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U.N. approves call for ban on human cloning

Vote a symbolic victory for Bush

UNITED NATIONS (Reuters) -- The U.N. General Assembly on Tuesday urged governments to ban all human cloning, including the cloning of human embryos for stem-cell research, in a divided vote that handed a symbolic victory to the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush.

Capping four years of contentious debate, the 191-nation assembly voted 84 to 34, with 37 abstentions, to approve a nonbinding statement on cloning.

The United States did not play a public role in promoting the statement. But it had worked behind the scenes, hand-in-hand with U.S. anti-abortion groups, to obtain a call for a blanket ban on all cloning.

The measure was proposed by Honduras and generally supported by predominantly Roman Catholic countries, in line with Pope John Paul's condemnation of human cloning. It was generally opposed by nations where stem-cell research is being pursued.

Unusually, the United States and Britain, traditional staunch allies in the United Nations, were on opposite sides of the issue, and Britain condemned the "intransigence" of nations opposed to cloning for medical reasons.

Many Islamic nations were among those abstaining, on grounds there was no U.N. consensus on the hot-button issue of whether stem-cell research was a valid medical pursuit or the destruction of human life.

Opponents said the text was not legally binding and would have no impact on their scientists' pursuit of stem cell research.

At the heart of the debate was so-called therapeutic cloning, in which human embryos are cloned to obtain stem cells used in medical studies and later discarded.

Saving lives, or taking them

Many scientists, backed by governments including Belgium, Britain, Singapore and China, say the technique offers hope for a cure to some 100 million people with such conditions as Alzheimer's, cancer, diabetes and spinal cord injuries.

But the United States, Costa Rica, Italy and anti-abortion groups argued that this type of research, for whatever purpose, constitutes the taking of human lives.

The U.N. debate began with a 2001 proposal by France and Germany for a binding global treaty banning the cloning of human beings, a plan that had broad international backing.

But that effort failed last year after the Bush administration fought to broaden the ban to all cloning of human embryos, including therapeutic cloning.

The assembly's treaty-writing legal committee, deeply divided, abandoned the idea of a treaty and decided instead to pursue a nonbinding declaration.

Costa Rican Ambassador Bruno Stagno Ugarte praised the assembly vote as "a historic step" that recognized "that therapeutic cloning involves the creation of human life for the purpose of destroying it."

U.S. envoy Sichan Siv made only a brief comment welcoming the statement.

But British Ambassador Emyr Jones Parry, who voted "no," lamented "the intransigence of those who were not prepared to recognize that other sovereign states -- after extensive dialogue and due democratic process -- may decide to permit strictly controlled applications of therapeutic cloning."


"Therapeutic cloning research conducted under strict regulations will contribute to the enhancement of human dignity by relieving millions of people from pain, suffering and misery," said South Korean envoy Ha Chan-ho, explaining his "no" vote.

"The foes of therapeutic cloning are trying to portray this as a victory for their ideology. But this confusing declaration is an effort to mask their failure last November to impose a treaty on the world banning therapeutic cloning," said Bernard Siegel, a Florida attorney who led a lobbying drive by scientists and patient advocacy groups to defend cloning for therapeutic ends.

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