

WorldWatch

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Cloning

To the fury of religious groups, Britain will give its permission for scientists to conduct research in human cloning in September. Initially, scientists will be allowed to clone embryos only for research purposes, but it could eventually lead to "tissue banks" of cloned organs to deal with illnesses from lung disease to diabetes. Scientists will not be allowed to use cells taken from aborted human fetuses, and the cloning of whole people will also remain banned. Richard Dawkins, a leading Oxford University biologist, says that any ethical attack on the research should be dismissed: "The moral implications of using human embryos are rather less than those connected with using mammals and other species for scientific experiment."

Drought

» According to the UN, 60 million people suffer under a severe drought in Central and South Asia that has killed livestock and crops and threatens to uproot families as they look for food and water. The drought has led to "a rapid deterioration of health and sanitary conditions in the affected communities and raised the prospect of large population displacements within and across national borders," says a UN spokesperson.

» On the American Plains, drought has dried up soil, stunted corn stalks, helped more weeds grow in cornfields and brought on a particularly destructive corn crop insect, the western bean cutworm, an aggressive insect that can destroy corn. For many farmers, the weeds and the onslaught of the cutworm have just added to problems brought on by a drought that has reduced yields and increased costs.

Drugs

» Heroin use has risen dramatically in the Pacific Northwest, with overdoses in the Portland, Oregon, area accounting for nearly as many deaths among young and middle-aged men as cancer or heart disease. The drug, at about \$20 a dose, is cheap on the West Coast, and black tar heroin from Mexico or South America is readily available there, the CDC says. Other studies have indicated heroin overdoses increasing in most U.S. cities in the 1990s.

» Federal agents intercepted 2.1 million tablets—1,100 pounds—of the drug MDMA, commonly known as Ecstasy, at Los Angeles International Airport. Valued at \$40 million, officials say it is the biggest Ecstasy haul ever. This cache, found on a flight from Paris, represents a quarter of the 8 million Ecstasy tablets seized in the U.S. this year. The drug, manufactured mostly in Europe, is commonly used at nightclubs and underground "rave" parties. In pill or liquid form, the drug can cause brain damage and have other side effects.

Nuclear Arms

Pakistan plans to begin exporting nuclear materials, including natural, depleted and enriched uranium; thorium; plutonium; zirconium; heavy water; tritium; beryllium; natural or artificial radioactive materials and nuclear grade graphite. Nuclear equipment for sale consists of nuclear power reactors, reactor pressure vessels, reactor fuel charging and discharging machines. A senior foreign affairs official says that the sale of these items does not violate any international convention. Pakistan is already facing severe economic sanctions imposed by the United States, the European Union and Japan after both India and Pakistan tested nuclear devices in May 1998.

Palestine

The Pope has reiterated the Vatican's call for Jerusalem to be given a special international status. The city is at the heart of the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians. Pope John Paul says only international action could safeguard the city's three religions, and only a special status could preserve its most sacred areas. U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, supported by both Yasser Arafat and Ehud Barak, has stressed that the Vatican proposal for international stewardship of the holy sites would not be considered.

Violence

Violent crime in Britain has risen 16% over the last year, and the country's top law enforcement official blamed the increase on alcohol abuse. Home Secretary Jack Straw said alcohol was a contributory factor in 40% of violent crime, 78% of assaults and 88% of criminal damage. The statistics showed general crime rose 3.8% over the same period to March 2000. Robberies jumped by 26.1% while crimes endangering victims' lives went up 12.6%. The widespread use of mobile phones also contributed to the surge in robberies, with criminal gangs targeting owners, Straw said.