever posed. The VLT has the capability of looking so far out in space and, therefore, so far back in time that we will ultimately reach the period, soon after the big bang explosion, when the matter in the universe had just begun to condense in the space islands we now observe as galaxies. The VLT will make it possible for us to look into the mysterious centres of galaxies where processes of unimaginable violence take place. The VLT will help us to understand the birth of stars, deep inside dense and, otherwise, impenetrable interstellar nebulae, enabling us to watch the processes that were the base of our own distant origins, 4.5 billion years ago. The VLT has the best potential of any telescope to search for, hitherto, unknown planets around other stars and, if they exist, to help us to discover other abodes of life in space.

The science of astronomy is a never-ending process which has drawn on the experience and ingenuity of countless individuals during the past millennia. Throughout the ages, scientists and engineers have put their faith in the latest technology and the VLT is no exception from this. We, as scientists, are deeply thankful to all those in- and outside ESO who have helped to realise this project and, in particular, to those authorities who have provided political and financial support for this project. Without their foresight, this moment would not have been possible.

During the coming years, it will be our privilege to share with them and the rest of mankind the excitement of new discoveries which will be made with the Very Large Telescope. The comprehension of our cosmic surroundings is one of the noblest goals of the human race. It enables us to understand and appreciate our niche in space and time, and it opens our minds towards fundamental truths which unite us all.

Las circunstancias me han llevado a leer el idioma de Chile, y hoy voy a aventurar algunas palabras en castellano.

Quiero decirles que nuestra organización no solo quiere hacer ciencia sino también participar en la vida cultural de Chile. Queremos apoyar el gran esfuerzo del gobierno del Presidente Frei para el desarrollo de la educación – en particular en la Segunda Región. Región donde la Cordillera, el desierto y su gente vive en una relación mas íntima con nuestro universo.

Muchas gracias.

Speech by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. José Miguel Insulza

Paranal, December 4, 1996

Señor Presidente de la República, don Eduardo Frei Ruiz-Tagle, sus Majestades los Reyes de Suecia, Karl XVI Gustaf y Reina Silvia, Señor Presidente del Consejo de la Organización para la Investigación Astronómica en el Hemisferio Austral, Señor Director General de ESO, Señores Senadores, autoridades civiles, militares y eclesiásticas, Señores miembros de la delegación de Suecia, Señores miembros del Consejo de la ESO, Señoras y Señores,

Para mi constituye un alto honor representar al Gobierno de Chile en esta ceremonia y compartir con todos ustedes la satisfacción y la esperanza que nos produce estar aquí participando en esta significativa ocasión por medio de la cual se inaugura el centro de observación de la ESO en Cerro Paranal. Esta satisfacción se origina, en primer lugar, en la importancia del proyecto que hoy inauguramos. El telescopio VLT/VLTI ya descrito por el Presidente del Consejo y el Director de ESO constituye no sólo una expresión de la más moderna tecnología puesta al servicio de las ciencias astronómicas, sino también una oportunidad de selección para profundizar en el conocimiento del Universo y responder así a las interrogantes que han preocupado a la humanidad desde sus orígenes. En este sentido, más allá del considerable valor económico de la inversión que hoy inauguramos, es evidente que nos encontramos participando en un hito en el desarrollo mundial y nacional de la astronomía.

Este sentimiento de satisfacción desde luego se acrecienta si consideramos el largo, y no siempre fácil, camino por el que debimos transitar en los últimos años para llegar hasta este lugar y hasta esta ocasión. Todos conocemos las dificultades heredadas de las incomprensiones hoy felizmente superadas que en un momento amenazaron la concreción de este proyecto.

Sin embargo, creo que es importante señalar que en todo este proceso, el Gobierno mantuvo, permanentemente, su apoyo a la ESO y a la posibilidad de que esta Organización continuara desarrollando y expandiendo sus actividades en Chile. Lo hicimos no sólo porque se trataba de un compromiso internacionalmente asumido por el Estado en lo cual nuestro país tiene una tradición de respeto riguroso a las obligaciones emanadas de tratados internacionales que comprometen el honor de la República, sino también porque apreciábamos que el desarrollo de las actividades de la ESO en nuestro país, en un marco jurídico claro, no sólo beneficiaría a la ciencia mundial, sino también al desarrollo científico de Chile y de importantes regiones de nuestro país.

La veracidad de este análisis queda hoy demostrada, pues el Centro de Observación de Paranal servirá no sólo a las actividades de la ESO, sino que redundará también en beneficio de los