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INTERNATIONAL

Cloning ban delay is 'tremendous victory'

David Dickson

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The delay on a United Nations decision whether to ban all forms of human cloning has been described as a "tremendous victory" by Bernard Siegel, executive director of the Genetics Policy Institute in Florida in the United States.

Siegel points out that a number of Southern African nations that previously supported calls for a total ban have since withdrawn their support.

"They are ravaged with HIV/Aids ... and there is promise for HIV/Aids research through therapeutic cloning," he said.

In his first public statement on the issue, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan gave his support for cloning stem cells that 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.

The delay reflects a deep split on whether such a ban should cover more than just the reproductive cloning of human beings, which is almost universally opposed.

There is also opposition to the so-called "therapeutic" cloning of embryos left over from fertility labs for research purposes with potential medical benefits.

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Total ban?

A total ban, demanded in a resolution put forward by Costa Rica, is being backed by the US, where the same issue became a major source of contention between President George Bush and his challenger John Kerry during the recent US presidential elections.

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The Vatican also strongly endorses a total ban. It made its first-ever speech to the UN General Assembly during a two-day debate on the issue.

But a counter-resolution proposed by Belgium, and backed by 20 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.

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

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And uncertainty about the issue in the Muslim world is 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.

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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".

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

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During the General Assembly debate, opponents to a total ban complained that those seeking banning of both types of cloning are effectively destroying the chance of reaching a global agreement on a ban on reproductive cloning.

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

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Emyr Jones Parry, Britain's ambassador to the UN, said Britain will not sign or be bound by a final convention that calls for a total ban.

South Korea, which proposed that the decision should be postponed for another year, has called for an international scientific conference to discuss the issue, and for a study of national laws and regulations covering cloning. --

[SciDev.Net](#)

David Dickson is director of the non-profit Science and Development Network. Article edited by Christina Scott

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