

Agency set up to tackle bioterror

WASHINGTON DC

In a late-night flurry of activity as it rushed to adjourn, the US Congress last week created a new agency that will allocate \$1 billion to companies that are developing drugs and vaccines to tackle bioterror and pandemic agents. Bleary-eyed lawmakers also passed legislation governing the broad workings of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and authorizing a hefty budget boost for the bio-

medical agency over the next two years.

Both bills — which President Bush is expected to sign into law as soon as this week — faced long odds as the Republican-dominated Congress entered its final hours before ceding control of both the House and the Senate to Democrats in January. But the determination of Republicans to leave on a note of achievement, and the insistence of Joe Barton (Republican, Texas), who chairs the energy

and commerce committee, that the NIH bill must be passed by the Senate for the popular bioterror measure to be brought to a vote in the House, combined to push both measures through. The complex horse-trading also involved a state-run health-insurance programme for children.

The biodefence bill establishes a new agency — the Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority (BARDA) — as part

SNAPSHOT

'So far, so good' for shuttle

NASA is breathing another sigh of relief after an apparently successful shuttle lift-off on the evening of 9 December. As *Nature* went to press, NASA officials were still checking Discovery's heat shield for any damage, but the night launch, the first since the 2003 Columbia disaster, seems to have passed without incident.

"So far, so good," was the assessment of flight director Tony Ceccacci. Small pieces of foam debris and ice fell off the shuttle's external fuel tank during the launch, but this was expected and they did not appear to strike the shuttle.

The night-time launch meant that NASA officials were unable to capture on-board video images with as much detail as they had on previous launches. The team is still investigating four 'low momentum' readings from the leading edges of the craft's wings, although they are confident that these are not evidence of debris strikes.

On 11 December, Discovery docked with the International Space Station, where it is delivering a new crew member, Sunita Williams, and an \$11-million extension to the station's solar-power system.
Michael Hopkin



NASA