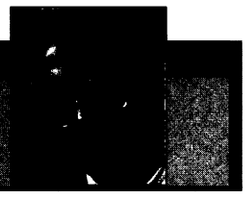


down," says computational biologist Peer Bork, "because that is an extreme scenario and I don't think it will happen. But there is a chance that we will lose our critical mass in some [research] areas and will not be competitive anymore." One of these areas, Bork says, is the hot field of functional genomics, "which requires a lot of expensive equipment." And Serrano adds that "it is clear this is going to be a major blow for EMBL." Just how major, he says, depends on which interpretation of the ILO ruling that the staff chooses to insist upon, a decision currently being debated in the lab's corridors.

As *Science* went to press, the staff association was expected to meet this week to discuss its options. EMBL employees might agree to spread the back payments over a number of years to soften the blow or to take increased holiday time to partly compensate for the money they are owed. But Serrano says that many of the original complainants in the case are no longer at EMBL, and they may not be willing to compromise—in which case the matter could end up back before the ILO if the governing council does not agree with the staff interpretation. According to one staff member who prefers to remain anonymous, "there are people who don't care if the lab goes down the drain over this."

Kafatos will have to tread carefully to avoid such a scenario in the coming months. The best solution, he says, would be one that would "safeguard both the fair interest of all EMBL personnel and the continued well-being of EMBL as an institution." And he will be looking for any encouraging signs that the staff will rally behind him. Says Serrano: "Nobody in this building is interested in destroying EMBL." **–MICHAEL BALTER**

ANIMAL RIGHTS

Booby-Trapped Letters Sent to 87 Researchers

Psychobiologist John Capitanio could see the razor blade through the back of the envelope mailed to his office at the University of California, Davis. He already knew what to look for: Capitanio had been told he was one of 87 scientists using nonhuman primates in their research across the United States targeted last month by a shadowy animal rights group that originated in Britain. Booby-trapped to slice the fingers of an unsuspecting scientist trying to open them, the letters mark a new and disturbing turn toward violence by the militant wing of the animal rights movement.

Although animal rights groups have vandalized many laboratories in the United States, in recent years most attacks on individuals have occurred in Europe (*Science*, 4 June, p. 1604). "This is the first time there's been a campaign of this ilk [in the United States] on this large a scale," says Mary Brennan, executive vice president of the Foundation for Biomedical Research (FBR), a Washington, D.C., watchdog group, which warned the intended victims after spotting a list of them on an animal rights organization's Web site. While some researchers, like Capitanio, seemed to take the missives in stride, others saw them as much more serious: "Some of my colleagues are feeling very frightened," Capitanio says.

As *Science* went to press, more than 50 of the 87 letters had been received, all bearing a Las Vegas postmark dated 22 October. In addition to a razor blade taped inside the upper edge of the envelope, each letter contained a short, typed message that read, in part: "You have until autumn of the year 2000 to release all of your primate captives and get out of the vivisection industry."

A group called the Justice Department has claimed responsibility for the letters in a 24 October communiqué on a Web site, the Animal Liberation Frontline Information Service, that posts information supplied by "underground" groups such as the Animal Liberation Front (ALF; www.enviroweb.org/ALFIS/index2.html). The FBR and another group, Americans for Medical Progress, spotted the posting the next day and alerted the researchers listed. No injuries have been reported.

The Justice Department originated in Britain, where it has acknowledged sending letter bombs and other devices to pharmaceutical labs, animal breeders, and researchers since 1993. One of the group's members served 3 years in prison. Three years ago, the group began sending similar threatening letters, complete with razor blades, to Canadian hunting groups and fur retailers. A fact sheet on the site associated with the ALF, which expresses a commitment to "nonviolence" despite having taken credit for past attacks on animal labs, explains that the Justice Department "see[s] another path ... [that] involves removing any barriers between legal and illegal, violent and nonviolent."

Some researchers already accustomed to regular protests by animal rights groups seemed unfazed by the letters. "There's not a whole lot we can do about this sort of thing other than just stay alert and not fool around with anything that looks suspicious," says Peter Gerone, director of the Tulane Regional Primate Center in Covington, Louisiana. But others were less nonchalant, including a University of Washington, Seattle, AIDS researcher who declined to have his name published. "I have a family," he says. "I don't want to say I'm afraid, but there are certain situations where you don't take chances." Capitanio says he's okay now, but admits that "I might feel more nervous next autumn."

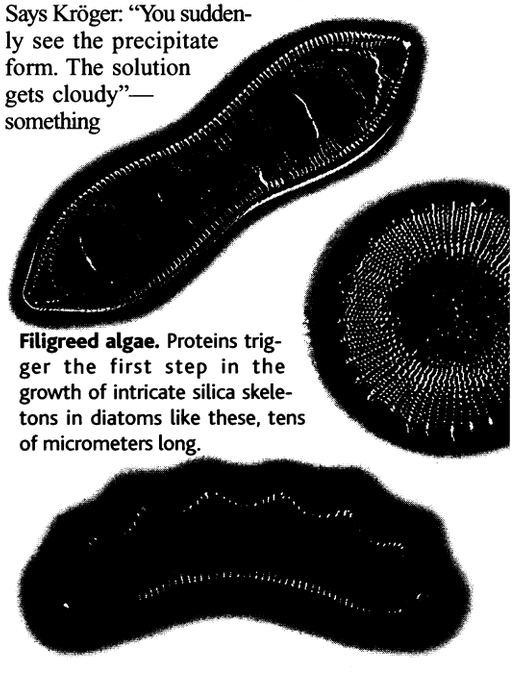
–JOCELYN KAISER

BIOMATERIALS

Reverse Engineering the Ceramic Art of Algae

The glasslike silica laceworks within the cell walls of diatoms are so beautiful they'd be on display in museum cases if only they were thousands of times bigger. No one knows how these tiny algae pull off their bioceramic art, but researchers are closing in on the secret. On page 1129, biochemist Nils Kröger and colleagues at the University of Regensburg in Germany report new clues—silica-forming proteins dubbed silaffins.

Within seconds after they added their first silaffin samples to solutions of silicic acid, a silicon-containing organic compound, Kröger, Rainer Deutzmann, and Manfred Sumper knew they were onto something. Says Kröger: "You suddenly see the precipitate form. The solution gets cloudy"—something



Filigreed algae. Proteins trigger the first step in the growth of intricate silica skeletons in diatoms like these, tens of micrometers long.

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