

Scientists sign up to protest against French law on immigration

[PARIS] French scientists are supporting a growing campaign of civil disobedience launched last week by artists and intellectuals in protest at proposed legislation to control illegal immigration.

Opposition to the law — which comes up for a second reading in the National Assembly this week — has crystallized around a provision requiring citizens to ensure that the papers of their foreign guests are in order, and to declare their arrival and departure to the local authorities. Signatories to the campaign state that they refuse to respect the provision.

One of the texts already signed by hundreds of scientists says: "We French scientists do not accept that our country equips itself with xenophobic laws that would be ridiculous if they were not odious."

It goes on: "We do not want to be the only scientists in the world to be forced — unless we wish to become lawbreakers — to ask our foreign colleagues to prove the legitimacy of their presence in France before we invite them to spend the night! We refuse to get caught up in a spiral of denunciation like that in totalitarian countries, and a reminder of the darkest hours of our history."

One geneticist who has signed the text says that the idea of scientists treating their foreign colleagues in the way demanded by the law is "either stupid or mad". Alain Juppé, the prime minister, has condemned the campaign as a "serious act", and says he does not plan to change the law.

Polio campaign in Asia immunizes 250m infants

[GENEVA] More than 250 million children under the age of five were successfully immunized against polio in December 1996 and January 1997 in a massive campaign organized by the World Health Organization (WHO). India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Thailand and Vietnam took part in a series of National Immunization Days, involving 2.6 million health workers in India alone. Since 1988, when WHO set itself the goal of eradicating polio worldwide by the year 2000, the number of cases has dropped from more than 35,000 to just 7,000 in 1995.

Chirac asks academy to predict social changes

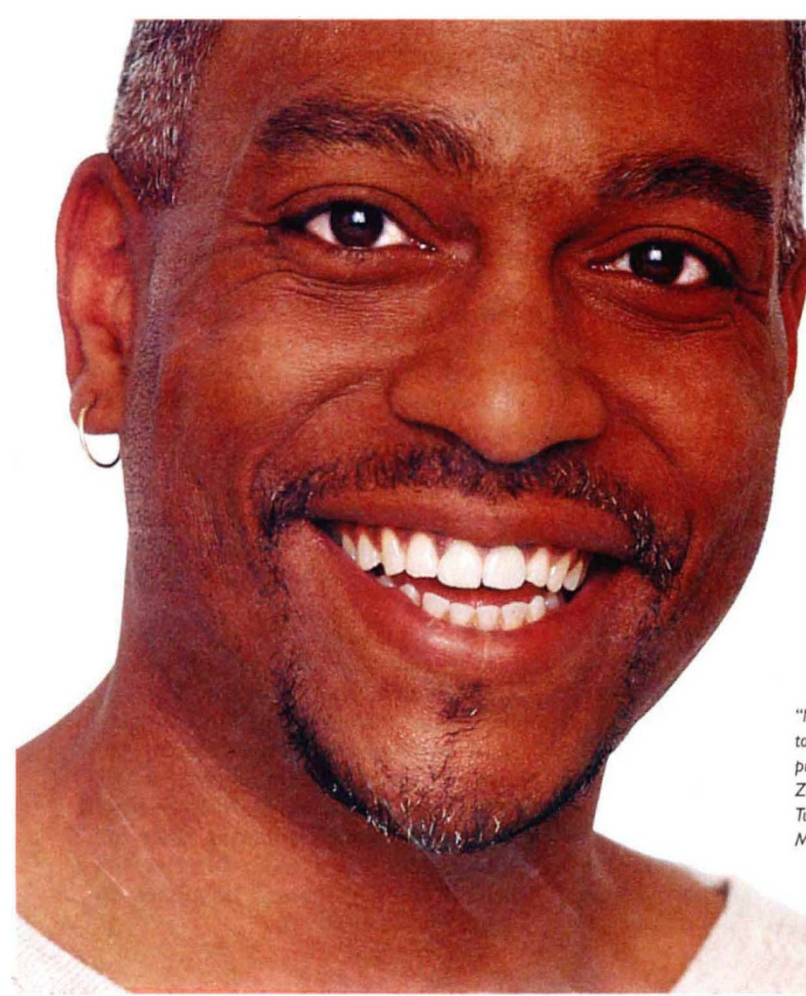
[PARIS] The French President, Jacques Chirac, has asked the Academy of Sciences to prepare a report on the big changes that can be expected in society early next century. He

also asked the academy to produce recommendations to promote "the access of all to knowledge", and to guide politicians on the consequences of developments in information technology and the life sciences. The academy has welcomed the invitation with "lively interest" and has set up a committee to carry out the study. Some observers hope that it may equip itself with an Internet address — something the academy lacks at present.

US patents on ESTs 'to be permitted'

[SEATTLE] An official from the US Patent and Trademark Office (PTO) said last week that the US government intends to allow patents to be granted for expressed sequence tags (ESTs), sequences of several hundred base pairs of DNA that uniquely identify full-length expressed genes. The statement was made during the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Seattle, Washington State; no official confirmation has yet been issued by the PTO itself.

Such a decision would clear up many years of uncertainty over whether these tiny markers of genetic information can be patented. But it would also be controversial. The official said that the decision was based on recognition that the 'utility' of ESTs lies in



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"Not being a protein chemist, I just want to clone the gene, express it, isolate the protein and move on," says Malcolm Zellars, who's working on his post-doc at Tufts University Medical School in Boston, Massachusetts, USA.