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## AP: Italy Offers Compromise on Cloning

By NICK WADHAMS

The Associated Press

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UNITED NATIONS - Italy has offered with a compromise on human cloning that seeks common ground among U.N. member states who are sharply divided over competing treaties to ban the practice, diplomats said.

It was too early to say whether the compromise will help settle the dispute before Friday, when the U.N. General Assembly's legal committee had planned to vote on the two offers if the sides couldn't agree on one text, Belgian diplomat Marc Pecsteen said.

"We're making progress," Pecsteen told The Associated Press on Wednesday. "We need some more playing with words to find the compromise we need, and I don't know if we'll have the time to get to that."

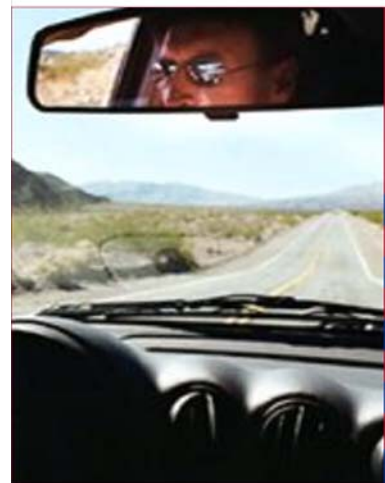
The issue of a global treaty on human cloning has exposed a stark rift in member states' attitudes. A proposal from Costa Rica would ban all human cloning, while the other, from Belgium, would ban reproductive cloning but allow countries to use embryos for stem cell and other research.

The Costa Rican document has 62 co-sponsors including the United States and Italy, while the Belgian offer is supported by 22 mostly European countries. Many Muslim countries are undecided and were courted by both sides Wednesday.

The Italian offer is a modified version of an old Belgian text, Pecsteen said. He said the Italian changes were not acceptable to the Belgians, but talks were continuing.

The document, obtained by The Associated Press, calls on nations to ban attempts to create "human life" through cloning. That's a revision of the old text, which called on nations to prohibit creating "human beings" through cloning.

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That change is key because it gets to the heart of the dispute over cloning: Many opponents argue that an embryo is human life, while fewer see it as a human being. This sleight of hand on the wording could help everyone to agree on a treaty.

Pecsteen acknowledged that at this point, the sides appeared to be seeking something they could interpret how they want to.

"That's what were trying to find, a constrictive ambiguity that could allow both sides to live with one text," Pecsteen said. "Unfortunately, 'human life' is not ambiguous enough in a way and that's why we have a problem with it."

A U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity, viewed the Italian offer favorably but said a vote on the two treaty proposals was still possible.

"If there were to be a compromise text, I think that would probably be very interesting to most parties, but at the same time I think we're pretty confident" in the Costa Rican offer, a U.S. official said on condition of anonymity.

Either way, observers said the Italian offer may be a sign that the two sides have all but given up trying to agree and are seeking a way to save face and drop the issue.

That's because the Costa Rican and Belgian documents, if passed, would seek a world treaty on cloning. The Italian offer, on the other hand, is only a declaration outlining U.N. member states' stance and would not call for a treaty.

"Declarations are so broad. They can be interpreted in dozens of different ways," said Bernard Siegel, executive director of the Genetics Policy Institute, which supports cloning for research. "So in a way, this would be the U.N.'s way of punting this so it's not longer a U.N. matter."

The other option, Pecsteen said, was to simply postpone the issue until next year. Last November, the legal committee voted to delay consideration of a cloning treaty for two years. But in December, the General Assembly decided without a vote to delay the discussion of a global treaty for a year, which led to this year's discussion.

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