Animal rights activists turn the screw

[MUNICH] Biomedical researchers in Germany and Britain are calling for more support from research organizations and politicians following a wave of violence and death threats by militant animal rights activists.

Mainstream animal rights organizations have condemned the activists' tactics. But in Germany they are pressing for a constitutional change to protect the rights of animals, a move that scientists fear could lead to lengthy delays in the approval of research protocols.

The British Animal Liberation Front (ALF), a militant activist group, threatened last week to kill ten British animal researchers and breeders if imprisoned ALF member Barry Horne, who has been on hunger strike for more than 50 days, should die.

Horne is serving an 18-year sentence for bomb attacks on the Isle of Wight and in Bristol. He is demanding a Royal Commission on animal experiments, which the Labour Party had promised before the 1997 general election, in addition to the existing committee on animal experiments.

Those receiving death threats include Colin Blakemore, a neurophysiologist at the University of Oxford and last year's president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, who has already been attacked by animal rights groups. He studies the working of the cerebral cortex, but says that in recent years he has reduced the number of primates and cats used in his research by adopting tissue-culture techniques.

Several years ago, the Labour Party promised various changes to the British animal protection law. But since taking up government, it has proceeded more slowly than some critics would like. This, says Blakemore, is one reason for the recent activities by such groups.

In Frankfurt last week, angry protests accompanied the award of the Hessian Cultural Prize to Wolf Singer, a director of the Frankfurt-based Max Planck Institute for Brain Research and a former president of the European Neuroscience Association.

Regional animal rights groups wrote to the Hessian state government, referring to Singer as a "monster", a "non-person" and a "cultural disgrace". Singer, who has received several death threats, was given police protection during the award ceremony.

Andreas Kreiter, one of Singer's former students who studies the electrical properties of primate brains, has frequently been subjected to physical and verbal attacks since moving to Bremen nearly two years ago. He has been under permanent police protection since activists tried to force their way into his office last year, and now he works in an isolated laboratory under constant guard.

The hostilities against Singer and Kreiter

Pressure for change: supporters of UK hunger-striker Barry Horne want a royal commission.

were sparked by their experiments on the visual system of macaques. Singer's work on the functioning of the cerebral cortex is likely to contribute to future treatments of brain-related diseases, such as schizophrenia or Alzheimer's disease.

Even researchers who have not experienced hostile acts, such as Nikos Logothetis, a director at the Max Planck Institute for Biological Cybernetics in Tübingen, admit to feeling uneasy. Logothetis worked for 17 years as a neuroscientist in the United States before coming to Germany last year. "I hope this was not the wrong decision," he says.

Mainstream animal protectionists, such as the Deutscher Tierschutzbund, the German association for animal protection, and the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection, say that animal research cannot be justified on scientific or medical grounds. Germany has the strictest animal protection law in the European Union (see *Nature* 391, 624; 1998), but animal rights groups are campaigning for a ban on animal research.

But they distance themselves from extremist and militant actions. Representatives of German and British animal protection groups describe violence as "embarrassing" and "counter-productive" to their goal of collaborating with researchers to develop alternative methods.

The Deutscher Tierschutzbund hopes the German government's plan to include animal rights in the constitution will help to reduce the number of animal experiments. A legislative initiative is likely to start soon, and the two-thirds majority required for a constitutional change is likely to be achieved, as the initiative has cross-party support.

This could have far-reaching consequences for animal researchers. The constitutionally guaranteed freedom to research would have to be weighed up against the constitutional rights of animals to be protected from avoidable pain. Thomas Schröder of the Deutscher Tierschutzbund says the association would immediately initiate court

cases and injunctions against researchers.

Martin Steins of the Max Planck Society (MPS) believes it would take at least ten years to clarify the legal position of researchers who use animals.

Jan-Erik Bohling, spokesman of the Society of Health and Research, Germany's main lobby group for academic and industrial research, says Germany would be isolated from research carried out elsewhere. "The approval procedure for animal experiments would become insanely drawn out," he says.

Many researchers feel abandoned by research organizations, such as the MPS and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) and by their colleagues. Indeed, some faculty members at the University of Bremen have issued a memorandum distancing themselves from Kreiter.

Blakemore argues that "medical and scientific institutions have not been public enough in their support of animal research". He has frequently appeared on television and in other high-profile media to explain to the public the value of his work, exposing himself to risk of attack in so doing.

Last month, Singer detailed the scientific, medical and ethical justifications of animal research in an article published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.

Hubert Markl, president of the MPS, last week strongly defended Singer against the "malicious campaign" of his extremist opponents. But both the MPS and the DFG, aware of public sensibilities, are reluctant to fight openly to defend animal researchers.

"A constitutional change would not be necessary if researchers limited their animal experiments to those that are really important," says Reinhard Grunwald, secretary general of the DFG. "After all, the DFG is not supposed to act as a lobby group for the use of animals in research."

But most of the animal researchers affected stress that they are not going to admit defeat. "I am not going to give way to blackmail," says Blakemore.

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