The Sunday Times - Britain

November 24 2003

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November 23, 2003

Monster telescope hunts blue planets

BRITAIN is to back a project to build the world's biggest telescope - so powerful that it could see life-bearing planets in other solar systems, *writes Jonathan Leake*.

The instrument will be able to spot the telltale blue shimmer of planets with oxygen in their atmosphere, considered by scientists to be a likely sign of life.

This week, Professor Ian Halliday, chief executive of the Particle Physics and Astronomy Research Council, will release details of the ambitious scheme, which would include the largest mirror ever built at about 100 metres in diameter. The biggest telescope built to date has only a 10-metre mirror. "This will cost about £1.2 billion but we plan to share the cost as this is far too expensive for any one country," said Halliday.

The telescope needs a location that is both high and seldom affected by cloud cover. The most likely site would be in the Andes in Chile.

Although the technology to build such a telescope does not yet exist, several British research groups are already at an advanced planning stage.

The most likely system - already working on some smaller telescopes - would involve hundreds of thin, flexible mirrors built onto

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a flexible frame. Its shape would be computer-adjusted thousands of times a minute to counteract the distorting effects of the atmosphere.

Under Halliday's plan, radio astronomy would get a similar instrument with a so-called "Square Kilometre Array" of radio dishes being planned - probably on a desert site in Australia.

This would create an instrument thousands of times more sensitive than the ageing Jodrell Bank dish near Manchester, which is likely to be diverted from scientific use around 2009.
