

News in brief

IRAN TAKES PIVOTAL NUCLEAR STEP

Iran has announced that it will no longer abide by any restrictions on its uranium-enrichment programme, prompting fears that the 2015 deal to limit the country's nuclear activities is effectively dead. Experts say that if Iran resumes enrichment at full throttle, it could be capable of creating a nuclear bomb in one year.

The step is widely seen as a response to the 3 January US drone strike on Baghdad that killed visiting Iranian military commander Qasem Soleimani, the architect of Iran's military operations around the world.

Iran struck the 2015 nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with six global powers on the condition that punishing international sanctions would be lifted. It agreed to drastic cuts in its ability to produce enriched uranium and plutonium, which can be used to build a nuclear bomb. In particular, the deal limited the number of centrifuges Iran could use to separate uranium isotopes, and the amount and purity of uranium-235 the country could stockpile.

The United States unilaterally pulled out of the JCPOA in 2018 and resumed harsh economic sanctions against the country. In May 2019, Iran announced partial removal of its restrictions. On 5 January, foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif tweeted that there will be no more limits on the numbers of centrifuges. He added that Iran will continue to allow international nuclear inspections and that it will revert to full compliance with the deal if the other parties do the same.



SCI-HUB PROBED FOR ALLEGED LINKS TO RUSSIAN INTELLIGENCE

The operator of Sci-Hub, a website that provides people worldwide with illicit access to a large volume of copyright-protected academic literature, is reportedly being investigated by the US Department of Justice (DOJ) on suspicion of stealing US military secrets.

The agency suspects Kazakhstan-born Alexandra Elbakyan, who created Sci-Hub in 2011, of running the pirate site with silent approval from the Russian government and, possibly, with support from military intelligence. *The Washington Post* reported the allegations on 19 December, citing anonymous sources close to the DOJ. The DOJ told *Nature* that it could neither confirm nor deny the existence of an ongoing investigation.

Sci-Hub allegedly operates from servers in Russia. Critics say that Elbakyan, a computer scientist whose whereabouts are unknown, uses advanced hacking and phishing practices to acquire login details illegally from libraries and personal subscribers. Elbakyan previously told *Nature* that she runs Sci-Hub alone as a private enterprise, with financial help from anonymous donors. She did not respond to *Nature's* request for comment on her alleged links to Russian intelligence.

UK GOVERNMENT CALL FOR SCIENCE 'WEIRDOS' PROMPTS CAUTION

Researchers have reacted with surprise to a bizarrely worded job advertisement posted by a senior UK government adviser. The notice calls for scientists, mathematicians and "super-talented weirdos" to work for the prime minister, and cites several scientific papers.

Dominic Cummings (pictured), a political strategist who is chief special adviser to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, posted the advertisement on his personal website on 2 January. Cummings, known for his strong and sometimes controversial views on science, says that he is seeking "data scientists, project managers, policy experts, assorted weirdos", as well as "unusual" mathematicians, physicists and economists, to work in the prime minister's office in Downing Street. The post attracted attention for its brash language and odd requirements, such as that applicants show excitement about a slew of specified scientific ideas.

Researchers, including the authors of some of the cited papers, welcomed a focus on data-driven techniques and scientific skills from the top level of government, but cautioned against oversimplifying how science is applied to policymaking.



Bush fires 'twice the size of Belgium' rage across Australia



Nearly half a billion native animals are estimated to have perished in bush fires in New South Wales, the Australian state most affected by the ongoing disastrous fires, and where this image was captured.

The total number of animals killed is likely to be much higher across the country, where conflagrations have been burning in multiple states since September.

The fires have so far burnt through at least six million hectares of land – more than twice the size of Belgium – across five states. In three states alone – New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia – fires have claimed at least 24 human lives and destroyed more than 1,800 homes.

The scale of the disaster prompted the federal government to call on the country's defence forces to help fire-affected communities.

On 3 January, residents of coastal towns in New South Wales and Victoria were told to leave ahead of worsening conditions, leading to one of the country's largest mass evacuations on record. About 160 fires were burning across those states as *Nature* went to press.

RUMOURED CHANGES TO US GOVERNMENT OPEN-ACCESS POLICY

A rumour that the White House is considering a policy that would make all federally funded studies free to read on publication has fuelled a debate between scientists who favour open access and publishers of subscription journals.

According to the widely discussed rumour, whose origin is unclear, the administration of President Donald Trump is drafting an executive order that would force the change in publishing practices.

On 18 December, two groups that represent publishers – the Association of American Publishers in Washington DC and the International Association of Scientific, Technical, and Medical Publishers in Oxford, UK – sent letters to the US government opposing any such policy. It would hinder the peer-review process, stifle innovation and tip the publishing business into chaos, they wrote.

But several scientists who advocate open access countered the publishers' arguments. "I welcome the rumored policy," tweeted John Wilbanks, chief commons officer at the non-profit research organization Sage Bionetworks in Seattle, Washington. "I work at a *really well funded* non-traditional research organization. We still can't afford journal access subscriptions."

Kristina Baum, a spokesperson for the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, declined to comment on the rumour.

The rumour follows an effort led by European funders, called Plan S, that will require that research they fund be made open access on publication, with liberal licensing terms.



HEAD OF ANCIENT-DNA LAB SACKED FOR MISCONDUCT

The University of Adelaide has fired Alan Cooper, the high-profile leader of its Australian Centre for Ancient DNA, for "serious misconduct". His dismissal follows allegations that Cooper bullied staff and students, and an investigation into the 'culture' of the centre.

Cooper is a major figure in the field of ancient DNA, and has charted the migrations of prehistoric people and their domestic animals around the globe.

In a statement, the university said it would not comment on the circumstances that led to Cooper's dismissal, but said that the move did not relate to the quality or integrity of his research or any other research conducted at the centre.

"The university takes seriously its commitment to the welfare of students and staff," it also said.

In response to his dismissal, Cooper told *Nature* that he rejects the allegation that he was a bully. "I work at the highest international levels, and want my students and staff to do the same. I've occasionally been too blunt in my language and actions, and regret this – but it was never bullying," he says. Cooper says that he was never warned about his conduct before action was taken against him, and that he was never asked to attend management courses.