

**ON THE RECORD**

**“I am not sure that it is fair to say that it is a problem we must wrestle with.”**

NASA administrator Michael Griffin discusses climate change on US radio.

**“Global temperature is nearing the level of dangerous climate effects.”**

NASA scientist Jim Hansen and his colleagues express a rather different view in a recent publication.

**SCORECARD****Meditation**

Mitch Altman's Brain Machine (pictured) claims to induce a state of deep calm by synching users' brain activity to flashing LEDs and beeps.

**Concentration**

Researchers at University College London have developed a psychometric test to measure proneness to distraction. The test could help employers such as airlines that need staff able to... oh look, a chicken!

**ZOO NEWS****Cock up**

Britain's Royal Society for the Protection of Birds was ridiculed last week when its software automatically removed the word 'cock' from a forum posting about male blackbirds, replacing it with asterisks. Great tits (*Parus major*) are apparently still acceptable.

**NUMBER CRUNCH**

**15 cm** is the average length of an erect human penis, as determined by 11,531 measurements.

**12%** of men in a survey of 50,000 believed that they had small penises.

**0%** of men complaining of small penises in a similar study actually had a 'micropenis', defined as a flaccid length of less than 7 cm.

Sources: NPR, *Atmos. Chem. Phys.*, *makezine.com*, *Psychol. Sci.*, *Daily Telegraph*, *BJU Intl*

# Diplomatic talks spur hope in Libya HIV case

Diplomats are cautiously optimistic that a deal may be within reach, perhaps by the end of June, to save the lives of five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor condemned to death in Libya for allegedly deliberately injecting over 400 children with HIV in 1998.

Private negotiations have recently intensified between Libya and the European Union — which Bulgaria joined on 1 January — to try to find a way out of the politically charged case. Any deal would have to balance provision of humanitarian aid for long-term treatment of the infected children, and support for their families, against compromising the medical workers' defence with implied guilt. Islamic law allows for blood money to substitute for punishment.

The medics were condemned to death on 19 December 2006. Arrested in 1999, they were first found guilty and sentenced to death in May 2004, but the Libyan Supreme Court overturned the verdict and ordered a retrial. When that retrial also found them guilty, it sparked a worldwide political and public outcry. Scientists argue that medical evidence exonerates the six, and that contaminated medical supplies and equipment caused the outbreak. This evidence was denied a hearing in court. The six have lodged an ultimate

appeal to the Supreme Court, but no date has been set for this.

The case has seen many false starts, but diplomats are now cautiously optimistic that progress is being made. On 27 May, the medics were acquitted of a separate but related case of slander, for accusing police of torturing them to extract confessions.

Other political moves have been afoot. Tony Blair, Britain's outgoing prime minister, met with Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi on a farewell trip to Africa last week. Blair's office said their discussion would include the medics' case. In public, Blair announced strengthened coop-

eration between the two countries — perhaps significant, as the HIV case has become an obstacle to Libya's ongoing integration into the international community.

After meeting with Blair, a representative for the infected children's families indicated his openness to reaching a solution. At the same time, Libya's foreign ministry issued a statement that the ongoing talks were intended “to find a solution favourable for all sides”.

Nicolas Sarkozy, the new French president, made resolution of the case a foreign-policy priority in his victory speech last month. And George W. Bush, in an interview on Bulgarian

**“The talks are going in the right direction. Let's say I'm less pessimistic than a few months ago.”**

## Terror terms for arsonists

Ten radical environmental activists have been sentenced over the past few weeks for a string of arsons committed in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The group, extremists claiming to be members of the Earth Liberation Front and Animal Liberation Front, targeted scientists and sites involved in activities such as logging and the culling of wild horses. As *Nature* went to press, most of the sentences had been handed out, and they ranged from 3 to 13 years.

Lauren Regan, a lawyer working with the convicted



Remains of the day: arsonists destroyed many years' work.

arsonists, says the sentences are “not surprising and within the realm of reasonable”, but that ‘terrorism enhancements’ added to many sentences will

make their treatment in jail much more harsh and will label them for the rest of their lives.

