ROBOT NEWS

Noelle nativity

Hampered by South Korea's low birth rate, medical students in need of obstetric experience are turning to Noelle, a mannequin mother complete with robotic baby equipped with pink and blue lights to indicate its 'health'.

Faking it

Game wardens in New Hampshire made more than 50 arrests for illegal hunting in 2006, with the aid of motorized decoy deer featuring realistic head and tail movements.

NUMBER CRUNCH

5 Atlantic hurricanes occurred in the 2006 season.

79 was their combined ferocity on the Accumulated Cyclone Energy index.

81 was the energy of the single biggest 2006 Pacific storm, Super Typhoon Ioke.

ON THE RECORD

"We are very excited about this game as it presents both sides of the creation-evolution argument, and so shows that the contemporary theory of evolution is perhaps the greatest hoax of modern times."

Erstwhile actor and born-again Christian Kirk Cameron, creator of the board game Intelligent Design vs Evolution, clearly doesn't trust players to make up their own minds.

"Elephants around the country will enjoy a delicious lunch today consisting of about five Christmas trees each."

Berlin Zoo spokesman Ragnar Kühn on a festive recycling solution.

Sources: Reuters, VAOnews.com, Wunderblog, Journal Chrétien

M. RIETSCH/AP

Holders of foreign passports are finding their access to the West Bank denied or restricted by Israeli border controls.

M. AL-SHAER/WFP/GETTY

Immigration policy forces researchers out of West Bank

A few kilometres outside the West Bank city of Ramallah, not far from the rubble-strewn compound where Yasser Arafat lived for many years, lies the campus of Birzeit University. As elsewhere on the West Bank, Birzeit's students and staff have learnt to live with the disruption and casualties caused by the occupying Israeli military and armed Palestinian groups. But now the university says that it faces a non-violent but potentially more dangerous threat to its existence: an Israeli policy that is forcing academics to abandon their jobs.

Around a year ago, say Palestinian academics, people with foreign passports started to find that their access to the West Bank and Gaza Strip was either denied or restricted by Israeli border controls. That poses a serious problem for universities. As there is no such thing as a Palestinian passport, researchers will, given the chance, often become naturalized citizens of other nations — forfeiting their right to Palestinian identification papers. Yet the new policy means that those academics, together with foreign staff, can find that a trip abroad ends in involuntary exile.

At Birzeit, officials say that they cannot put an exact figure on the number denied re-entry, but say the policy is one reason that around half of the university's 57 foreign academics had to leave last year. Campaigners say that other universities in the regions have suffered the same consequences, although precise data are not available. "We don't know why they are doing this, but brain drain will be the end product," says Sarit Michaeli, communications director for B'Tselem, an Israeli human-rights group based in Jerusalem.

The rationale for the move is hard to confirm, as the Israeli government initially said

that it was simply enforcing existing rules. Many holders of foreign passports no longer have residence permits for the occupied territories and so have to repeatedly obtain three-month tourist visas to live there. Israeli officials said that the restrictions were designed to end this misuse of tourist visas. A request for clarification of this point received no reply.

But in meetings with foreign diplomats last month, Israeli officials seemed to acknowledge the problem, saying that they would start to renew tourist visas and allow access to those whose passports have been stamped "last entry". Palestinian campaigners say they have since seen written confirmation of this intent, but note that they have seen no sign of a change in policy at the borders and that some foreign-passport holders are still being refused entry.

If the restrictions continue, academics from both sides of the border say they will fight them. A small group banded together last October to form the Israeli Committee for the Right of Residency, which is attempting to persuade Israel's academics to take a stand against the restrictions. Jacob Katriel, an emeritus physics professor at Technion, the Israeli Institute of Technology in Haifa, says the call was well received when he presented it last month during a session on human rights at the Statistical Mechanics Conference at Rutgers University, New Jersey.

Palestinian universities are also asking foreign academics and scientific organizations to protest against the rules. They say that the loss of academic talent, together with a drop in fees earned from foreign students, could destabilize the fragile education and research infrastructure of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. ■

Jim Giles