



## AIDS MEETING

# South African Leader Declines to Join the Chorus on HIV and AIDS

**DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA**—When South African President Thabo Mbeki rose to address the opening ceremony for the XIII International AIDS Conference here last Sunday, the thousands of researchers packed into Kingsmead Stadium hoped he would say three simple words: HIV causes AIDS. He didn't. "He waffled while Rome is burning," said Glenda Gray, a pediatrician who co-runs a perinatal HIV clinic at Soweto's enormous Chris Hani Baragwanath Hospital.

HIV has infected one in five adults in this country, which puts South Africa in the unenviable position of having more infected people than any other country in the world. Mbeki recently convened a panel to help his government develop policies to tackle the growing AIDS crisis, but he included so-called "dissidents," who insist that HIV does not cause disease and question whether AIDS is a new disease or old diseases collectively given a new name. Scientists around the world have berated Mbeki for giving new lifeblood to the dissidents, whose arguments had been thoroughly dismissed years ago, and they were hoping that the president would finally distance himself from their views.

Mbeki addressed this criticism head-on in his lengthy speech to the conference, which runs through 14 July. "Some in our common world consider the questions that I and the rest of our government have raised around the HIV/AIDS issue ... as akin to grave criminal and genocidal misconduct," said Mbeki. "What I hear being said repeatedly, stridently, and often angrily is 'Do not

ask any questions!'"

When it came to stating his own position about the role of HIV, however, Mbeki was anything but direct. Much of his speech quoted from a 1995 World Health Organization report that fingered "extreme poverty" as "the greatest cause of ill health and suffering across the globe." Mbeki did note, however, that his government would continue to intensify its anti-AIDS campaign by encouraging the use of condoms, supporting



**Iconoclast.** President Mbeki stopped short of acknowledging that HIV causes AIDS.

research on an AIDS vaccine and anti-HIV drugs, and responding humanely "to people living with AIDS and HIV." But he made no mention of his decision not to supply relatively cheap courses of anti-HIV drugs to infected, pregnant women, which studies have shown can cut by 50% transmission of the virus to their babies.

Mbeki's failure to acknowledge directly that HIV causes AIDS has angered the country's AIDS researchers. "This was a good opportunity for him to put a closure on the whole thing, and he didn't," complained virologist Lynn Morris, who works at the National Institute of Virology in Johannesburg and sat on the panel that Mbeki convened. Many visiting scientists also expressed their dismay. "He could have emerged as a spectacular leader of the whole African continent," said Anthony Fauci, head of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. "He flubbed it."

Still, some top South African researchers saw the speech as a step forward. "Considering all we've gone through over the last few months, it's an excellent speech," said Male-

gapuru William Makgoba, head of the country's Medical Research Council and another member of Mbeki's panel. "He had the option of just talking about AIDS. But he always talked about HIV/AIDS. So he links HIV to AIDS." What some saw as word-smithery, Makgoba concluded was a "clever way" for Mbeki to extricate himself from the debate. Those who criticized the speech, Makgoba said, were being "churlish."

The speech itself came after a day of rumors and controversy surrounding the sudden and unexplained cancellation of a press conference to publicize the so-called "Durban Declaration." More than 5000 scientists had signed the document, published in the 6 July issue of *Nature*, which declares that HIV causes AIDS. The declaration apparently offended Mbeki, whose spokesperson earlier in the week said he would put it in the "dustbin" if it were sent to the president.

Many speculated that the Mbeki administration threatened South African scientists who signed the document that they would lose their government funding if they spoke at the press conference. But Hoosen Coovadia, chair of the meeting, insisted that "they didn't put any pressure on us to cancel this." Chris Hani's Gray said she and others nixed the press conference simply to avoid offending Mbeki on the eve of his much-anticipated speech. They hoped their conciliatory gesture would encourage him to end a sad chapter in a sad saga about a country that seems to have swapped the anguish of apartheid for the anguish of HIV and AIDS.

—JON COHEN


## ECOLOGY

# California Algae May Be Feared European Species

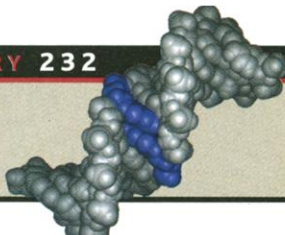
A volleyball court-sized patch of bright green algae in a San Diego lagoon has set off alarm bells among ecologists and officials. Scientists strongly suspect that the algae, *Caulerpa taxifolia*, is the same fast-growing, non-native clone that has swept over the northwestern Mediterranean sea floor in the past decade with devastating ecological consequences. A consortium of agencies and private groups has cordoned off the lagoon and is laying plans to poison the seaweed, marking the first major U.S. attempt to stop an incipient marine species invasion.

