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Ready for action? It is unclear whether the WHO will investigate suspected bioterror attacks.

### WHO sets health rules but ducks bioterror issue

New guidelines governing the conduct of the World Health Organization (WHO) have been agreed — but it's still not clear whether the agency should have a role in handling suspected bioterror attacks.

In Geneva on 23 May, the 192 WHO member states accepted a final version of a document called the International Health Regulations, which govern how the agency manages disease outbreaks. Years of negotiations over the document had stalled because of arguments over the WHO's powers to investigate bioterrorism.

Some negotiators had pushed for the agency to take on the role of policing possible violations of international biological-weapons treaties. But several nations were uneasy about providing the WHO with the sensitive information needed for it to act effectively.

The final version of the document eliminates any mention of bioterrorism, but requires states to cooperate with the WHO in "public health emergencies of

international concern". Observers say the WHO has gained some power through this clause, but that there is still much uncertainty about how the international community will deal with bioterrorism outbreaks in the future.

### Union scraps boycott of Israeli universities

A British academic teachers' union has abandoned plans to boycott two Israeli universities.

The original decision by the Association of University Teachers to sever links with the universities of Bar-Ilan and Haifa was made in April as a protest against Israeli policies in the Palestinian territories, but prompted an angry reaction from academics. A special meeting of the union's council, held on 26 May in response to the outcry, agreed to scrap the boycott. Union officials say they will focus instead on providing support to Israeli and Palestinian academics.

But the reversal angered Palestinian academics, some of whom backed the boycott as a means of pressuring Israel to end its occupation of the West Bank and Gaza (see *Nature* 434, 813; 2005).

### Ireland finds transgenic corn after US tip-off

The Irish authorities last week impounded a US shipment of animal feed containing a strain of genetically modified corn that is banned in the European Union. This provides early evidence that a new testing regime seems to be working.

It is the first such catch from some 290 shipments examined so far. US inspectors test any corn destined for European markets,

and alerted their Irish counterparts when the test came back positive. The corn was intercepted at the port.

The European Commission insisted on the test system after *Nature* revealed in March that the Swiss biotechnology firm Syngenta had inadvertently released hundreds of tonnes of unauthorized seeds of a transgenic form of corn, called *Bt10*, onto the market. The news caused particular concern because *Bt10* contains a gene that confers resistance to the antibiotic ampicillin (see *Nature* 434, 548; 2005).

The Irish authorities are holding the corn pending a decision on its disposal.

### Nuclear treaty meeting leaves delegates up in arms

A conference to determine the course of the world's leading nuclear arms-control treaty has ended in stalemate.

Delegates from more than 180 nations gathered in New York last month to discuss possible adjustments to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the main global accord to stop the spread of nuclear weapons. The meeting was the seventh such review since the treaty came into force in 1970.

Arms-control experts had hoped that the delegates would use the meeting to strengthen the power of international inspectors, and that countries with nuclear weapons would recommit to reducing their arsenals (see *Nature* 435, 132; 2005). But after four weeks of acrimonious debate, attendees have little to show for their effort, says Rebecca Johnson, director of the London-based Acronym Institute for Disarmament Diplomacy.

Iran held up efforts to reach a statement on the Middle East, and the United States objected to language strengthening the disarmament sections of the treaty.

### Freedom of choice leads Italy to failed cancer drug

Italy's government is flirting with paying for a controversial cancer therapy that clinical trials have shown does not work.

The treatment, a cocktail of natural products including the expensive drug somatostatin, was developed by physician Luigi Di Bella. In 1998 the government gave in to public pressure and agreed to sponsor clinical trials, but these provided no evidence of beneficial effects, and interest in the therapy subsided.

But last month, Francesco Storace, newly appointed health minister in Silvio Berlusconi's right-wing government, announced plans to consider fresh trials, saying that "freedom of choice for patients must be guaranteed".

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### Nations line up to sink Japan's whale catch plan

Japan's plan to increase the number of whales it can catch for 'scientific' research purposes is already rousing some strong opposition from governments and non-governmental organizations.

At the International Whaling Commission's annual meeting this month, Japan will ask whether it can double its catch. Joji Morishita, a senior member of the fisheries agency's international-affairs division, says there are plenty of

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scientific reasons for the increase. But he adds that the commission's rules prohibit him from discussing details before the plenary session starts in Ulsan, South Korea, on 20 June.

This hasn't stopped critics from responding to early

reports that Japan plans to catch humpback and fin whales, in addition to the four other species currently taken. Australian Prime Minister John Howard has written directly to his Japanese

counterpart, Jun'ichiro Koizumi, asking Japan to drop any such plans.

Morishita says that such pleas are based on emotion rather than science. "We want a scientific and constructive discussion," he says.