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## NEWS

### UN delays vote on cloning ban — again

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The member states of the United Nations have delayed yet again - possibly until after the US presidential election - a vote on whether to draw up a global ban on all forms of human cloning.

The move reflects a deep split on whether such a ban should not only cover the reproductive cloning of human beings, which is almost universally opposed, but also the 'therapeutic' cloning of embryos for research purposes.

A total ban, demanded in a resolution put forward by Costa Rica, is being backed by the United States, where the same issue has become a major source of contention between president George W. Bush and his challenger John Kerry in the current election campaign.

Such a move is also being strongly endorsed by the Vatican, which made its first-ever speech to the UN General Assembly during a two-day debate on the issue at the end of last week.

But a counter-resolution, proposed by Belgium, and backed by Britain and 19 other countries, would offer nations three options for dealing with therapeutic cloning: banning it, putting a moratorium on the practice, or seeking to prevent misuse through national legislation.

Belgian officials claim that a comprehensive ban would be doomed to failure, given widespread support for such research in many parts of both the developed and developing world.

In his first public statement on the issue, UN secretary-general Kofi Annan gave his support for creating embryos whose stem cells could be used for research into possible treatments for diseases such as Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, diabetes and multiple sclerosis.

"Obviously it is an issue for the member-states to decide, but as an individual and in my personal view, I think I would go for therapeutic cloning," Annan told reporters before the debate.

And uncertainty about the issue in the Muslim world was reflected in the fact that Turkey announced on behalf of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference that the 57-member group wants more time to consider the issue, and expressed opposition to a vote on either alternative.

Turkey's representative said that for one side to impose its views on the other within such a polarising setting would "only create a negative atmosphere".

The proposal for a total ban was first raised in the United Nations two years ago, but has twice been deferred, primarily because of the lack of consensus, and an awareness that many countries in which therapeutic cloning is currently allowed would be unlikely to sign up to a global ban.

The new delay has been described as a "tremendous victory" by Bernard Siegel, executive director of the Genetics Policy Institute in Coral Gables, Florida, which has been actively campaigning on the issue.

Siegel points out that a number of southern African nations that had previously supported calls for a total ban had since withdrawn their support. "They are ravaged with HIV/AIDS ... and there is promise for HIV/AIDS research through therapeutic cloning," Siegel said after the decision was made.

During the General Assembly debate, opponents to a total ban complained that those seeking such a measure were effectively destroying the chance of reaching a global agreement on a ban on reproductive cloning, even though all nations agreed to such a move.

Vanu Gopala Menon of Singapore, for example, said progress towards achieving the latter goal was being thwarted by countries that had "adopted an all-or-nothing attitude and paralysed the process".

Emyr Jones Parry, Britain's ambassador to the United Nations, said that that Britain would not sign or be bound by a final convention that called for a total ban.

South Korea, which proposed that the decision should be postponed for another year, has called for an



UN member states are split over whether to allow cloning of human genetic material for medical research

international scientific conference to discuss the issue, and for a study of national laws and regulations covering cloning.

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