

Minister knocked down by court verdict on mosque demolition

New Delhi India's science minister, Murli Manohar Joshi, has submitted his resignation in the wake of a scandal over the destruction of an ancient mosque more than ten years ago.

In December 1992, fanatical Hindus tore down the Babri Masjid mosque at Ayodhya in the state of Uttar Pradesh, as they wanted to rebuild a Hindu temple they believe once stood on the same site. The act sparked nationwide rioting and fighting between Hindus and Muslims that resulted in hundreds of deaths.

On 18 September this year, an Uttar Pradesh court upheld allegations that Joshi, along with six others, instigated the mosque's destruction. The court has ordered that the group face criminal charges, although Joshi maintains his innocence and has filed a petition against the ruling. India's deputy prime minister, Lal Krishna Advani, was also named in the case but has been exonerated.

As *Nature* went to press, Joshi's resignation had not been accepted by India's prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee.



Demolition squad: the Babri Masjid mosque was destroyed by Hindu fundamentalists in 1992.

Money runs out for project to spy on bank transactions

Washington The US Congress has axed a Pentagon intelligence office that has come under fire from civil-rights advocates.

The Information Awareness Office was part of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), an arm of the defence department. The office was criticized last year for a plan to comb the financial details of millions of citizens in search of potential terrorists.

The project was the brainchild of former DARPA director John Poindexter, who resigned last month amid a row over another project, in which participants could bet on future terrorist attacks (see *Nature* 424, 601; 2003).

Many US security experts argued that the projects should not have been terminated, despite protests from civil-rights groups that they were unethical.

Venter's dog's genome sets tongues wagging

Washington First he sequenced his own DNA. Now Craig Venter has sequenced the DNA of his pet poodle, Shadow (pictured).

Choosing to sequence a dog is a wise move, as there are more than 350 known canine genetic diseases — more than for any other animal apart from humans — although picking a poodle may seem a curious choice. A US government project, expected to be completed early next year, has chosen to sequence a boxer, as this is one of the least genetically variable breeds and is likely to give a representative sequence.

But dog breeds are more than 99% identical to one another, so Shadow's sequence should be adequate for studying some diseases. It should also help track canine evolution. Based on the sequence, which is 80% complete, it is estimated that 18,473 dog genes have human



equivalents — slightly more than are known to be shared by humans and mice (E. F. Kirkness *et al. Science* 301, 1898–1903; 2003).

California rejects party line on stem-cell work

San Diego More human embryos could be available for research in California as of January 2004, thanks to legislation signed into law last week.

The law requires staff at fertility clinics to ask all patients if they are happy for their discarded embryos to be used for research. Currently, the law only suggests discussing the option of embryo donation with patients.

This ruling is part of a raft of legislation regarding stem-cell work in California — in spite of a federal decision in 2001 to limit such research. A registry of donated embryos is planned, and a 13-member commission of scientists, ethicists, attorneys and religious leaders will be in place by 2005 to provide guidelines for the work. Some state legislators are also pushing for hundreds of millions of dollars in bonds to create a pool of stem-cell research funding.

Brazilian ruling sows seeds for transgenic future

Washington Brazil, one of the world's largest exporters of soy beans, has legalized the planting of transgenic versions of the crop for the coming growing season. The government's decision is expected to pave the way for the permanent legalization of genetically modified crops.

Brazil's courts banned transgenic crops in 2000, but farmers in the south of the country have long been suspected of importing transgenic seeds illegally from Argentina. Currently, 20–30% of Brazil's soybean crop is thought to contain transgenes. Last year the government granted an exemption from the ban, initially for a single growing season. That concession has now been extended for another year.

Brazil's official 'transgenic-free' status has allowed it to continue selling produce to European countries that refuse to import transgenic food. But that could soon change.

Nigeria joins the space age with first satellite

London Africa took a big step into space on 27 September with the successful launch of a Nigerian Earth-monitoring satellite.

The craft, NigeriaSat-1, will monitor Nigerian territory to help prevent disasters caused by floods, landslides, oil spillages and fires, or to assist relief workers during such emergencies. It will be operated by the country's National Space Agency in Abuja.

The satellite will form part of a disaster-monitoring constellation — a cluster of satellites built by the British company Surrey Satellite Technologies. An Algerian contribution to the cluster was launched last November, and two other satellites — from Turkey and Britain — were launched with NigeriaSat-1 by a Russian booster. A Chinese satellite will join them in early 2005.

NigeriaSat-1 is the first product of a €20-million (US\$23-million) investment in space science made by the Nigerian government in 2001.

Correction

Due to an editing error, last week's article "SARS triggers biomedical shake-up in China" (D. Cyranoski *Nature* 425, 333; 2003) incorrectly states that most of China's biomedical research is supported by the Chinese Academy of Sciences when in fact the responsibility is divided among several governmental bodies. The article also incorrectly implies that the academy aims to retain this central position in biomedical funding by resisting new initiatives. In fact, many leaders of the academy strongly support the initiative described in the article and have been instrumental in introducing it to China's prime minister.