

Spanish oil company has *Prestige* clean-up operation in the bag

Madrid Giant underwater bags could be used to remove oil from the sunken tanker *Prestige*. The move, one of three proposed plans to retrieve the oil, was announced by the Spanish government on 4 April.

Repsol YPF, the petroleum company contracted to remove the oil, plans to create a valve between the ship and the bag, and says that the oil should then rise into the bag, as it is less dense than water. If this fails, the company intends to put a canopy over the ship and catch the oil rising from it. As a last resort, the oil would be pumped from the ship to the surface. Work could begin this summer.

The *Prestige* is lying in about 3,500 metres of water, and still contains about half of her cargo of 77,000 tonnes of fuel oil. A submarine has patched up some of the holes in the wreck, but oil is continuing to leak out. No budget for the oil recovery has been set because there is no precedent for this kind of operation, Spain's deputy prime minister, Mariano Rajoy, told a news conference last week.

Spread of bird flu triggers Dutch Easter egg hunt

The Hague Dutch soldiers have been drafted in to hunt for chicken eggs this Easter in an attempt to stop the spread of a highly virulent type of chicken flu that is moving through the Netherlands.

The virus responsible for the outbreak was identified at the end of February, and control measures were put into place (see *Nature* 422, 247; 2003). These were initially successful, but last week the flu spread from the centre of the country to areas close to the German and Belgian borders in the south, crossing two rivers that were thought to be natural barriers. The transport of eggs and chickens has now been banned, and soldiers patrolling the affected area have been issued

with stop-and-search orders.

By 5 April, nearly 800 poultry farms had been infected and almost 11 million chickens culled. The virus has infected 66 humans who have been in contact either with infected chickens or with other infected humans. Although deadly to chickens, infection in humans usually causes conjunctivitis, which is sometimes accompanied by flu-like symptoms.

Life's work adds up to prize for maths master

Oslo Jean-Pierre Serre, a mathematician whose work contributed to the proof of Fermat's last theorem, has won the first Abel Prize. The €760,000 (US\$800,000) award from the Norwegian government was set up to provide a mathematics equivalent of the Nobel Prizes (see *Nature* 413, 100; 2001).

Serre received the prize on 3 April for his lifelong contributions to mathematics. Now 76, he began his academic career by studying topology, which deals with the properties of objects when they are deformed, such as by folding or twisting. In 1954, he became the youngest-ever winner of the Fields Medal, the most prestigious prize in mathematics. Later, Serre studied polynomial equations. His work contributed to the 1995 proof of Fermat's last theorem, which states that the equation $x^n + y^n = z^n$ has no non-zero integer solution when n is greater than 2.

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Chemical catastrophe poisons Brazilian rivers

Rio de Janeiro A major chemical spill has cut off the water supply to half a million citizens around Rio de Janeiro.

Caustic soda began leaking from a wood-pulping factory on 28 March, according to the environmental group WWF-Brazil. More than 1.2 billion litres had emptied into two rivers — the Paraibo do Sul and Pomba — before the leak was shut off three days later. Caustic soda, or sodium hydroxide, is used in paper mills at concentrations of



Dead in the water: caustic soda from a wood-pulping factory is killing fish in the Pomba river.

50% or higher, according to Mary DeVany, president of DeVany Industrial Consultants in Vancouver, Washington. "At 50% concentration, it has a pH of 14. A 10% solution will eat the skin right off your body," she says.

Locals have been told not to drink or bathe in water from the rivers, and the rise in pH is killing plants and animals living in or near the affected water. WWF-Brazil says the incident shows that the government is unable to deal with such accidents, as the spill would have been spotted by the water-monitoring systems in use in other countries.

Science minister's gift triggers political storm

London David Sainsbury, the supermarket magnate turned British science minister, is at the centre of a political row after donating £2.5 million (US\$3.9 million) to the ruling Labour Party in whose government he serves. The gift — the largest ever made to the party — takes Sainsbury's donations to Labour to over £8.5 million since 1999.

The Labour Party revealed on 31 March that it had accepted the money. Critics inside and outside the party say that it should be sent back. "The fact that Lord Sainsbury is a government minister raises real questions over this donation," says Theresa May, who chairs the opposition Conservative Party.

Both the government and Sainsbury — whose family's wealth is believed to run to billions of pounds — insist that the donation is unrelated to his position. Sainsbury regularly gives money to other causes and, through the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, his family supports work in several areas, including the developing world and mental health.

Seeing the big picture

Berlin The dramatic architecture of the Sony Centre in Berlin's Potsdamer Platz is the new backdrop for the Artwork Earth exhibition, an imposing series of oversized photographs of the Earth seen from space.

The travelling exhibition — curated by the Helmholtz Society, which organizes Germany's 16 national research centres — consists of a series of 3.6-metre-high images that are floodlit at night, and will be seen by 60,000 people each day. It opened last year to mark Germany's Year of the Geosciences, and arrived in Berlin on 3 April.



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