

NEWS BRIEFING

M. DUENAS/EPA/CORBIS



ERUPTIONS MARK NEW YEAR

Colombia's Galeras volcano (pictured) erupted on 2 January; no injuries were reported as *Nature* went to press. The same day, the Nyamuragira volcano in the Democratic Republic of the Congo began spewing ash and lava into Virunga National Park, threatening rare chimpanzees.

POLICY

Japan's budget: Science projects in Japan emerged with minor scars from the new government's 2010 budget, after researchers protested against recommendations for drastic cuts. A supercomputer project fell just ¥4 billion (US\$43 million) short of hoped-for funding, delaying its scheduled start by 7 months to June 2012, and Earth and oceanographic research spending dropped by ¥16 billion to ¥54 billion. But the SPring-8 synchrotron's support was largely unscathed; a basic-

science budget — including a controversial grant programme for innovative research — jumped by ¥47 billion to ¥341 billion; and funding for green projects such as low-carbon technology almost tripled to ¥10 billion.

RESEARCH

Space shortlist: Candidates for NASA's newest mid-size mission to visit another body in the Solar System were narrowed down from eight to three on 29 December. The proposals

are landing on Venus; bringing back material from the Moon's south pole; or fetching a sample of a near-Earth asteroid. The winning mission will be selected in 2011 and it must be ready for launch before 2019.

Lab deaths: Police and internal investigations continue at India's Bhabha Atomic Research Centre — a nuclear-research facility near Mumbai — after the deaths of two young PhD students in an explosion and fire on 29 December. An analytical-chemistry laboratory was gutted by the blaze, but no radioactive material was involved, said Swapnesh Malhotra, a spokesman for the government's Department of Atomic Energy.

Primate-breeding dispute: A court has halted construction of a controversial facility in Guayama, Puerto Rico, that would breed primates for biomedical research. Bioculture, a company based in Mauritius that supplies primates to US and UK labs, should not have been awarded permits to build the facility on land reserved for agricultural use, a judge ruled in a statement published on 30 December. Bioculture says that it will appeal. Local citizens, concerned by the island's history of failing to contain primates brought there for research, filed the lawsuit, supported by US and UK antivivisection groups.

THE WEEK AHEAD

9-10 JANUARY

Last year's International Year of Astronomy officially ends with the 'Astronomy Beyond 2009' meeting in Padua, Italy.

▶ www.beyond2009.org

11 JANUARY

German chancellor Angela Merkel launches the United Nations' International Year of Biodiversity in Berlin.

▶ www.cbd.int/2010/welcome

12-15 JANUARY

Britain's Royal Society in London hosts the triennial conference of the Interacademy Panel on International Issues, a network of world science academies.

▶ go.nature.com/5YsESP

BUSINESS

Buyout: Switzerland-based Novartis announced on 4 January a take-over of eye-care company Alcon, also based in Switzerland. It will pick up a 52% stake for \$28.1 billion — adding to the 25% it bought for \$10.4 billion in 2008 — offering other shareholders stock worth \$11.2 billion. Novartis is diversifying in part to prepare for the 2011 loss of patent protection on its blockbuster blood-pressure drug Diovan.

BUSINESS WATCH

The new decade will see a bumper crop of clean-technology companies offering their stock to the public for the first time, analysts predict. It wouldn't be hard to improve on 2009, when few companies in the sector registered for an initial public offering (IPO).

London-based analysts New Energy Finance tracked only 13 clean-energy IPOs last year, compared with 82 in 2007 (see chart). Lithium-ion battery company A123Systems of Watertown, Massachusetts, was the highest-profile IPO of 2009, and, in December, solar firm Solyndra of Fremont, California, and biofuels start-up Codexis of San Francisco, California, both registered for IPOs. Five other

solar firms made IPOs last year, compared with 13 in 2007 and 11 in 2008. New Energy Finance's Jenny Chase thinks solar IPOs will return to 2007 levels this year, with Miasolé, Nanosolar and Sunfilm probably among those in the thin-film sector. Tesla Motors, the electric-car firm based in San Carlos, California, is another company hotly tipped for a 2010 IPO. "There's a certain amount of pent-up demand from public-sector investors," says Michael Holman of New York City-based Lux Research. But for venture capitalists and businesses seeking to offload their private-sector investments, most opportunities remain in mergers and acquisitions, he says.