Scientists say such actions are needed to preserve biodiversity in the face of voracious non-native plants and animals

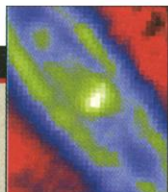
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Fire ants  
reduce  
biodiversity



Reengineering  
life's  
chemistry



Toward a  
virtual  
observatory

(*Science*, 17 September 1999, p. 1834). "It's a rare chance to stop an invasion once it's started," says marine biologist Andrew Cohen of the San Francisco Estuary Institute. He and others also hope U.S. officials will avoid the mistakes made in Europe, where governments initially ignored warnings about *C. taxifolia*. "This is almost a test case of the new resolve to deal with this problem" of invasive species, says ecologist Daniel Simberloff of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

*C. taxifolia* is native to various tropical seas. But in 1980 an aquarium in Stuttgart, Germany, began sharing with other aquaria a showy clone that grew fast in cold water. The organism's potential for triggering an ecological disaster didn't become apparent, however, until 1989, when French scientist Alexandre Meinesz noticed a flourishing *C. taxifolia* patch in the waters off the Monaco aquarium. Meinesz's 1999 book, *Killer Algae* (*Science*, 10 March, p. 1762), describes the bureaucratic fumbling and the seaweed's relentless spread as French officials dithered 2 years before reacting. The algae now carpets 4600-and-counting hectares of sea floor, wiping out native grasses from Spain to Croatia.

The story was familiar to Rachel Woodfield, a marine biologist with the consulting firm of Merkel & Associates in San Diego, who in mid-June spotted some unfamiliar seaweed growing in a lagoon. The 10-meter-by-20-meter patch and smaller, scattered patches had apparently edged out the eelgrass within a few years. Woodfield consulted with algae experts, including Meinesz, who fingered the Mediterranean clone or one just as invasive. And that set off alarm bells. If the algae, now 30 kilometers north of San Diego, gets loose throughout California, says Bob Hoffman of the National Marine Fisheries Service Southwest Region, "the whole rocky reef plant and animal assemblage off our coast would be dramatically transformed."

As *Science* went to press, experts were awaiting results of genetic tests to confirm the invader's identity. But with evidence pointing toward the Mediterranean clone, 10 agencies and groups are now scrambling to

wipe out the algae in an effort that will likely cost at least \$500,000. As a first step, they've quarantined the lagoon, owned by a power plant and used for boating, to prevent tiny fragments of *C. taxifolia* from being spread by boat anchors. Within a week or two, they plan to cover the seaweed patches with tarps soaked with an herbicide, most likely chlorine or copper sulfate. The next step is long-term monitoring, including pamphlets to alert boaters and divers to look out for other colonies.



**Dead ringer.** *Caulerpa taxifolia* algae found near San Diego looks just like a weedy clone that's wreaked havoc in the Mediterranean.

In tackling *C. taxifolia*, the San Diego group is wading into uncharted waters. Although many weedy plants and non-native animals have been extirpated from lakes and land, only two marine invaders—a zebra mussel-like species in Australia and an abalone parasite in California—have reportedly been eradicated. U.S. experts have long feared that they might one day need to battle *C. taxifolia*. In 1998, Cohen spearheaded a lobbying effort that succeeded last year in adding the clone to the U.S. Noxious Weed list, which bans its sale and transport.

A 1999 presidential order calling on federal agencies to thwart invasives may provide additional weapons for battling *C. taxifolia* and other troublemakers. Simberloff says he's "very impressed" with a draft inter-agency plan that has just been developed. But Cohen is reserving judgment, noting that federal rules to crack down on species spread by ship ballast water (see p. 241) still lack teeth. Even so, a victory over San Diego's patch of *C. taxifolia* will lift his spirits. "I do think there's a good chance of eradication," Cohen says.

—JOCELYN KAISER

## SCIENTIFIC PUBLISHING

### Publish and Perish in The Internet World

**NEW YORK CITY**—When 120 leaders in publishing and biomedicine met here last week to talk about the Internet's effect on scholarly journals, it didn't take long for disagreements to surface. Participants clashed over two very different visions of the future—one predicting that private firms will continue to produce the most reliable and readable journals, the other that scientists will soon abandon traditional journals and share results directly with other researchers on the Internet.

The seeds of this debate were sown 16 months ago, when Harold Varmus, who was then director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and Stanford University geneticist Patrick Brown floated a radical plan for an NIH-backed preprint journal and biomedical archive (*Science*, 12 March 1999, p. 1610). Since then, the scope of NIH's electronic publishing venture—now called PubMed Central—has been scaled back, and the public archive has been slow getting started.

David Lipman, director of NIH's National Center for Biotechnology Information, which is running PubMed Central, reported at the meeting that his staff is making steady progress putting articles online from the 20 journals that have so far agreed to provide published papers for the archive. But his team has "bumped into technical problems," he said, particularly with one of the most prominent contributors, the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS). So far, according to a PNAS staffer, two 1999 issues have been posted. Meanwhile, plans to publish original, nonreviewed research at PubMed Central are being put aside for now.

Those difficulties have not discouraged Vitek Tracz, head of the London-based publishing company, Current Science Group. In May, Tracz—whose company sponsored the New York meeting—started his own Internet publication called BioMed Central, which will be free of charge to authors and readers. (Its first papers are still in review.) "Our mantra is that we will never charge for primary research reports," Tracz says.

Although Tracz says he has no definite business plan for BioMed Central, he aims to use it to establish credibility with scientists and through this process, to develop other publications and news services that