

## Asian biologists seek self-sufficiency in network development

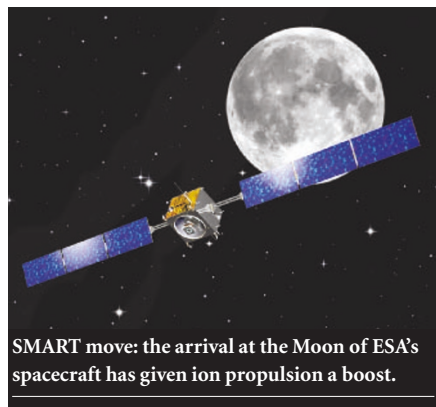
**Tokyo** More than a dozen prominent developmental biologists from the Asia-Pacific region gathered last week in Kobe, Japan, to launch their own regional scientific network.

The Asia-Pacific Developmental Biology Network will promote student training and the exchange of scientific information, resources and staff from New Zealand to China and as far west as Iran. The network, to be based at the RIKEN Center for Developmental Biology (CDB) in Kobe, plans an inaugural meeting next year at the International Society of Developmental Biologists' congress in Sydney, Australia.

Planners are hopeful that the network will help Asian countries to look to each other for cues, rather than always turning to the United States. "It's been a trend in this region to look to the West first," says CDB director Masatoshi Takeichi, who was appointed as the organization's first chair. "We're trying to encourage people here to get to know what others are doing in their own part of the world as a way of fostering more local collaborations."

## Leisurely Moon cruise adds thrust to deep-space flight

**Washington** For its first trip to the Moon, the European Space Agency (ESA) chose the slow route. What took the Apollo astronauts just three days has been a 13-month marathon for the spacecraft dubbed SMART-1 (Small Missions for Advanced Research in Technology). The craft finally arrived in lunar orbit on 15 November.



SMART move: the arrival at the Moon of ESA's spacecraft has given ion propulsion a boost.

Thankfully this wasn't a race, and researchers say speed isn't meant to be one of SMART's best features. Nor are its science instruments, although its visible and infrared cameras, mineral-mapping spectrometer, and radio and X-ray devices will study the Moon for six months after the craft enters its final lunar orbit in January.

Instead, SMART is showcasing several new

## Italians splash out to complain about reforms

**Turin** Scientists from the University of Turin in Italy flooded onto the streets with squeegies last week to clean car windscreens in a protest against proposed university reforms.

The changes, put forward by Italy's research minister, Letizia Moratti, include the abolition of the academic category of 'researcher', the only position for academics below a professorship.

The reforms were approved by the government in January and will be discussed in parliament next month. This could give them the final stamp of approval.

Italian scientists have spent the summer staging



a range of innovative protests, including a funeral for universities and a lecture series in a pizzeria.

technologies, including an ion propulsion system that spits out a high-speed stream of xenon atoms to give a small but steady thrust. The successful arrival at the Moon has proved that spacecraft could use the same engines to get to Mercury and Mars, says Bernard Foing, who heads the SMART-1 team at ESA's Space Research and Technology Centre in Noordwijk, the Netherlands.

## Contest sets tongues wagging for science

**London** Budding science communicators who fancy a few minutes of fame are invited to audition for FameLab, a competition to be held in Britain next March and April.

Contestants will have three minutes to impress the judges with what the organizers say should be an "entertaining, engaging and informative talk for a non-scientific audience". Twelve entrants will be selected for a final at the Cheltenham Science Festival in June 2005. The winner will be given broadcasting time on Channel 4 television and a UK tour of speaking events.

"Good communication is essential to maintaining confidence in science," says Paul Nurse, president of Rockefeller University in New York and one of the competition's patrons. "If we don't talk about science there may be no science to talk about."

## Kids and chemicals study halted for external review

**Washington** The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has temporarily suspended a study of children's exposure to pesticides and household chemicals following criticism from environmental groups who claim the research is unethical.

The study came under fire in part because it planned to use \$2 million from the American Chemistry Council, a major chemical-industry lobbying group. Environmental watchdogs claimed this presented a conflict of interest, and also

questioned the study's methodology (see *Nature* 432, 6; 2004).

In response, the EPA's acting science adviser, William Farland, announced that the agency would send the study out for an external review by academics from several independent advisory boards. "The EPA is taking this extraordinary step because protecting the health and well-being of children is of paramount importance," Farland wrote in a memo to EPA employees on 8 November. The committee is expected to report back in spring 2005.

## Clerics helped to focus on the end of Ramadan

**London** Muslim clerics in Iran on the lookout for the new Moon last weekend were given official permission to use telescopes in their search by Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Astronomical observations are needed to help determine the end of Ramadan, a month-long daylight fast that starts and ends with a new Moon. Many Islamic followers are happy to base these dates on textbook predictions. But the more traditional approach, in which a religious leader must verify local sightings of the Moon, still persists in many regions, including parts of Iran.

Efforts to spot the first sliver of the Moon can be hampered by dust storms, low cloud or the failing eyesight of ageing clerics. The end of Ramadan — and the start of the three-day Eid al-Fitr holiday — was marked 24 hours apart in some areas of Iran last year, after disagreement over a sighting of the Moon from the holy city of Qom.

## Correction

The News story "Beta-blocker goes on trial as asthma therapy" (*Nature* 432, 7; 2004) incorrectly states that beta-blockers reverse high blood pressure by acting on blood vessels. In fact, the drugs act on a number of organs including the kidneys, heart and brain.