

Syngenta shoot-out in Brazil leaves two dead

A gun battle left two dead last week at a Brazilian farm owned by the agricultural biotechnology firm Syngenta. The plantation, in the state of Parana, has been at flashpoint since some 300 activists, protesting against genetically modified crops, first invaded the farm in March 2006 and Syngenta hired guards to protect it.

The shoot-out left one activist and one guard dead, with four more injured on each side, according to news agency reports. A Syngenta spokesman described it as “a quite dramatic and violent confrontation”. The guards’ contract does not authorize them to use weapons.

Although Brazilian law allows some transgenic crops to be grown, the Parana state government has outlawed genetically modified corn and repeatedly attempted to shut the farm down.

Nuclear-waste programme criticized by scientists

A nuclear-waste reprocessing programme intended to promote a global expansion of atomic energy should be abandoned in favour of basic research, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) reports this week.

The report underscores many of the criticisms that have been levelled at the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership since it was unveiled by the White House in 2006, namely that it is too risky and expensive for commercial-scale development.

The US Department of Energy (DOE) is seeking \$405 million for the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership for the 2008 fiscal

year, but key Democrats have vowed to put the brakes on it this year. “It seems to the committee that the DOE has given more weight to schedule than to conservative economics and technology,” the NAS panel says in its 29 October report.

Lack of realism blamed for failed anthrax vaccine

A US government report has concluded that unrealistic expectations were to blame for a small biotechnology company’s inability to fulfil its contract to supply an anthrax vaccine for civilian use.

The 23 October report by the Government Accountability Office found that the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) pre-empted development work on the vaccine by awarding the contract to VaxGen in South San Francisco, California, before crucial manufacturing issues had been addressed. Moreover, the Food and Drug Administration’s requirements for data and testing of the vaccine were not known when the contract was approved.

The \$878-million contract was cancelled in December (see *Nature* 445, 12; 2007). As the DHHS prepares to hire another company, the report warns that the department “has not analysed lessons learned from the first contract’s failure and may repeat earlier mistakes”.

Europe votes to legalize Afghan opium for medicine

The European Parliament has overwhelmingly backed a recommendation for a pilot project looking into the legalization of opium production in Afghanistan to make morphine-related



Flower power: Afghanistan’s opium poppies could become a source of medicines.

medicines, as an alternative to destroying opium poppy crops by chemical spraying.

The vote was 368–49 in favour of the recommendation, which is based on a technical dossier that was produced by the Senlis Council, an international think-tank.

The European Commission currently supports the policy of poppy eradication (see *Nature* 449, 268–269; 2007), which the Senlis Council says has been a disaster. If the Council of the European Union decides to back the European Parliament’s recommendation, the commission will be forced to consider doing the same, says Jorrit Kamminga, the Senlis Council’s head of policy research.

Genotype data of families with autism are released

Researchers have released a mass of newly generated data providing the most detailed look yet at the patterns of genetic variation in families with autism.

Last week, raw genotype data from 4,250 individuals — including people with autism, their parents and their siblings — were made public by the Autism Consortium based in Boston, Massachusetts, and Johns Hopkins’ McKusick-Nathans Institute of Genetic Medicine in Baltimore, Maryland. Lead researchers Aravinda Chakravarti of Johns Hopkins and Mark Daly of the Autism Consortium, say that they hope to identify key genetic contributions to the disease over the next few months.

In the meantime, says Daly, “we’re releasing raw genotype data so that other qualified researchers can take a look at them even as we’re still beginning our own analysis”. The data will be available through the Autism Genetic Resource Exchange (www.agre.org).

Sale of meteorite meets with stony silence

A piece of one of the world’s most famous meteorites failed to sell at a New York auction on 28 October.

A 13.5 kilogram chunk of the Willamette meteorite (pictured right) was withdrawn after a top bid of \$300,000 fell a long way short of the expected price of \$1 million to \$1.3 million.

The pockmarked slab of iron and nickel — weighing roughly 14.5 tonnes — from which it was hewn about 10 years ago resides at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Although ownership of the meteorite has been debated since it was discovered in 1902 (inset), the piece will remain in the Macovich Collection of meteorites, waiting for a buyer.

