Government’s green agency invests millions in companies that pollute

THE GOVERNMENT'S environment watchdog body has been investing tens of millions of pounds in oil companies and firms that have been sharply criticised for their records on green issues.

The Environment Agency, which is in charge of flood protection, has invested £64m in oil firms that have been condemned for contributing to flooding by causing climate change. Last year the agency's pension fund invested £64m in BP-Amoco – its largest holding – and £18m in Shell. Both firms have been fined large sums by the agency for polluting water with petrol or oil products.

The watchdog also invested £19m in Barclays Bank, which has been challenged by green groups for allegedly helping to finance logging in the Indonesian rainforest. Barclays has also been criticised for reportedly helping to arrange finance for the Yusefeli dam in Turkey, which would flood environmentally sensitive areas.

MPs and environmental campaigners called on the Environment minister Michael Blunkett to outlaw the carrying of replica guns in public

By MARIE WOOLF
Chief Political Correspondent

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A BAN on carrying replica guns in public and a law to prevent under 18-year-olds owning air pistols are to be introduced as part of a crackdown on firearms.

News of the tightening of Britain's gun laws came as Michael Blunkett confirmed plans for a five-year minimum sentence for illegal possession and use of a firearm.

The Home Secretary also decided to act against imitation firearms – used by robbers in an estimated six out of ten hold-ups, and by young men as "fashion accessories" and a means of intimidation. Airguns have also been involved in a series of fatal shootings and injuries.

A new offence of carrying a replica or blank-firing gun in public without a reasonable excuse is to be created, punishable by a fine or, in extreme cases, by a jail term. The exact number of replica guns in circulation is unknown but it is thought to be in excess of 500,000. The new law will stop short of an outright ban on imitation firearms and will allow enthusiasts to keep collections.
Britain is braced for temperatures of -20C

THE FREEZING weather showed no signs of abating yesterday, with savage frosts expected overnight and forecasters predicting temperatures as low as minus 20C in some parts of Britain.

Many people returning to work were left stranded as their cars froze and batteries died. Their journeys were made worse by recent floods.

Weather forecasters predicted more snow showers along the east coast of England and throughout the South-east.

By Terri Judd

Pakistan's military ruler Pervez Musharraf has ordered a X-ray search of all military aircraft and weapons to be carried out as part of a clampdown on weapons possession by the armed forces.

The X-ray searches follow allegations that officers from the army's elite special forces have been using live ammunition in training exercises.

Musharraf said the measure was taken to prevent the sale of weapons to the Taliban, who have been using them to launch attacks on government forces and civilians.

Britain's police say they have been given an increase in resources to combat the growing problem of gun crime, which has seen a rise in the number of police officers being targeted.

The police said they had been given more resources to tackle gun crime, as well as an increase in funding for community policing schemes.

But they said they were still struggling to cope with the rising number of gun-related incidents, with some areas reporting a doubling of such incidents in the past year.

In 2001, the average sentence of 277 people convicted for possession or distribution of firearms was 18 months, although some were given community sentences.

Police in London alone said they were seizing more than 140 guns a month.

Proposals for the tough approach to gun possession follow aัก campaign by the Metropolitan Police and the back of growing evidence that gun crime is a growing problem in Britain.

It was highlighted by the double murder of two teenagers who were killed in a hail of bullets at a New Year party in Birmingham.

Mr Blunkett's proposals were greeted with praise by the police but described as a knee-jerk reaction by the Times, the shooting industry and a civil liberty group.

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KFC is cruel to chickens, says animal rights group

Poland's EU bid tainted by media bribery claim

Travel ban threatens Middle East summit

The insurance group Britannia warned it would not pay a 2002 shareholder dividend and with profits policymakers were not likely to receive bonuses for last year. This section, page 15.

IN THE CITY

FTSE 100

The insurance group Britannia warned it would not pay a 2002 shareholder dividend and with profits policymakers were not likely to receive bonuses for last year. This section, page 15.

Currency, both carrying maximum jail terms of 10 years.

The minimum age for owning an airgun will be raised from 14 to 18. Under the proposals for a five-year minimum jail term for firearm possession or distribution, revealed by The Independent a year ago, judges will be given discretion to hand out smaller sentences.

In 2001, the average sentence of 797 people convicted for possession or distribution of firearms was 18 months, although some were given community sentences. In London alone, police are seizing more than 140 guns a month.

Proposals for the tough approach to gun possession follow a Back the British Police campaign by the Metropolitan Police and on the back of growing evidence that gun crime is a growing problem in Britain.

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