

# Correspondence

## Panama says no to more mining – a win for environmentalists

Panama is at a crossroads of biodiversity conservation and economic development. The government approved a law in October 2023 that extended a concession with the Cobre Panamá mine until 2041, triggering weeks of protests. Panama's Supreme Court ruled the concession unconstitutional in November. We urge the authorities to produce a viable long-term plan to make economic activities sustainable and to preserve Panama's forests and biodiversity.

The Canadian firm First Quantum Minerals acquired the mining rights ten years ago. The open-pit mine now occupies 13,600 hectares and accounts for 3.5% of Panama's gross domestic product (see [go.nature.com/3rrjmef](https://go.nature.com/3rrjmef)). But it cleared rainforest cover in the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor, a passageway for plants and animals between North and South America. Indigenous communities and the Panama Canal's water supply also depend on the corridor.

The firm has begun international arbitration to appeal the court's decision (see [go.nature.com/3tfn2pl](https://go.nature.com/3tfn2pl)). Solutions to protect livelihoods and the environment are urgently needed.

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## Eliminate undeclared as well as declared chemical weapons

The destruction of all declared stockpiles of chemical weapons is a "landmark moment" for global security (P.J. Hotchkiss *Nature* **623**, 459; 2023). But undeclared stockpiles of chemical weapons in the hands of aggressive regimes such as those in Syria, Russia and North Korea continue to pose a threat.

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has documented Syria's use of chemical weapons. It suspended the country's OPCW voting rights in 2021 because the nation failed to declare and destroy its chemical-weapons stockpile.

Russian authorities used Novichok, a nerve agent developed by the Soviet Union, in a 2018 assassination attempt in the United Kingdom (*Nature* <https://doi.org/gp459s>; 2019). In 2020, the OPCW confirmed that a critic of the Russian authorities, Alexei Navalny, was also poisoned with Novichok. And the United States accused North Korea of using another nerve agent (VX) in 2017 to kill the half-brother of North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un in a Malaysian airport (see [go.nature.com/486cdtm](https://go.nature.com/486cdtm)).

The OPCW and its member states must directly confront the growing problem of undeclared stockpiles of chemical weapons. The world's most dangerous regimes must not deploy chemical weapons with impunity.

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## Ethics compliance should not delay biomedical advances

I contend that the United States is becoming too risk-averse in overseeing biomedical research. The red tape involved threatens to undermine our biomedical security by holding back research progress (see, for instance, *Nature* <https://doi.org/k86t>; 2023).

Compliance committees set up to ensure the safety and ethical responsibility of biomedical research are proliferating in the United States (see [go.nature.com/48pgcnh](https://go.nature.com/48pgcnh)). Moreover, the cost of this compliance to universities accounts for a shockingly high percentage of their expenditure (see [go.nature.com/41pnpwi](https://go.nature.com/41pnpwi)).

I have witnessed the differences in regulatory frameworks that exist between countries. These are not always apparent to outsiders, policymakers and stakeholders. For instance, China and Latin American countries – including Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Mexico – curtail their ethical-compliance requirements if these threaten to introduce delays in the race for scientific advances (see, for example, *Nature* **620**, S2–S5; 2023).

The resolution is simple: the United States must curb its current trend towards a stultifying risk-averse biomedical research culture if it is to remain competitive. US ethical-regulation frameworks should focus on delivering research results that provide sustainable benefits for society.

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## New UK immigration rules threaten academic mobility

The UK government's latest immigration policy aims to increase the annual earnings threshold for skilled overseas workers coming into the country by nearly 50%, from £26,200 (US\$33,100) to £38,700 ([go.nature.com/3rqk8g2](https://go.nature.com/3rqk8g2)). This exceeds the starting salary for many UK postdoctoral and university lectureship positions, which are already hard to fill (see *Nature* <https://doi.org/k87d> (2022) and *Nature* **622**, 419–422; 2023).

The higher threshold could further imperil the quality and future of UK science – even if it stimulates a much-needed boost in starting salaries for new postdocs and other research staff. For example, it might affect UK participation in the European Union's Horizon Europe research-funding scheme and in other budgeting projects that span multiple countries. It would challenge the drive for salary equity among those employed before and after the threshold change. And it could impede the mobility of non-UK partners of UK scientists if their earnings are below the new threshold.

The vitality of UK science depends on recruiting the best scientists globally. And postdocs who have recently obtained PhDs from international laboratories can import the research skills that are currently most in demand.

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