

Push for broad UN cloning ban crumbles

(Agencies)

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A divided United Nations on Friday rejected a US-led campaign to ban all cloning of human embryos, including for stem-cell research, as a General Assembly committee opted instead for a nonbinding declaration.

With some viewing the practice as the destruction of human life and others as a potentially lifesaving avenue of medical research, "we thought it would be unbearable for the international community to be divided on an issue like cloning," said Ambassador Mohamed Bennouna of Morocco, chairman of the assembly's treaty-writing legal committee.

"The bottom line is that stem-cell research will advance. This declaration will not chill stem-cell research," said Bernard Siegel, a Florida attorney who led a lobbying drive by scientists and patient advocacy groups to defend cloning for therapeutic ends.

Adopting an agreement reached late on Thursday between supporters and foes of Washington's three-year drive for a broad anti-cloning treaty, the UN committee shunted aside the US proposal by consensus.

In its place, the panel adopted a resolution instructing a working group to meet in February for talks on a political declaration put forward by Italy as a face-saving compromise.

Rome suggested the assembly issue a nonbinding statement calling on nations to adopt laws "to prohibit any attempts to create human life through cloning processes and any research intended to achieve that aim."

'A Moderate Success'

While proponents of embryonic stem-cell studies had problems with the term "human life," they agreed the text could form the basis of future negotiations, diplomats said.

US envoy Carolyn Willson had no comment after the vote.

In Washington, State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said the United States was pleased the United Nations had not issued an endorsement of cloning.

"We are proud of our efforts to prevent human cloning. So the fact that there isn't any action by the UN to endorse cloning is a moderate success," Ereli told reporters.

Opponents of the US plan said the outcome showed that a majority of the 191 UN member-nations wanted to keep the door open to therapeutic cloning, in which human embryos are cloned as part of research such as stem-cell studies.

But Ambassador Bruno Stagno Ugarte of Costa Rica, who led nations supporting Washington's plan, said it would have won in a straight up-or-down vote but instead faced death through procedural challenges, as happened twice before in the panel.

Friday's committee action fell a little over two weeks after US elections in which stem-cell research was an issue.

Opinion polls showed strong support for such studies, and the US Congress has so far shunned President George W. Bush's pleas for a tough law that bans therapeutic cloning.

But Bush has on his own restricted the use of federal money for stem-cell research, allowing US funding only for studies on embryonic stem-cell batches that existed as of August 2001.

France and Germany first proposed a UN treaty banning human cloning in 2001, but the issue has been bottled up ever since over whether a treaty should also ban the cloning of human embryos, as Washington insisted.

The United States says this is the taking of human life.

But scientists say the technique holds out the hope of a cure for some 100 million people with such conditions as Alzheimer's, cancer, diabetes and spinal cord injury.