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W. JETZ, UC SAN DIEGO

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Sibling rivalry hits Swiss institutes

Tempers erupted last week at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zürich (ETHZ), with faculty members claiming that its board had sneakily siphoned its budget off to Switzerland's other federal institute, the EPFL in Lausanne.

Interim president of ETHZ Konrad Osterwalder has complained formally to the Swiss government, saying that the ETH Board — a politically independent body responsible for both universities and for four federal research institutes — “made serious errors in both the form and content of [its] decision on the allocation of the 2008 budget”. Department heads at ETHZ have also asked Pascal Couchepin, the government minister responsible for research and higher education, for his support in solving the crisis.

As part of Switzerland's push to bolster its research and higher education sector, the ETH Board's budget for 2008 will be nearly 4% higher than that for this year. The board decided to give a disproportionate sum to EPFL, even though there has been no political decision about how Switzerland might afford a second top-level university, say staff from ETHZ. The staff say that the board used different starting budgets to calculate the percentage increase for each institute, and that it did not release the information within the required time before the meeting.

ETHZ also hit the headlines last November when faculty members forced its president, Ernst Hafen, to resign. Hafen had tried to implement organizational changes at the university that had been desired by the board but that the faculty members thought were detrimental to the institute.

“The source of all the problems is the ETH Board,” says Kathy Rifkin, spokeswoman for the Swiss parliamentary committee on science and research. She says that parliament is discussing the abolition of the board, to bring more decision-making back into the government — most particularly decisions about apportioning the budget.

Alexander Zehnder, president of the ETH Board, says that he is surprised by the reaction. “The extra money given to Lausanne was not core money, but strategic funds used to integrate cancer research into that university plus some extra to reward the improvement in its research quality,” he says. He adds that the board's procedures for budget allocation were transparent. The government has declined to comment on the dispute.

Alison Abbott

Tony Blair's meeting with Muammar Gaddafi in Libya last week may speed progress to a resolution.

Television last week, reiterated the United States's desire for the case to “be solved quickly and in a way that is satisfactory to the Bulgarian people.”

Diplomats hope that the activity might result in a resolution before a summit of European Union heads of state in Vienna on 21 June, just before Germany's presidency of

the European Union ends.

“We are greatly appreciative of the very strong European diplomatic activity,” says Emmanuel Altit, a member of the medic's defence team. “The talks are going in the right direction. Let's say I'm less pessimistic than a few months ago.”

Declan Butler

should be labelled as terrorists.

One of the biggest fires, and perhaps the most memorable to the scientific community, was the torching of a building in the Center for Urban Horticulture at the University of Washington in Seattle on 21 May 2001. The fire targeted the work of Toby Bradshaw, whom the group thought was genetically engineering poplar trees. “I am delighted that the perpetrators have been caught,” says Bradshaw, “and satisfied that the criminal-justice system is capable of determining an appropriate punishment.”

Group members were also

found responsible for torching a lab of the US Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) in Olympia, Washington, on 21 June 1998. Lab worker Dale Nolte, who now works on avian flu for the service, says that he hasn't followed the trial and has no opinion on the sentencings. “My focus from the beginning was to recover our facilities, to keep up the morale of our scientists and keep the work going,” he says. One of this group was sentenced to more than 12 years in prison, which included a terrorism enhancement.

The sentencing memo depicts a group of ideological activists who were not always successful at crime. Their cars broke down, accomplices dropped out at the last minute, members of the group were busted for shoplifting and time and again their incendiary devices failed to go off. Yet, according to federal prosecutors, they racked up more than US\$40 million in damages between 1995 and 2001. No one was harmed during the group's actions, although many contend that this was more through luck than careful planning.

Emma Marris