In brief

Agencies suspend work in

Darfur: The World Food Programme and other agencies have suspended operations in north western Darfur, Sudan, after the deaths of two staff of the Save the Children charity in a landmine explosion. The United Nations warned that mounting insecurity was making it increasingly difficult to respond to the crisis.

Report spells out dangers of

passive smoking: A new report from the UK Scientific Committee on Tobacco and Health says that regular exposure to secondhand tobacco smoke increases the risk of lung cancer in individuals by 24% and heart disease by 25%. The report, which has not yet been officially published, but which has been leaked to the press, was sent to the Department of Health four months ago.

FDA orders warning on

antidepressants for children: The US Food and Drug Administration has ordered that all antidepressants must carry a warning of an increased risk of suicidality among children given the drugs. This follows the FDA hearings last month at which experts presented evidence about the risks of these drugs in children (*BMJ* 2004;329:641, 18 Sep).

NHS appoints equality director:

The NHS has appointed its first ever director for equality and human rights. Mr Surinder Sharma, who was European diversity director at Ford Europe, will try to tackle issues such as the higher rate of coronary heart disease and type 2 diabetes among South Asian adults in Britain, compared with the indigenous population.

Students battle the bulge:

Going to university expands the body as well as the mind, new research shows. A study of freshmen at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York state, shows that in the first 12 weeks, they put on up to an average of 2 kg. The students blamed snacking, junk food, and "all you can eat" dining halls (*International Journal of Obesity* 2004;28:1435-42).

US presidential candidates clash over health care

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George Bush likened the efficiency of the American health-care system to that of "the buggy and horse days," and John Kerry described the president as having "turned his back on the well-being of America." Last week, the two men were on stage together for the last time this election season, in the only one of the three campaign debates to focus exclusively on domestic issues.

Grim statistics composed the backdrop for their discussion of healthcare reform—45 million Americans are uninsured, five million have lost their insurance in the past four years, and insurance costs have risen by 36% under the current administration. And the statistics kept coming, as the candidates seemed more inclined to hurl numbers at each other than engage in direct dialogue.

Citing the hundreds of thousands of children who have lost health insurance in electoral battleground states, such as Wisconsin and Arizona, Senator Kerry touted his plan to provide coverage for all Americans: "We're the richest country on the face of the planet," but, "the only industrialised nation in the world not to do it."

"A plan is not a litany of complaints," replied President Bush, who went on to portray Mr Kerry's proposal as a radical and expensive reworking of the system. "We have a fundamental difference of opinion. I think government run health will lead to

President George Bush accused John Kerry of wanting to introduce government run health, which would bring rationing and less choice

poor quality health, will lead to rationing, will lead to less choice."

Under Mr Kerry's plan, the government would contribute three quarters of the cost of "catastrophic" coverage greater than \$30 000 (£16 638; €24 032) a year (*BMJ* 2004;329:592, 11 Sep). "But let me just say to America," Mr Kerry explained, "I am not proposing a government run programme." Both candidates repeatedly emphasised the importance of consumer choice in their respective plans.

The president pushed once again for "health savings accounts," which would allow workers to purchase cheap insurance plans with high deductibles, while setting aside tax free earnings for spending on health care.

Reciting statistics that have been questioned by both the General Accounting Office and the Congressional Budget Office, Mr Bush asserted that spurious lawsuits cost Americans between \$60bn and \$100bn every year. He also said that investing in electronic medical record keeping would "wring some 20% of the costs out of the system," while Mr Kerry's plan would cost at least \$1.2 trillion.

Mr Kerry argued that increased coverage would yield lower costs; early diagnosis of diabetes, he said, would save the system \$50bn. He also promised to facilitate the import of generic drugs from Canada and to promote collective bargaining for lower drug prices. He intends to pay for most of his plan by repealing tax cuts for the richest Americans.

This year's shortage of influenza vaccine became an issue in the debate. "Vaccine manufacturers are worried about getting sued and so therefore they have backed off from providing this kind of vaccine," explained Mr Bush.

The candidates also exchanged views on abortion. Mr Kerry called abortion, "a choice between a woman, God, and her doctor," and challenged Mr Bush on whether he would seek to overturn the Supreme Court's decision supporting that choice. Mr Bush would only say that an "ideal world is one in which every child is protected in law and welcomed to life." □

John Kerry's main points on health care

- Five million Americans have lost their health insurance since Bush took office
- The White House has increased the costs of prescription drugs by blocking the import of generics and preventing Medicare from negotiating bulk rates
- Increased coverage would bring down medical costs by promoting early diagnosis and more effective treatments
- As president, Kerry would not appoint judges to the Supreme Court who might overturn the right to abortion

George Bush's main points on health care

- Malpractice lawsuits are costing the system billions of dollars every year
- Kerry's plan will transfer medical decision making from doctors and patients to government bureaucrats
- Kerry has underestimated the costs of his proposal
- Investment in information technology, such as electronic medical record keeping, will lower costs