Academic hopefuls set for pole position in US visa applications

Washington Academics and students could soon be able to jump the queue for US visas, thanks to new guidelines issued by the Department of State.

Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, applicants for visas have faced long security-related delays that some academic societies fear could drastically reduce enrolment (see *Nature* **423,** 906; 2003). In an attempt to prevent this, Janice Jacobs, the state department's deputy assistant secretary for visa services, asked consular officials last month to give priority to academics when setting up visa interviews.

"We're very pleased," says Barry Toiv, a spokesman for the American Association of Universities, which was informed of the development on 1 July. But he adds that US consulates still need more officials to help process the backlog that has built up since the attacks.

JAPAN MAR. SCI. TECH. CEN./REUTERS

That sinking feeling: Japanese researchers lost the *Kaiko* submarine when its tether broke.

Ocean experts hit wave of bad luck as sub goes under

Tokyo Japanese researchers have given up the hunt for *Kaiko*, the world's deepest-diving submarine. The device has been missing since 30 May, when the tether connecting *Kaiko* to an underwater launcher snapped.

***Kaiko* had just finished collecting pressure data from holes drilled in the ocean floor 4.7 kilometres below the surface, south of the Kii peninsula in western Japan. Researchers from the Japan Marine Science and Technology Center had decided to reel in the craft, as an approaching typhoon was causing rough seas. The tether snapped as they were bringing it back to the launcher.**

***Kaiko*, which can dive to depths of 11 km, has carried out a wide range of missions since it was commissioned in 1995, from studying the Earth's structure to discovering bacteria that live in extreme deep-sea environments, and have potential medical use.**

A spokesperson says that researchers hope to replace the ¥1.8-billion (US$15-million) unit, but do not know whether they will be able to raise the money.

Test-tube babies 'not at risk of brain defects'

Paris The largest and longest-running study of babies born by assisted reproduction has eased fears that children conceived using the technology face an increased risk of psychological or cognitive problems.

The research, which was presented at the European Society for Human Reproduction and Embryology's annual meeting in Madrid last week, tracked around 1,000 children born by conventional *in vitro* fertilization or by direct injection of sperm into an egg, together with about 500 control children. Throughout a range of measures, no difference was found from birth until five years of age.

The authors say that the study was designed to detect cognitive problems, not physical defects. But measurements of physical development were taken, and children born using intracytoplasmic sperm injection, in which a sperm cell is injected into an egg, were found to have a higher rate of abnormalities such as urinogenital defects. The rate of defects for these babies was 6%, compared with 2% in control children.

Court rejects corner-cutting in bid to clear atomic waste

Washington A court judgement has overturned the US Department of Energy's masterplan to clean up sites contaminated with waste from its atomic-weapons programme. The planned endeavour is the world's largest environmental-restoration project.

The department's proposal, which would restore massively contaminated sites at Hanford in Washington state, Savannah River in South Carolina, and elsewhere, was revised in 1999 to prevent the project's costs — expected to exceed $100 billion — from spiralling out of control. Under the revisions, some waste held in leaking underground tanks at these sites would have been kept *in situ*, instead of being turned to glass and stored permanently elsewhere.

But on 2 July, the Federal District Court in Boise, Idaho, ruled that the revised proposal fails to comply with a 1982 law stipulating that highly radioactive waste should be stored permanently in underground chambers. The ruling is seen as a setback for the federal government, and as a victory for environmental groups and state governments, which have argued that more money should be spent on a thorough clean-up.

F. DANIEL/AP PHOTO

Bunker shot: a court has ruled that US atomic waste should be stored in underground vaults.

Oxford don penalized for outburst at Israeli

Tel Aviv Andrew Wilkie, a pathologist at the University of Oxford, UK, who rejected a PhD application because the student in question had served in the Israeli army, has been barred from selecting students and faculty members, pending the outcome of a disciplinary hearing.

The disciplinary committee will review an e-mail that Wilkie sent to the student, Amit Duvshani, who had enquired about the possibility of studying for a doctorate under Wilkie's direction (see *Nature* **424,** 7; 2003). Wilkie wrote that he would not accept a student who had served in the Israeli army because of his belief that Israel is committing human-rights abuses against Palestinians in the occupied territories.

He later issued a public apology, describing his message as a "wholly inappropriate expression of my personal opinions". An Oxford spokesman says that the university was "appalled that any member of its staff should have responded to an enquiry from a potential graduate student" in the terms that Wilkie used.

Correction: Broad Institute

In the news in brief "Whitehead geneticist quits for broad remit at medical institute" (*Nature* **423,** 910; 2003) it was incorrectly stated that Eric Lander was leaving his post as director of the Whitehead Institute at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to move to the Broad Institute in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Lander is director of the Whitehead Institute/MIT Center for Genome Research. This centre will become a part of the Broad Institute and Lander will remain in his position as director.