New England Edition

Boston: Turning cloudy, cool, high 76. Tonight, showers, low 57. Tomorrow, continued cloudy, cool and damp with a few showers and patchy drizzle, high 66. Weather map is on Page C13.

Some in G.O.P. Say Iran Threat Is Played Down
Spy Agencies Blamed for Mild Assessments

By MARK MAZZETTI
WASHINGTON, Aug. 23 — Some senior Bush administration officials and top Republican lawmakers are voicing anger that American spy agencies have not issued more ominous warnings about the threats that they say Iran presents to the United States.

Some policy makers have accused intelligence agencies of downplaying Iran’s role in Hezbollah’s recent attacks against Israel and overestimating the time it would take for Iran to build a nuclear weapon.

The complaints, expressed privately at recent weeks, surfaced in a congressional report about Iran released Wednesday. They echo the tensions that divided the administration and the Central Intelligence Agency during the prelude to the war in Iraq.

The criticisms reflect the views of some officials inside the White House and the Pentagon who advocated going to war with Iraq and now are pressing for confronting Iran directly over its nuclear program and ties to terrorism, say officials with knowledge of the debate.

The reassurance is surging just as the intelligence agencies are overhauling their procedures to prevent a repeat of the 2002 National Intelligence Estimate — the faulty assessment that in part set the United States on the path to war with Iraq.

The new report, from the House Intelligence Committee, led by Representative Peter Hoekstra, Republican of Michigan, portrayed Iran as a growing threat and criticized American spy agencies for cautious assessments about Iran’s weapons programs. “Intelligence community managers and analysts must provide their best analytical judgments about Iran’s W.M.D. programs and not shy away from provocative conclusions or bury disagreements in consensus assessments,” the report states, using the abbreviation for weapons of mass destruction like nuclear arms.

Some policy makers also said they were dismayed that American spy agencies were playing down intelligence reports — including some from the Israeli government — of extensive contacts recently between Hezbollah and members of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard. “The people in

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IN NEW METHOD FOR STEM CELLS, VIABLE EMBRYOS
OBJECTIONS TO USE REMAIN

Development Could Raise the Level of Debate in Midterm Elections

By NICHOLAS WADE

Biologists have developed a technique for establishing colonies of human embryonic stem cells from an early human embryo without destroying it. This method, if confirmed in other laboratories, would seem to remove the principal objection to the research.

It could also redirect and intensify the emotional political debate over limits on federal financing for research on human embryonic stem cells, which give rise to the cells and tissues of the body and which scientists and patient advocate groups see as a potential source for new treatments for diseases like Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s and diabetes.

But the new method, which is being reported by researchers at Advanced Cell Technology today on the Web site of the journal Nature, also brought objections from critics who warned of possible risks to the embryo and the in vitro fertilization procedure itself, in which embryos are generated from a couple’s egg and sperm.

The new technique would be performed on a two-day-old embryo, after the fertilized egg has divided into eight cells, known as blastomeres. In fertility clinics, where the embryo is available outside the woman in the normal course of in vitro fertilization, one of these blastomeres can be removed for diagnostic tests, like for Down syndrome.

The embryo, now with seven cells, can be implanted in the woman if no defect is found. Many such embryos have grown into apparently healthy babies over the 16 years or so the diagnostic tests have been used.

Up to now, human embryonic stem cells have been derived at a later stage of development, when the embryo consists of about 150 cells. Both this stage, called the blastocyst, and the earlier eight-cell stage, occur before the embryo implants in the wall of the womb. Harvesting the blastocyst-stage cells kills the embryo, a principal objection of those who oppose the research.

“There is no rational reason left to oppose this research,” Dr. Robert Lanza, vice president of Advanced Cell Technology and leader of the research team, said in an interview.

With the approach of midterm

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In New York Times

Thursday, August 24, 2006

ONE DOLLAR

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In New Method for Deriving Lines of Human Embryonic Stem Cells

One Stem Cell Line, One Growing Embryo

Scientists report a new method to make human embryonic stem cells that does not, as before, destroy the embryo.

1. An egg fertilized by sperm, begins to divide.
2. After the third division, at the 8-cell stage, a single cell called a blastomere is removed.
3. The blastomere is cultured with an established embryonic stem cell line and then separated to form new lines.
4. Left intact, the embryo continues to develop into a ball of some 150 cells, the blastocyst. The older stem cell technique removes inner mass cells at this point, destroying the embryo.

