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U.S. Withdraws Effort to Prohibit Human Cloning Worldwide

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UNITED NATIONS, Nov. 19 -- The Bush administration has dropped its bid this year for a global ban on human cloning, avoiding what promised to be an acrimonious battle at the United Nations over the right of countries to clone human embryos in pursuit of cures for life-threatening diseases, U.S. and U.N. officials said Friday.

President Bush made the ban a foreign policy priority, issuing a personal appeal to the 191-member U.N. General Assembly in September to adopt a treaty prohibiting the controversial practice. The majority of U.N. members supports a ban on the cloning of human beings, but there is deep division whether it should extend to the cloning of human embryos for stem cell research.

The United States supports the ban on such research, known as "therapeutic cloning," but it agreed to withdraw its demand for a vote on a Costa Rican resolution that would have opened formal negotiations on a ban. In exchange, the U.N. assembly made a commitment to resume discussions in February on a nonbinding declaration appealing to countries to "prohibit any attempts to create human life through cloning processes and any research intended to achieve that aim."

The draft of the nonbinding declaration was introduced by Italy to bridge the gap between supporters of the Costa Rican resolution and backers of a competing Belgian resolution calling for a partial ban on human cloning that would permit the use of human embryos for scientific research.

Delegates involved in the negotiations said the language of the Italian compromise was sufficiently ambiguous to allow both sides to claim victory. But the Italian proposal has already triggered a theological debate among delegates over whether the phrase "human life" should be construed as beginning at birth or conception.

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Costa Rica's ambassador, Bruno Stagno Ugarte, said he would abandon his push for a treaty banning all forms of human cloning if the General Assembly approves the declaration as currently written.

Friday's compromise dealt a fresh blow to religious activists who have championed opposition to using human embryos in stem cell research. With the support of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R), Californians this month approved a \$3 billion ballot initiative to fund embryonic stem cell research.

"I'm absolutely delighted" with the proposal, said Bernard Siegel, the executive director of Genetics Policy Institute. "A declaration is not a treaty, it is not legally binding in any way and the research can advance."

A State Department spokesman also called the compromise a step forward because it headed off any effort to explicitly permit the continuation of therapeutic cloning. "I think we're actually pleased with the progress that we have made in preventing any action by the United Nations that would endorse human cloning in any form," State Department spokesman J. Adam Ereli said.

Jeanne E. Head of the National Right to Life Committee, an antiabortion organization that has lobbied at the United Nations for a ban on cloning, called the result "the best possible outcome at this point in time. This in fact sends a message to the international community that this is the direction that the United Nations is going."

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