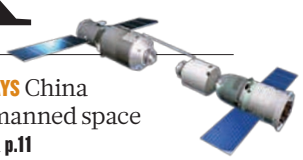
THIS WEEK



Support refugee scientists

The cause of displaced scholars provides a much-needed reminder that intellectual freedom must not be taken for granted. Groups that help them need greater support themselves.

Albie Sachs, a white South African human-rights lawyer, was imprisoned by the apartheid regime in the 1960s and lost an arm and was blinded in one eye in 1988, in a bomb assassination attempt by security forces. On each occasion, he found a safe haven as an academic in Britain from which to rebound. After the end of apartheid, Sachs returned to South Africa, where he is credited as an architect of the country's progressive post-apartheid constitution, and sat on its Constitutional Court from 1994 until last year.

Sachs, like thousands of other refugees over the years, received a lifeline from the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA), a small charity based at the London South Bank University that helps academics and scientists who are seeking, or have obtained, political asylum in the United Kingdom to make a fresh start. Working with a growing network of universities in Britain — and increasingly in continental Europe — it assists refugees in finding academic placements. It also provides small grants, often just a couple of thousand pounds, to help them settle in, finish degrees or requalify. CARA offered "a little grant at the right moment, but it was much more than a grant", Sachs said. What counted most was "the human connection".

VIGILANCE NEEDED

In much of the free world, a threat to academic freedom usually means political interference in science-based policies, or pressure for research to show an economic pay-off. But in many parts of the world, academic freedom has an altogether starker meaning — academics and their families can face discrimination, prison, or worse, for speaking out about or studying issues that threaten dominant policies or ideologies. They can also be persecuted for their politics, or for belonging to a particular ethnic group.

Helping refugee academics is worthy in itself, and raises scientists' awareness of the need for vigilance in protecting academic freedom. That message is all too relevant today. In an increasingly individualistic and competitive research world, academics tend to be preoccupied with their own interests. At the same time, tough anti-immigration stances are taking hold in several European countries. Political asylum is increasingly difficult to obtain in countries including France and the United Kingdom, and refugee academics from Islamic countries often face hostility and discrimination.

History shows that no country is immune to political and ideological changes that can repress intellectual freedom, warned Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in the CARA annual lecture earlier this year. He succinctly summed up what is at stake: "Defending intellectual freedom is defending the possibility not only of a free academy but of a society willing to learn — and thus a society willing to see itself critically."

Founded in the 1930s to help scientists in continental Europe fleeing the Nazis and other fascist regimes, CARA supported some 1,500 academics in those dark years, 16 of whom went on to win Nobel prizes. It currently aids around 200 refugee academics annually. Other agencies worldwide have also taken up the cause, including the US-based Scholars at Risk and the Scholar Rescue Fund. Some learned societies, such as the American Physical Society and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, are also actively publicizing cases of academics under threat. But the integration of refugee scholars needs a firmer footing and better funding — CARA has eight paid staff and an annual budget of some £840,000 (US$1.2 million) — as well as more institutions to play an active host role.

"Supporting beleaguered academics is key to defending the aspirations of open civil societies."

The effort also faces new challenges. Many of those seeking CARA's aid are academics from poorer countries. Often, although they held senior positions at home, they may not be qualified to compete in the cut-throat academic environment of richer countries. In response, CARA often tries to deploy such scientists on research relevant to their home regions, for which they can be well qualified. Or it helps them to find jobs outside academia.

In some cases, aiding scientists in their home country might make more sense. CARA maintains a strong focus on refugee academics from Iraq, for example, arguing that violence continues and noting that two researchers who recently returned to Iraq were killed. But although academics remain at risk in Iraq, they no longer seem to be targeted on a large scale (see *Nature* **441,** 1036–1037; 2006). It could be argued that the greater need now is for them to stay in Iraq when possible, to help in the huge task of reconstructing the country's gutted research and higher-education system.

REACHING OUT

CARA has taken steps in this direction, for example by broadening its initial mission to include funding fellowships outside the United Kingdom. In the Middle East, CARA supports research on topics such as tuberculosis, education and depleted-uranium reduction, with researchers at UK universities as unpaid collaborators. In Zimbabwe, CARA is also in the early stages of a project to help rebuild the tattered higher-education system, by funding lecture trips for expatriate Zimbabwean academics, encouraging others to return, and setting up high-speed Internet connections at the country's universities.

Governments and other funders would do well to consider contributing to an expansion of such efforts. Supporting beleaguered academics preserves talent, and is key to defending the aspirations of open civil societies. Due diligence is needed to ensure that the money is well spent. But given the human return on investment, such activities are a bargain. ■