

# **WorldWatch**

**by Staff**

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## **Weather**

At least 29 deaths are blamed on the series of storms that have caused floods, landslides and avalanches across the American West since December 26. Thousands of homes and businesses have been swamped, and hundreds of thousands of people have been evacuated. One environmental official said, "The scary thing is, it will probably happen again in March with the reservoirs so full."

## **Illegitimacy**

In December the Allan Guttmacher Institute released a report showing that 1/3 of American children are born to unmarried women. It also found that the U.S. has the highest rate of teenage childbearing in the industrialized world. Each year almost one million teens—11% of all women aged 15-19—become pregnant, and 54% of these pregnancies end in births.

## **Political Freedom**

Freedom House, a research institution studying freedom and human rights, released its 1996 survey results, finding 79 countries to be "free," 59 "partly free," and 53 "not free." Countries in Asia, including the Middle East, and Africa comprise the majority of "not free" nations. Western Europe and the Americas remained the strongholds of democracy.

## **NATO**

» Russia, opposed to any eastward expansion of NATO, is conducting a coordinated diplomatic offensive against it. Its foreign minister, Yevgeny Primakov, warns that such expansion would strengthen Russian nationalists in undermining democracy there. The 16 NATO foreign ministers will meet in July to decide which nations to admit.

» Greek officials fear that absorbing former Soviet satellites into NATO will rekindle the Cold War without improving NATO's military clout. They warn that a bitter rivalry could develop over the Baltic States and Ukraine. Greece also believes that NATO should address Russian arms sales to Arab nations.

## **Germany**

Chancellor Helmut Kohl sent a congratulatory letter to Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Palestinian President Arafat, describing the Hebron accord as an important step that could spark the pursuit of peace in the Middle East. Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel added, "The [German] government will do all it can, through bilateral measures . . . within the framework of the EU, to contribute to the success of the peace process."

## **Red Tide**

An outbreak of red tide has already killed more than 1.5 million fish along 2/3 of the Texas Gulf Coast. Red tides result from a growth spurt of single-cell algae that bear a neurotoxin that paralyzes a fish's ability to breathe. Fishermen report that affected fish swim crazily, sideways or upside down. Oysters and mollusks collect toxin in amounts that can harm humans.

## **Religion**

Chicago Presbyterian Church officials voted overwhelmingly on January 14 against an amendment that would have required fidelity and marriage for all church officers, including ministers and elders. Last July the Presbyterian Church USA approved a policy allowing ordination of gays, but only if they remain celibate. The policy also bars ordained unmarried heterosexuals from having sex.