

Protests mount against Libyan trial

Scientific and human-rights organizations have rallied to the cause of six medical workers imprisoned in Libya, accused of deliberately infecting hundreds of children with HIV. The workers look likely to be found guilty and could face the death penalty, yet independent scientists who have reviewed the evidence are convinced they are innocent.

Emmanuel Altit, a lawyer with *Avocats sans Frontières* based in Toulouse, France, which is handling the defence of the health workers, welcomes the renewed pressure as “formidable, exactly the sort of thing that’s needed now”. But he adds that pressure needs to be increased and sustained throughout the rest of the trial.

The five Bulgarian nurses and one Palestinian doctor, who have been in prison since 1999, were sentenced to death in 2004. The verdict was overturned in 2005 by the Libyan Supreme Court, which ordered a retrial that began in May this year. A verdict is expected next month, and the defence team isn’t hopeful.

Although many human-rights groups have supported the six in the past, the Supreme Court ruling led to a false sense of security and international pressure to free the medics dropped, says Zafra Lerman, chair of the subcommittee on scientific freedom and human rights of the American Chemical Society (ACS). The call by a Libyan prosecutor at the end of August for the death penalty came as a shock. “We relaxed too much; we thought the retrial would just see them being released. We didn’t see this new danger coming,” says Lerman, who has won awards for her work in helping to free Soviet dissidents and Chinese scientists jailed after the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests.

So last week, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the ACS, Physicians for Human Rights, and Amnesty International issued new human-rights action alerts for the medical workers. In particular, they reiterated last month’s call by the defence lawyers for the court to hear independent



What can pressure by the scientific community achieve?

Taye Woldesemayat, an academic who was freed from an Ethiopian jail in 2002 after six years, says he is living proof that campaigning by scientists for colleagues whose human rights have been compromised can be effective.

“In prison, I felt hopeless at the beginning; I knew they were going to kill me,” he told *Nature*. “But then the letter-writing campaigns began, and as the letters started flowing in [to the Ethiopian government] it was fantastic, I knew I could get out.”

Woldesemayat was jailed in Addis Ababa in 1996 on charges of terrorism and armed conspiracy against the state. Human-rights organizations concluded that he had simply called for greater social justice and democracy.

The American Association for the Advancement of

Science (AAAS) and the US National Academy of Sciences weighed in alongside human-rights bodies such as Amnesty International, and the Ethiopian High Court overturned the charges in 2002. After his release, Woldesemayat moved to the United States, although the Ethiopian government is again pursuing him after he helped form an opposition party last December.

Defending the human rights of scientists, engineers and physicians is a little-known sideline of many scientific organizations. Every year they campaign on hundreds of cases.

The biggest players are the AAAS, which launched its Science and Human Rights Program in 1993, and the US National Academies’ Committee on Human Rights (CHR). Also in 1993, the CHR created a

global action network of 70 science academies, although only 40 participate actively. “Nobel prizewinners and scientists, especially when they represent many different countries, have the power to influence,” says Dagfinn Føllesdal, a philosopher at Stanford University in California and a member of the network’s board.

Carol Corillon, director of the CHR, says science bodies vet cases carefully before taking them on. “If Amnesty International has adopted the case I feel fairly comfortable, as they do good research,” she says. “But we always try to get verification with the families, the lawyers, and people we know in the country.”

Once a case is adopted, lobbying is mainly through private political contacts and

letter-writing to politicians. The impact of such campaigns is hard to measure, admits Corillon. “About three-quarters of our cases get resolved, but it’s difficult to know what role, if any, our action played.”

Corillon feels that scientific academies are often better placed to act in private. But, she adds, “Often a carrot-and-stick approach is most effective. I think that without having the public pressure as well on many cases, we wouldn’t have had success.”

Even when campaigns do not resolve a case, they are crucial, says Claude Cohen-Tannoudji, a 1997 Nobel laureate in physics and board member of the academy network. “It’s important that when someone is persecuted, the government doing the persecution knows that the world is watching.” D.B.



Three of the prisoners on trial: Nasia Nenova (right), Snezana Dimitrova and Ashraf Hajjuj in court last month.

scientific evidence (see *Nature* **443**, 245–246, 254; 2006).

But despite a Palestinian being one of the accused, science bodies in the Arab world have been relatively silent on the case. “The case is not on the radar at all,” says Moneef Al-Zou’bi, director-general of the Islamic Academy of Sciences, based in Amman, Jordan. “It has not attracted as much attention in this part of the world compared to elsewhere.”

The academy, created by the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), which represents 57 Islamic countries, has not taken a position on the case. “People here have so many political and economic problems, including the conflicts in Iraq and Palestine, that the case has just not become a priority,” says Al-Zou’bi. Such difficulties mean that the academy’s human-rights focus is much more on promoting basic socio-economic rights, he adds, such as access to clean water.

Not everyone agrees with that position. “This is a difficult call,” says one official at an international human-rights body, who asked not to be named. “Of course it is totally legitimate to prioritize the most basic rights for the larg-

est number of people. But there is definitely a pattern of organizations in this region virtually ignoring violations of civil and political rights in their own neighbourhoods. I would think that at the very least, scientific or medical organizations would come out in support of colleagues sentenced to death in such a blatant case of scapegoating and dismissal of science. And in the end, when this can happen to health workers, the right to health also comes under threat.”

The OIC’s Commission on Scientific and Technological Cooperation (COMSTECH) hasn’t taken a position either. Chairman Attar-Rahman, who is also Pakistan’s higher education minister, says that human-rights issues are beyond the commission’s remit. “COMSTECH’s charter is confined purely to matters concerning scientific and technological cooperation between member states”, and so does not extend to legal and judicial matters, he explains.

Imad Khatib, secretary-general of the Palestine Academy for Science and Technology in East Jerusalem, says his academy “cares deeply about the plight of the nurses and the doctor and that they have a fair trial”, although he says that most of its human-rights efforts are spent on the abuse of scientists’ rights within Palestine. ■

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