Science clings on as Japan slashes spending

Despite an overall cut of 3% to Japan's national budget for 2006, basic research managed to secure a slight increase in funds.

Approved by the cabinet on 24 December, the budget includes ¥1.3 trillion (US$11.4 billion) for the country's main research activities, a rise of 1.1% on last year. This was welcome news for scientists, who had been steeling themselves for cutbacks (see *Nature* 437, 181; 2005).

Among the winners are the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, which received a 2% much-needed boost to ¥180 billion, and a bid to build a fast-breeder nuclear reactor, which scored a 13% increase to ¥34.7 billion. New projects aimed at developing the next generation of supercomputers and a powerful X-ray free-electron laser for atomic-scale imaging will get ¥3.5 billion and ¥2.3 billion, respectively.

But not all sectors of science are so fortunate. The life-sciences budget will fall by 11% to ¥74.4 billion, largely because a project for the International Space Station was cancelled. The government is also cutting back subsidies for public universities and research institutes, while encouraging them to bid for competitive grants and to seek collaborations with private companies.

Death sentence revoked for HIV workers in Libya

Six health workers sentenced to death in Libya were granted a reprieve on 25 December. The country's supreme court quashed the sentence and ordered a retrial.

In 1999, five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor were accused of deliberately infecting 426 Libyan children with HIV. They insist they are innocent and that their confessions were extracted under torture. Investigations by independent experts have concluded that the children were probably infected through unsanitary hospital conditions with the outbreak beginning before the health workers arrived in the country (see *Nature* 430, 277; 2004).

YOUSEF ALHELO/AP

Libya's supreme court has revoked the death sentence passed on six foreign health workers.

Bulgaria, Libya, Britain, the European Commission and the United States recently agreed a plan to provide money for the infected children's medical care — a move that some think led to the overturning of the death sentences.

Upgrade aims to put drill ship at cutting edge

After 20 years as the flagship of scientific ocean drilling, the *JOIDES Resolution* (right) is taking a holiday. The ship is heading to dry dock for what its operators describe as an "extreme makeover".

In a US$115-million facelift, the ship will get a new name, at least 50% more lab space and revamped drilling systems to enhance its sample retrieval and analysis capabilities.

Creature comforts will also be improved with the addition of a sauna. And accommodation will see just two people sharing a berth rather than the current four.

Once operational, in summer 2007, the revamped ship is expected to join Japanese-built drillship *Chikyu* off the coast of Japan.

D.HILSHEER/AP

Together, as part of the Integrated Ocean Drilling Program, they will try to drill into an active fault in the crust, some 5.5 kilometres beneath the ocean floor.

Europe launches first part of navigation network

The first test satellite in the Galileo network, the European equivalent of the US Global Positioning System (GPS), launched on 28 December.

Costing €3.8 billion (US$4.5 billion), Galileo's full constellation of 30 satellites is expected to be operational in 2008, joining the 29 satellites in the GPS network. Researchers plan to use both Galileo and GPS for a range of projects — from measuring the creeping movement of Earth's tectonic plates to the water content of the lower atmosphere.

"GPS is still primarily a military tool," says Terry Moore, a satellite-navigation expert at the University of Nottingham, UK; its signals could in theory be switched off at any time. Galileo, on the other hand, is primarily for civilian use and should stay on in all but the most extreme circumstances.

Terrorist attack in India raises alarm for scientists

Scientists found themselves the target of a terrorist attack in India late last year. On 28 December, gunmen shot and killed retired mathematics professor Munish Chandra Puri at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bangalore. As a result, the Indian Science Congress, the country's largest scientific event, opened on 3 January in Hyderabad amid unprecedented security.

Puri, who was based at the Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi, was killed in what officials said was a senseless shooting designed to create panic across the scientific community. Four others were injured, including the IISc's Vijay Chandru, developer of a cheap hand-held computer.

The attackers picked scientists as soft targets, says science secretary Valangiman Ramamurthy, and they chose Bangalore — home to about 1,500 software companies — to attract global attention. A man belonging to the Pakistan-based militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba, which wants to see a separate Kashmir, has been arrested in connection with the shooting. Several others have been detained.

Freed archaeologist considers return to Iraq

German officials are urging archaeologist and aid worker Susanne Osthoff not to return to Iraq, where she was kidnapped and held for three weeks before being released on 18 December.

Osthoff has been trying for years to draw attention to the looting of archaeological sites (see *Nature* 438, 722; 2005). She has also organized the transport of medicine and other goods to Iraqi citizens.

In television interviews after her release, Osthoff left it open as to whether she will return to Iraq. Her comments have angered some German politicians, who say that the country should not fund future rescue efforts if Osthoff is kidnapped again.

The German government has also refused to continue funding her projects in Iraq, including the renovation of a historic building in Mosul on which it has already spent €40,000 (US$47,500).

It is still unclear who kidnapped Osthoff and how her release was secured.