The judge in the case, Ann Aiken, ruled that crimes carried out with “intent or desire to influence, affect, or retaliate against government conduct” were eligible for these enhancements. She made it clear, though, that she was ruling only on the narrow legal question of whether the crimes fit the legal criteria for the enhancement, and not on the broader, more controversial question of whether the people involved



**BYE-BYE, BIRDIE**  
Climate change and human intrusion converge to imperil birds.  
[www.nature.com/news](http://www.nature.com/news)

W. JETZ, UC SAN DIEGO



P. MACDIARMID/GETTY

## Sibling rivalry hits Swiss institutes

Tempers erupted last week at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zürich (ETHZ), with faculty members claiming that its board had sneakily siphoned its budget off to Switzerland's other federal institute, the EPFL in Lausanne.

Interim president of ETHZ Konrad Osterwalder has complained formally to the Swiss government, saying that the ETH Board — a politically independent body responsible for both universities and for four federal research institutes — “made serious errors in both the form and content of [its] decision on the allocation of the 2008 budget”. Department heads at ETHZ have also asked Pascal Couchepin, the government minister responsible for research and higher education, for his support in solving the crisis.

As part of Switzerland's push to bolster its research and higher education sector, the ETH Board's budget for 2008 will be nearly 4% higher than that for this year. The board decided to give a disproportionate sum to EPFL, even though there has been no political decision about how Switzerland might afford a second top-level university, say staff from ETHZ. The staff say that the board used different starting budgets to calculate the percentage increase for each institute, and that it did not release the information within the required time before the meeting.

ETHZ also hit the headlines last November when faculty members forced its president, Ernst Hafen, to resign. Hafen had tried to implement organizational changes at the university that had been desired by the board but that the faculty members thought were detrimental to the institute.

“The source of all the problems is the ETH Board,” says Kathy Rifkin, spokeswoman for the Swiss parliamentary committee on science and research. She says that parliament is discussing the abolition of the board, to bring more decision-making back into the government — most particularly decisions about apportioning the budget.

Alexander Zehnder, president of the ETH Board, says that he is surprised by the reaction. “The extra money given to Lausanne was not core money, but strategic funds used to integrate cancer research into that university plus some extra to reward the improvement in its research quality,” he says. He adds that the board's procedures for budget allocation were transparent. The government has declined to comment on the dispute.

**Alison Abbott**

Tony Blair's meeting with Muammar Gaddafi in Libya last week may speed progress to a resolution.

Television last week, reiterated the United States's desire for the case to “be solved quickly and in a way that is satisfactory to the Bulgarian people.”

Diplomats hope that the activity might result in a resolution before a summit of European Union heads of state in Vienna on 21 June, just before Germany's presidency of

the European Union ends.

“We are greatly appreciative of the very strong European diplomatic activity,” says Emmanuel Altit, a member of the medic's defence team. “The talks are going in the right direction. Let's say I'm less pessimistic than a few months ago.”

**Declan Butler**

should be labelled as terrorists.

One of the biggest fires, and perhaps the most memorable to the scientific community, was the torching of a building in the Center for Urban Horticulture at the University of Washington in Seattle on 21 May 2001. The fire targeted the work of Toby Bradshaw, whom the group thought was genetically engineering poplar trees. “I am delighted that the perpetrators have been caught,” says Bradshaw, “and satisfied that the criminal-justice system is capable of determining an appropriate punishment.”

Group members were also

found responsible for torching a lab of the US Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) in Olympia, Washington, on 21 June 1998. Lab worker Dale Nolte, who now works on avian flu for the service, says that he hasn't followed the trial and has no opinion on the sentencings. “My focus from the beginning was to recover our facilities, to keep up the morale of our scientists and keep the work going,” he says. One of this group was sentenced to more than 12 years in prison, which included a terrorism enhancement.

The sentencing memo depicts a group of ideological activists who were not always successful at crime. Their cars broke down, accomplices dropped out at the last minute, members of the group were busted for shoplifting and time and again their incendiary devices failed to go off. Yet, according to federal prosecutors, they racked up more than US\$40 million in damages between 1995 and 2001. No one was harmed during the group's actions, although many contend that this was more through luck than careful planning.

**Emma Marris**