Mr. Bush has allowed federal financing for research on human embryonic stem cells, provided they were established before Aug. 9, 2001. Although that might seem to rule out any new cell lines derived from blastomeres, Dr. Battey said that was not clear because the embryo would not be destroyed, and that he would seek guidance on the point.

The federal policy does not affect privately financed stem cell research, like that done by Advanced Cell.

Critics have a range of objections to deriving human embryonic cell lines with the new method. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in particular, oppose both in vitro fertilization and preimplantation genetic diagnosis, and therefore still object to the research.

Richard Doerrflinger, deputy director for pro-life activities at the conference of bishops, said the church opposed in vitro fertilization because of the high death rate of embryos in clinics and because divorcing procreation from the act of love made the embryo seem “more of a product of manufacture than a gift.”

Asked if he meant that the parents of a child conceived through in vitro fertilization would love it less, Mr. Doerrflinger said he was referring to the clinic staff. “The technician does not love this child, has no personal connection with the child, and with every I.V.F. procedure he or she may get more and more used to the idea of the child as manufacture,” he said.

Dr. Leon Kass, former chairman of the President’s Council on Bioethics, said, “I do not think that this is the sought-for, morally unproblematic and practically useful approach we need.”

Dr. Kass said the long term risk of preimplantation genetic diagnosis was unknown and that the present technique was inefficient, requiring blastomeres from many embryos to generate each new cell line. It would be better to derive human stem cell lines from the body’s mature cells, he said, a method researchers are still working on.

Dr. Andrew La Barbera, scientific director of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, said more than 2,000 babies had been born in the United States after a preimplantation genetic diagnosis is no sign yet that they have a greater risk of disease than do in vitro fertilization babies, but society needs more data to be sure.

I.R.S. Warns of Tax-Collection Swindlers

WASHINGTON, Aug. 23 (AP) — The Internal Revenue Service warned taxpayers on Wednesday of swindlers posing as debt collectors hired by the agency.

The I.R.S. created the collection program to minimize that risk, “because we know what it’s like out there with regard to identity theft nowadays,” Collection Director Brady Beven said.

Some critics of the program had so many pitfalls that they were urging debtors to insist on negotiating directly with the agency. The National Treasury Employees Union, which represents employees of the agency and opposes the program, has drafted a sample letter that taxpayers can send to leave the private collection program and demand that the agency handle their cases.

The agency said it planned to assign 12,500 accounts with unpaid debts to three companies beginning Sept. 7. About 40,000 accounts are to be transferred by Dec. 31. The agency chose taxpayers who owed less than $25,000 and did not dispute the debt.

Taxpayers can call (800) 829-1040 for information and verifications.
Growing Embryo

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LaBarbera said. Scientists welcomed the new development but also expressed concern. Dr. Irving Weissman, a stem cell expert at Stanford University, said the new method, if confined to blastocysts derived from preimplantation genetic testing, would not provide a highly desired type of cell, those derived from patients with a specific disease.

Many scientists have come to regard this use of the cells, to explore the basic mechanisms of disease, as more likely to provide new therapies than direct use of the cells themselves.

Dr. Weissman said the new advance could lead into a "Congressional trap" if Congress permitted new lines to be established only during the preimplantation genetic diagnosis procedure. This test looks for only a handful of diseases, he said, and not for Alzheimer's and the other degenerative diseases for which better therapies are needed.

Congressional Republicans who led the resistance to the embryonic stem cell legislation that had bipartisan support in the House and Senate also said the new technique did not ease their opposition. Brian Hart, a spokesman for Senator Sam Brownback, Republican of Kansas and a prominent opponent of federal financing for embryonic stem cell research, said Mr. Brownback's moral objection remained.

"You are creating a twin and then killing that twin," Mr. Hart said.

Dr. Lanza said, however, that twinning is a phenomenon that occurs at a later stage of embryonic development and that there was no evidence that a single blastocyst could develop into a person.

Democrats and others who had pushed for added research using embryos that were ultimately going to be discarded stepped up their criticism of the president and his Congressional allies for holding back science.

"It's tragic that the current Republican Congress continues to rubber stamp the restrictions that deny federal funding for scientists engaged in medical research that could save or improve countless lives," said Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts.

Political analysts said the new findings could elevate embryonic stem cell research as a campaign issue by both keeping it in the news and making it more difficult for opponents to explain their position.

"It paints the pro-life community into a corner," said Stuart Rothenberg, a pro-life analyst of Congressional races. "As a rule, you don't want to oppose scientific advancements."