

Tokyo professor accused of perjury over evidence of HIV infection

Tokyo. A group of 72 people, including HIV-infected haemophiliacs, have filed an accusation of perjury with the Tokyo Public Prosecutor's Office against a scientist from Tokyo University who served in the Ministry of Health and Welfare in the early 1980s, and had held responsibilities for setting the ministry's policies on blood products and AIDS.

The group claims that Atsuaki Gunji, a professor of public health, lied while giving evidence in a trial brought by the group against the government and pharmaceutical companies. Gunji testified twice in 1993, saying that ten years earlier he had been unaware that the infection routes for HIV are similar to those for hepatitis B.

A lawyer for the haemophiliacs says they have recently obtained a copy of a ministry document dated July 1983 that was submitted to the Ministry's AIDS study group stating that the infection routes of the two viruses were suspected to be similar. But Gunji reportedly maintains he never intended to lie, and refuses to accept that he did.

In October, the Tokyo and Osaka district courts urged the government and pharmaceutical companies to reach an out-of-court settlement with hundreds of HIV-infected haemophiliacs who have sued the government for the alleged late introduction of heat-treated blood coagulants and recommended a payment of 45 million yen (US\$420,000) to each plaintiff. The accusation filed by the group follows another one filed in April 1994 against Takeshi Abe, Gunji's former professor and head of the AIDS study group, who haemophiliacs have accused of "wilful negligence" resulting in death (see *Nature* 368, 680; 1994). □

Troubled waters for ocean science

Washington. Republican divisions loomed large between the co-chairs of a joint hearing held last week on ocean sciences in the House of Representatives (see *Nature* 379, 283; 1996). Curt Weldon, chair of the research subcommittee of the National Security Committee, chastised Dana Rohrabacher, chair of the energy and environment subcommittee of the Science Committee, for creating "a false sense of savings" by cutting ships and programmes at the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Agency (NOAA) which the Navy was left to pick up.

After the hearing, Walden said he would introduce legislation this year designed to improve co-ordination between NOAA, the Navy, and other agencies involved in ocean research. □

Funding for US agencies extended

Washington. US President Bill Clinton signed yet another temporary spending measure last Friday (26 January) in a move that will allow funding for a number of agencies still without agreed budgets — including the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the National Science Foundation — at last year's level until 15 March, almost the mid-point in the 1996 fiscal year.

Programmes which the House of Representatives wants to close, including the Advanced Technology Programme at the National Institute of Standards and Technology, will get 75 per cent of last year's funding level until then, in common with other programmes targeted by Republicans for major cuts (see page 386). □

Megascience sets up task groups

Paris. The Megascience Forum, a body set up by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1992 to encourage intergovernmental collaboration in support for science, last week established three working groups. Two are on the specific areas of neutron sources and bioinformatics; the third is on general obstacles to cooperation, and includes subgroups on access to international facilities and legislative issues.

The forum has in the past produced reviews of big science projects, for example in oceanography, astronomy, deep-Earth drilling and neutron and synchrotron radiation sources. But last year, the OECD's high-level Committee for Scientific and Techno-

logy Policy extended the forum's mandate to allow it to set up working groups, made up of government officials and scientists, to propose new cooperative agreements.

"Instead of looking at broad issues, we will now be looking at more specific issues," says Stephan Michalowski, its executive secretary. "We will no longer only be talking, but proposing solutions", adds Peter Tindemans, the Dutch chairman of the forum, who says that the forum rejected proposals for a working group on seismology because it felt that the necessary scientific consensus on what is needed was lacking. □

'No' to commercial fossil collecting

Los Angeles. An opinion poll of 300 US citizens has revealed widespread opposition to the commercial collecting of fossils found on public land. More than 90 per cent of respondents to the poll, which was conducted last year by MKTG Inc., a New York-based polling service, said they would report to "appropriate scientific authorities" any fossil found on public or private land.

In addition, over 80 per cent said they would allow a museum or university to collect such a fossil, once found. A similar proportion expressed the view that it should be illegal to collect fossils found on public land, sell them, destroy them or export them. □

Democrats thank President Clinton

Washington. The Democratic R&D Task Force in the House of Representatives, set up last autumn by George Brown (Democrat, California), has written to President Bill Clinton to thank him for showing some backbone in recent negotiations over the science budget (see *Nature* 378, 229; 1995).

Brown, who expressed doubts last summer over whether Clinton would stand and fight for research programmes, says that he is now impressed with the president's refusal to accept Republican cuts to climate change research and the Advanced Technology Programme. Clinton has vetoed the appropriations bill containing these cuts. □

French risk body suspends work

Paris. A commission set up by the French government to assess industrial and technological risks has suspended its activities in protest at what it describes as uncertainty over the government's willingness to maintain an 'independent institution' with power to produce opinions on its own initiative. Over the past year, the government has not replaced members of the Collège de la Prévention des Risques Technologiques (CPRT) whose terms of office have expired, and its apparent lack of interest has fuelled rumours that it intends to abolish the CPRT (see *Nature* 379, 4; 1996).

But Corinne Lepage, France's minister of environment, has now taken up the CPRT's cause and asked for it be reconstituted within her ministry. Although this move would downgrade the CPRT, which is currently attached to the prime minister's office, it has been cautiously welcomed by the group itself — partly because Lepage is an outspoken environmentalist. The CPRT will continue to suspend its activities, however, until it gets firm guarantees that its independence will be preserved, and that it will be given an adequate budget. Otherwise it will resign *en bloc*, says one member. □

South African tribunal postponed

Cape Town. The tribunal which was due to begin hearings this week investigating allegations against William Makgoba, deputy vice-chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand, has been postponed after the withdrawal last week of one of its members, Walter Kamba of the University of Namibia (see *Nature* 379, 199; 1996).

Robert Charlton, vice-chancellor of the university, said in a statement that in creating a new timetable for the adjudication of the allegations, the university council had agreed "that every effort would be made to constitute a new panel that meets legitimate concerns that Professor Makgoba may raise". The two remaining members, Lord Flowers, a former vice-chancellor of the University of London and Sir Colin Campbell, vice-chancellor of the University of Nottingham, would still serve on the tribunal, subject to their availability in the light of other commitments. □