

## Zimbabwe reaches deal with UN on transgenic food

**Harare** The Zimbabwean government has dropped its opposition to accepting genetically modified food as aid, according to officials at the United Nations' World Food Programme (WFP).

About six million Zimbabweans face food shortages caused by drought and the government's policy of seizing farms owned by whites. Some Zimbabwean politicians had wanted to reject offers of transgenic grain from the United States. They feared that some seeds would be planted, potentially harming future exports to Europe, where consumers are reluctant to buy food containing transgenic ingredients (see *Nature* 418, 571–572; 2002).

But President Robert Mugabe said last week that his country will now accept 17,500 tonnes of yellow maize donated by the US government. The grain will be milled so that the seeds cannot be planted.

"We are very encouraged by this and hope the agreement will be formalized shortly," says Luis Clemens of the WFP. Officials in Zambia, which is also facing food shortages, have yet to accept transgenic food, although the programme hopes that Zimbabwe's decision will encourage them to do so.

## US gives clearance for first private Moon landing

**Washington** The first privately funded mission to the Moon has been given clearance for take-off by the US government.

TransOrbital, a space-exploration company based in La Jolla, California, announced on 22 August that it has won permission for its TrailBlazer probe to map the Moon's surface, photograph the Earth and deposit a time capsule on the Moon. As a company based in the United States, it had to obtain its permit from the US government. The mission, scheduled for a June 2003 launch from the

Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan, will be funded by corporate sponsorship and by selling video footage and images.

Obtaining the permit took more than two years — the company had to prove it would not contaminate the Moon with biological material, pollute the surface or disturb any historical landing sites.

► [www.transorbital.net](http://www.transorbital.net)

## Anger at plans to cut French research funds

**Paris** President Jacques Chirac is facing a storm of criticism following revelations that France's research budget is to be cut by 1.3% in 2003. According to official figures leaked to *Le Monde* newspaper last week, the cuts will include the loss of 50 jobs from publicly funded research.

The figures, contained in a letter from Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin to research minister Claudie Haigneré, is expected to be confirmed at a meeting of ministers on 25 September.

The news has annoyed researchers' trade unions, who are accusing the recently re-elected Chirac of renegeing on his election promise to ensure that 3% of gross domestic product was invested in research by 2010. It had been estimated that public spending on research would need to increase by 4.2% annually if this target was to be reached.

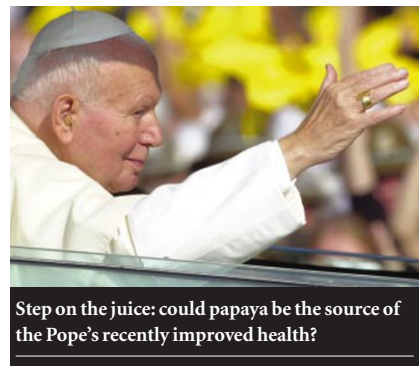
The unions are also angry that the new right-wing government is apparently not going to follow the previous socialist government's plan to create 1,000 new research posts before 2004. Critics say the decision echoes the initial years of Chirac's first term as president with a right-wing government, in 1995–97, when the research budget and science jobs were cut.

## Fruitful meeting between the Pope and Montagnier

**Paris** Luc Montagnier, head of the laboratory at the Pasteur Institute in Paris that discovered the AIDS virus in 1983, has made an unconventional attempt to treat Pope John Paul II, who is thought to be suffering from Parkinson's disease.

Montagnier met the Pope in June to discuss the AIDS pandemic in Africa, and to lobby for a shift in the Catholic church's opposition to condom use. But he also offered the Pope an experimental concoction of fermented Asian papayas, which he claims can stimulate the immune system and also mop up free radicals. Montagnier believes that free radicals play a role in many chronic diseases and could be used to treat conditions such as Parkinson's. The benefits of papaya have not yet not been proven, however.

Observers have remarked on a spectacular improvement in the Pope's health, especially his speech, during his recent trips to Canada



Step on the juice: could papaya be the source of the Pope's recently improved health?

and Poland. But the Vatican has never confirmed that the Pope has Parkinson's, nor that he took the papaya prescription.

## Two fired in wake of anthrax investigation

**Washington** Former biodefence researcher Steven Hatfill, who was questioned by the FBI over last autumn's anthrax attacks, has been fired by Louisiana State University (LSU). Stephen Guillot, director of the National Center for Biomedical Research and Training at LSU where Hatfill worked, has also been removed from his job.

Hatfill, who has been described by government officials as a "person of interest" in connection to the anthrax attacks (see *Nature* 418, 808; 2002), was fired on 3 September. He was subject to intense media and government scrutiny during the FBI's investigation, but no solid link has emerged between him and the attacks.

Newspaper reports claim that the Justice Department, one of the LSU centre's primary funders, demanded that Guillot remove Hatfill from all the projects that it funds, but the centre refused to confirm why Hatfill had been fired. Administrators at the university were equally tight-lipped over the firing of Guillot from his position a day later.

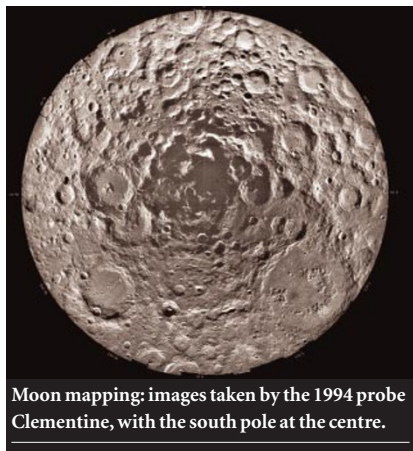
## Star spotting leads to claim that planet is just an illusion

**Washington** At least one of the 100 or so planets discovered around other stars is an impostor, according to new research.

Astronomers claimed in 1999 that shifts in the frequency of light from the star HD 192263 were due to the pull of a large planet. But a paper to be published in the 1 October issue of *Astrophysical Journal Letters* finds that the light varies on a regular cycle. Gregory Henry of Tennessee State University, Nashville, and his team attribute this to the rotation of large 'star-spots', cooler regions associated with magnetic activity, on the star's surface.

The same phenomenon may eventually disqualify other purported planets, they add, but it only a few as it just occurs on stars with very active surfaces.

NASA



Moon mapping: images taken by the 1994 probe Clementine, with the south pole at the centre.

AP/PIER PAOLO COTTO