The La Silla News Page

The editors of the La Silla News Page would like to welcome readers of the eleventh edition of a page devoted to reporting on technical updates and observational achievements at La Silla. We would like this page to inform the astronomical community of changes made to telescopes, instruments, operations, and of instrumental performances that cannot be reported conveniently elsewhere. Contributions and inquiries to this page from the community are most welcome. (J. Brewer, O. Hainaut, M. Kürster)

News from the NTT

O.R. HAINAUT, ESO, La Silla

As the reader will notice, the "News from the NTT" are back in the La Silla News Page, marking the end of the "Big Bang" era (this major upgrade has been described in *The Messenger* Nos. 75–91). The NTT is now fully returned to the La Silla Observatory. With this, another era is finishing too: Gautier Mathys has left the Team. After 5 years at the NTT (i.e. since the beginning of the team itself), many of these as local representative of the Team Leader, and the last year as Team Leader, Gautier is now preparing the scientific operation of the VLT UT1 at Paranal. His excellent leadership, and his extensive, boundless and all-encompassing knowledge of the NTT systems will be missed by the Team. Since the 1st of August, the author has taken over the duties of NTT Team Leader; he will aim at continuing Gautier's work to improve the reliability and user-friendliness of the Telescope, while maintaining the full compatibility with the VLT environments.

During the past months, SOFI, the NTT infrared spectro-imager, has received its first visiting astronomers. The instrument proved to be extremely efficient, as illustrated by the paper by Chris Lidman in this issue of *The Messenger*. Its "second generation" observation templates, which make full usage of the interactive capabilities of the "Real Time Display", constitute an intuitive and effective interface that allows the observer to efficiently master all the modes of this instrument.

After its commissioning in January, SUSI2 experienced a series of problems, including loss of vacuum, sometimes accompanied by sudden warming up. These were caused by the rapid contraction of the O-ring sealing the dewar, which happens when some LN2 is spilled over them, e.g. when re-filling the instrument, or when moving it when it is still full. This problem should be solved by the end of August, with the installation of a dewar with improved O-rings and equipped with a device limiting the LN2 spilling. We should then be able to take full advantage of this new-generation dewar, capable of keeping the instrument cold for 48 hours.

A series of improvements of the system have also been implemented; a few examples and highlights follow:

• The CCD monitoring, which had received no new developments since the departure of Griet van de Steene in January 1998, has been taken over by Vanessa Doublier. Our three CCDs are now monitored weekly, and the results of these tests, including bias level, read-out noise, shutter delay and sensitivity, are presented on our instrument Web pages. We plan to continue implementing more tests into this monitoring of the detectors, as well as adapt it to the SOFI IR array.

• The focus offsets between the Image Analysis cameras and the scientific detectors has been measured. These offsets have been found extremely stable for SUSI2, while for EMMI and SOFI they show some slight variations with the rotator angle. It reflects the greater complexity of these instruments, which are subject to minor internal flexures. The Active Optics system is now calibrated to take these focus differences into account. As a consequence, the telescope is automatically focused while performing an image analysis.

• Various monitoring and technical templates are being developed to perform operation and maintenance tasks in a more efficient way.

Finally, a point that will be of interest for the observers: the new versions of the EMMI and SOFI manuals are undergoing their final revision and should be available on the NTT Web pages by the time these lines are printed.

SOFI Receives its First Users

C. LIDMAN, ESO, La Silla

SOFI, the recently commissioned IR imager and spectrograph on the NTT, started regular service on June 6 this year. Since then, about a dozen visiting astronomers have successfully used the instrument.

All modes of the instrument, which includes broad- and narrow-band imaging, low-resolution spectroscopy and imaging polarimetry, have since been used.

To date, the instrument has been used to study objects as varied as supernovae, proto-planetary nebulae, embedded stars, dwarf galaxies, gravitational lenses, high-redshift clusters and the star-formation rate at high redshifts.

Of particular note was the observation of the well-known Einstein ring