

NASA feels the heat as glacier pictures cause unrest in Peru

Lima NASA has come under fire for causing unnecessary alarm with a recent press release warning of an “ominous crack” that has appeared in an Andean glacier.

An infrared imaging device on Terra, a NASA Earth-observation satellite, identified the crack, which was detailed in a press release on 11 April. The release warned that if the glacier broke off and fell into the lake that it feeds, it could cause a flood that would reach the 60,000-strong Peruvian town of Huaraz in less than 15 minutes. Many inhabitants of Huaraz became alarmed after the release was covered in local newspapers, which referred to earlier, similar events in which thousands died in the region.

NASA says that the press release was intended to promote the value of remote sensing in monitoring potentially dangerous geological conditions, but Earth-observation experts have questioned whether it was responsible to do this, as the glacier posed no immediate threat. José Achache, director of the European Space Agency’s Earth Observation Programmes, says it is “not ethical for an agency to refer to threats to people’s lives as a means of demonstrating the relevance of Earth-observation satellites”.



Warnings over satellite pictures of a glacier have unsettled the residents of Huaraz (bottom left).

Stench of fraud in German odour lab as paper cries foul

Munich The atmosphere is not so fragrant in Germany’s top lab for the physiology of smell, according to the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

Allegations of data manipulation have been brought against its head, Heinz Breer of the Hohenheim University near Stuttgart, concerning at least two publications from the past five years. The newspaper reports this week that in one paper (S. Schreiber, J. Fleischer, H. Breer and I. Boekhoff *J. Biol. Chem.* 275, 24115–24123; 2000), a photograph of a western blot is alleged to have been manipulated. It also claims that some results in another paper (J. Noé and H. Breer

Poincaré proof adds up to potential payday

Moscow Mathematicians around the world are poring over a proof of the Poincaré Conjecture, one of seven US\$1-million Millennium Prize Problems.

Grigori Perelman of the Steklov Mathematical Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg released two versions of the proof as preprints, one in November and the other last month. The conjecture concerns three-dimensional surfaces. Closed two-dimensional surfaces without holes can be transformed onto the surface of a sphere, and Henri Poincaré (pictured) suggested that similar surfaces with higher dimensions should also transform back to spheres.

In 2000 the Clay Mathematics Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts, offered an award of \$1 million to anyone providing a proof of the



conjecture that could withstand academic scrutiny for two years. Six other problems were allocated an equal amount. Proofs have appeared frequently on preprint servers (see *Nature* 416, 670; 2002), but have never survived academic scrutiny. But Perelman’s highly

technical paper is considered very promising, and many universities are planning seminars in which researchers will probe the proof for errors.

▶ www.arxiv.org/abs/math.DG/0303109

J. Neurochem. 71, 2286–2293; 1998) seem to have been altered. Breer told the paper that “something was not quite right” but denied any intention to deceive.

In 1998, the DFG, Germany’s granting agency for universities, awarded Breer the country’s most prestigious research prize, the Leibniz award. The agency is now investigating the affair.

Japanese lab turns the page on cDNA delivery

Tokyo Geneticist Yoshihide Hayashizaki is going back to basics in his bid to supply researchers with samples from his laboratory. From this summer, Hayashizaki plans to send out his collection of 60,000 mouse complementary DNAs (cDNAs) in the form of a hardcover book.

The cDNA samples, which can be used in gene-expression studies, are in great demand from researchers around the world (see *Nature* 420, 602–604; 2002). Hayashizaki, who works at RIKEN’s Genomic Sciences Center in Yokohama, says the DNA book will be mailed by courier, cutting the time and costs incurred by the current supply system, which involves shipping a large box of refrigerated samples.

When researchers drop the cDNA of choice into a tube of water, the paper dissolves leaving the cDNA behind. The samples have been shown to last for about four months, although Hayashizaki says they should last for over a year. His group is patenting the printing method.

AIDS scientist rapped over controversial treatment test

Los Angeles A researcher at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), broke federal human-protection rules by “indirectly” participating in tests of a controversial AIDS treatment known as malaria therapy, the university said on 16 April.

John Fahey became involved in the trial in 1997 when he supervised Xiao Peng Chen, who brought samples to UCLA from a Chinese malaria therapy trial. The widely discredited approach, which involves deliberately infecting AIDS patients with the parasite that causes malaria, is championed by Henry Heimlich, inventor of the famous manoeuvre to aid choking victims.

“Fahey and his laboratory participated only indirectly in the research by allowing the testing of Chen’s samples,” the university said in a statement. But because UCLA’s Medical Institutional Review Board had not approved the research, Fahey was found to be in violation of regulations on the use human subjects. The university has referred Fahey’s case to the federal office that oversees human research protections.

Congo massacre probe enlists forensic team

London Forensic-science experts arrived this week in the Democratic Republic of the Congo as part of a 15-strong United Nations team charged with investigating the alleged massacre of 350 civilians.

The killings occurred on 3 April in the Ituri district, where a war within a war rages between local militias. Forensic investigation will be a first step towards identifying the perpetrators, according to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights at the United Nations. An estimated 50,000 people have been killed in and around Ituri since 1999. The day before the massacre, the government, rebel groups and opposition parties agreed on a fragile deal to end the country’s four-year civil war.

The human-rights office is also updating its list of forensic experts to feature a broader range of specialists, in the light of recent investigations of atrocities in Afghanistan. It currently draws on medical experts from crime labs and academic forensic anthropologists and archaeologists.