

## Russian troops free Polish ecologists from Chechnya

**Moscow** Two Polish ecologists kidnapped last August by Chechen bandits have been rescued by Russian forces. Zofia Fiszer-Malanowska of the Warsaw Ecology Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences and Eva Marchwinska-Wyrwal of the Ecology Institute in Katowice were freed in the Argun ravine, Chechnya.

After capturing the scientists in the neighbouring republic of Dagestan, the kidnappers demanded a ransom of \$1 million for each prisoner. However, the Polish authorities refused to pay (see *Nature* **402**, 114; 1999).

Details of the operation that freed the two scientists remain secret. Both are now back in Warsaw.

## Texaco pulls out of US climate lobby group

**Washington** The Global Climate Coalition, a Washington-based lobby group that opposes legislation to curtail global warming, has lost three members in the past four months. Last week, Texaco notified the coalition that it would not renew its membership for 2000. Daimler-Chrysler withdrew in January, and

Ford said it would not renew its membership in December.

Glenn Kelly, the coalition's executive director, is putting a brave face on the defections. He claims that the three companies still support the coalition's opposition to the Kyoto Protocol. The departures will not affect the coalition's lobbying leverage at all, Kelly asserts.

## German medics oppose embryo laws

**Munich** The German Chamber of Physicians has issued a proposal calling for a relaxation of rules that forbid preimplantation genetic diagnosis.

Germany's strict embryo-protection law currently bans preimplantation diagnosis on ethical grounds. But the Chamber of Physicians argues that there is an increase in "medical tourism" by German couples seeking advice in neighbouring countries. Preimplantation diagnosis is allowed in most countries of the European Union. Worldwide, 400 couples have used the technique, and more than 100 babies have been born following preimplantation diagnosis.

The Chamber of Physicians would like preimplantation diagnosis to be legal in Germany for some medical conditions, such as monogenetic diseases or parental

chromosome defects. It says that such diagnosis should be limited to genes associated with diseases for which the parents have a genetic predisposition.

The German health ministry has indicated that it may be prepared in the future to modify the embryo protection law — but not yet. Opponents of preimplantation diagnosis, such as the Berlin-based Gene Ethical Network, fear that it could foster eugenics.

## Centre for endangered species boosts research

**San Diego** The Center for Reproduction of Endangered Species at the San Diego Zoological Society, known worldwide for its condor and panda projects, is undergoing a major research expansion.

The centre is seeking 12 postdoctoral researchers for international studies on endangered species and is building a \$20 million laboratory facility. It has also hired a new director, Alan Dixon, who left the University of Cambridge last autumn.

Research projects for the new postdocs will be funded either through the zoological society — which has an annual operating budget of \$100 million for its facilities, including two zoos — or through grants secured competitively from funding agencies, officials said.

## Compton observatory faces reprieve

**Washington** The US space agency NASA's Compton Gamma Ray Observatory will not be deliberately destroyed until June at the earliest, and may remain in orbit for years if engineers can persuade nervous NASA managers that a new technique for controlling the spacecraft without gyroscopes will work. After one of the observatory's on-board gyroscopes failed in December, NASA started making plans to bring the spacecraft down in a fiery re-entry this month to avoid the risk of an uncontrolled crash over a populated area (see *Nature* **403**, 232; 2000).

The plan now calls for a June de-orbiting, says project scientist Neil Gehrels of the Goddard Space Flight Center. But he is hopeful that the new control technique, which has proven feasible in simulations, will persuade NASA to leave Compton in space. A decision is expected on around 23 March.

## NIH finds more adenovirus 'serious adverse events'

**Washington** The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has revised upwards by 50 per cent the number of serious adverse events that investigators failed to report promptly in gene therapy trials using adenoviral vectors.

Adenoviruses were used in the trial in

which an 18-year-old volunteer died last September at the University of Pennsylvania (see *Nature* **401**, 517; 1999). Following that tragedy, the NIH called for more information on adverse reactions. By November, 652 events had been reported. Last week, Lana Skirboll, director of NIH's Office of Science Policy, testified to the National Bioethics Advisory Commission that 970 serious adverse events have now been reported in about 70 trials over seven years.

## Partnership reveals malaria projects

**Paris** The Medicines for Malaria Venture, a public/private-sector collaboration which aims to boost research into malaria drugs, has selected its first three projects. Although details of the projects have not yet been released, *Nature* has learnt that the winners are: a project involving Glaxo Wellcome, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, and the University of Bristol; one involving Hoffmann La Roche, the University of Nebraska, and the Swiss Tropical Institute; and one by SmithKline Beecham and the University of California at San Francisco.

All three multimillion-dollar projects are thought to be investigations into new families of drug targets that are less likely than current ones to succumb to parasite resistance.

## Japanese universities may keep half of royalties

**Tokyo** Public universities could be authorized to withhold half of the royalties on patented inventions, the Japanese Ministry of Education has announced. At present, royalties are paid directly into the national treasuries but the ministry hopes to provide incentives for entrepreneurial activities within academia.

Observers have welcomed the new scheme but point out that many universities lack the resources to manage intellectual property rights. Although the number of papers co-authored with industry has increased substantially in recent years, the number of patents held by Japanese universities is insignificant and has stagnated.

## Drug companies agree to donate vaccines

**Washington** Some of the world's leading drug companies are to donate millions of doses of vaccines to combat diseases such as malaria and polio in developing countries.

The donations, valued at more than \$150 million, follow a call by the US president, Bill Clinton, for an international endorsement of his Millennium Vaccine Initiative. It would mean a major boost in vaccine efforts and a \$1 billion tax credit for drug companies that invest in vaccine development.