

WorldWatch

by Staff

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Natural Disasters

More than 270,000 individuals and families sought federal aid from the Federal Emergency Management Agency during this record year of hurricanes, the agency reports. Director James Lee Witt says 1999 was "an extraordinarily busy year," as his agency handled relief programs involving five major hurricanes, a rash of wildfires, 14 major tornadoes, summer floods and Y2K-related preparedness. President Clinton declared 55 disasters in 1999, making victims eligible for federal aid in 37 states and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

Roman Catholic Church

The health of John Paul II has deteriorated to the point where he may not be able to continue in office. Speculation that a new Pope may soon have to be found has increased with recent reports that the longest-serving pontiff of the 20th century now has to be pushed around on a trolley to ease the strain on his legs. Inside the Vatican, officials confirm that intense negotiations are now underway on the future of the papacy. The Pope himself, in the presence of one witness, has held a series of "sounding out" lunches with potential papal candidates: French cardinal Roger Etchegarry; Colombian cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos; and Italian cardinal Camillo Ruini.

World Economics

The world's twenty leading industrial and developing countries are meeting in Berlin to try to prevent another financial crisis like the one that threatened the global economy last year. Finance ministers from the new Group of 20 hope to outline a common approach to reforming the world's financial system, decreasing the likelihood of global meltdown. The G20 includes Russia, Brazil, China, Saudi Arabia and Mexico, as well as the world's biggest industrial countries like the United States, Japan, and Germany, accounting for about 80% of the world's productivity. The group was created in September to involve major developing countries like Korea and Brazil, nations at the center of the latest economic crisis, in reform talks. It was also a response to criticism of the role of the Group of Seven—made up of the world's leading industrial countries—in managing the last crisis.

European Union

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder says Europe must act more like a single country if it wants to challenge U.S. economic and political dominance. Asked if the United States lacks consideration for its allies, Schroeder replies: "Yes, that certainly is so. There is a risk of America looking inward because of its huge economic power and its huge political weight, and it would be regrettable if that process continues. [But] whining about U.S. dominance doesn't help. We have to act."

Schroeder portrays Germany as a European power with growing self-confidence, underscoring a more assertive tone in foreign affairs that sets him apart from his predecessor, Helmut Kohl. "The old

theory of Germany as an economic giant but a political midget was over with German unification." The young chancellor, the first with no personal memory of World War II, insists Germany needs to show "measured self-confidence" while remaining conscious of its Nazi past.

Genetics

» Oregon researchers, writing in the journal *Molecular Human Reproduction*, claim success in placing jellyfish genes into monkey embryos, a step that could lead to a better understanding of genetic diseases in humans. The scientists chose the jellyfish gene because it instructs cells to produce a green protein, making it easy to track whether the gene has been transferred into a target embryo, as the cells emit a green glow under certain lighting. Doctors at Oregon Health Sciences University's primate research center say they doubt the same technique could be used in human embryos to correct or prevent diseases, since such a step raises questions of genetic engineering.

» Genetically modified food has been banned from the staff cafeteria at Monsanto's British headquarters by the company's own caterer. Granada Food Services recently told clients it would not supply food containing genetically modified soya or maize due to customer concerns. The move is designed "to ensure that you, the customer, can feel confident in the food we serve." Genetically modified products, including Monsanto's genetically engineered corn, have recently met with safety concerns in parts of Europe and Asia.