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Britain may boost protection of researchers from intimidation...

Natasha Loder, London

Prompted by the increasingly aggressive tactics of animal-rights activists, Britain's Home Secretary, Jack Straw, promised last week to consider changes in the law that would give the police more powers to stop individuals organizing campaigns of intimidation.

His comments came after five firebomb attacks on cars belonging to workers at Huntingdon Life Sciences (HLS), a contract company that uses animals mainly to test medicines for safety for the pharmaceuticals industry, and agricultural chemicals for toxicity.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attacks. But it is widely assumed that they were the work of animal-rights activists. "Most of the hardcore activists are central to the campaign against Huntingdon," says Mark Matfield of the Research Defence Society, a body set up to protect the use of animals in research.

Since 1997, protest campaigns have closed three animal breeding centres. Britain's only supplier of primates for research, Shamrock Farm, shut earlier this year (see *Nature* 404, 215; 2000). It had been the site of confrontations between masked protesters and the police, and its managing director suffered a series of attacks.

In 1997, Consort Kennels of Ross-on-Wye, which bred beagles for use in research,

Terror campaign: cars have been firebombed in an attempt to close down Huntingdon Life Sciences.

closed after a campaign of attacks on the homes of its directors. And Hillgrove Farm near Oxford, which supplied cats for experiments, closed in 1999 after letter-bombs were sent to the farm's owner and two employees.

Andrew Gay of HLS says the law has failed to protect his staff against death threats and abusive letters. Forty staff are shareholders in the company, and their names and addresses have been released, as required by British law.

Earlier this year, 11% of HLS shares were dumped by city fund managers when directors' names were publicized, and a campaign of abuse, telephone calls, letters and bomb

threats followed. Gay says that, despite the campaign, orders for experimental animals have grown by 40% in the past two years.

Home Office minister Mike O'Brien visited HLS and met staff in July, and has launched a series of consultations with police, scientists and animal-welfare organizations. The government has previously looked at whether tighter controls are needed on animal experimentation. It now says it is determined to curb the intimidation of scientific and laboratory staff.

Many scientists believe that animal activists are dealt with too lightly by the courts because they claim to be acting out of idealism rather than self-interest. The Home Office plans to discuss the matter with the department that manages UK courts. It will also liaise with the Association of Chief Police Officers to discuss the policing of animal-rights demonstrations and the effective use of existing laws.

Over the next three months the Home Office will consider extending the law in the area covering incitement to intimidate. But a heavy parliamentary timetable means that any new legislation would have to wait until after the next general election, which may take place next year.

Cambridgeshire police — which has a team of 40 officers investigating animal-rights activists in the region — claims that loopholes in current harassment legislation have prevented arrests.

...as German activists wage propaganda war

Quirin Schiermeier, Munich

Animal-rights activists in Munich have been accused of using confidential information leaked from a Bavarian ethics commission as the basis of a campaign against experiments on Java macaques.

Konrad Messmer, director of the institute of surgery research at the Ludwig-Maximilian University in Munich, also claims that a leak formed the basis of a deliberate media disinformation campaign. The activists say the information

was obtained via legal channels.

Several newspapers and radio stations in Bavaria last week reported that a researcher at the institute intended to amputate the arms and legs of the macaques for xenotransplantation studies. The researcher and his family were inundated with aggressive telephone calls from animal-rights activists and animal lovers.

But the experiments, which were approved by the Bavarian authorities in July, merely involve

the microscopic analysis of the macaques' thigh muscles under anaesthetic. The research is designed to investigate the mechanisms of rejection reactions in human organ transplants. Messmer says the experiments are not related to xenotransplantation, nor do they involve amputation.

In response to the accusations, research lobbyists in Munich are now considering taking legal action against unknown members of the ethics commission.