

USA

Going public on rights

Colin Norman reports from Washington on an appeal in support of named scientists who are victims of political repression

In a significant departure from its usual style of quiet diplomacy, the National Academy of Sciences last week called a press conference to urge public support for eight scientists in three countries who are "victims of grave official harassment for political reasons". The action, taken by a newly-established Committee on Human Rights, signals that the Academy is prepared to adopt a more aggressive role in defending scientists against political repression than it has in the past.

The eight scientists involved in the appeal are five Argentinian physicists who disappeared in 1976, a Uruguayan mathematician arrested in October 1975, who has been charged with subversive activities and allegedly tortured, and two Soviet scientists, one of whom is serving a prison term and the other is under arrest awaiting trial. According to Robert W. Kates, the chairman of the Academy's Committee on Human Rights, these eight scientists are the first of "a large group" which the Academy hopes eventually to take public action on. "They are", said Kates, "at best symbolic of the many scientists who are subject to repression".

The Committee on Human rights was established a year ago, following complaints from some Academy members and from the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) that the Academy had been too timid in its attempts to defend scientists against acts of political repression. Though it made one highly publicised statement in support of Andrei Sakharov in 1973, the Academy has worked mostly behind the scenes, making private representations to officials of foreign governments on behalf of harassed scientists. Early last years, there was a move, sparked by complaints by the FAS Director, Jeremy J. Stone, to urge the Academy to back up its private negotiations with occasional public statements.

The Academy responded by establishing the Committee on Human Rights and it also adopted a set of guidelines which suggested that the Academy would speak out publicly when the occasion so demands. It seems from last week's press conference that such public appeals may become more common. Kates said that the committee will concentrate on in-

dividual cases rather than making broad statements of principle, and he indicated that several more cases will be added to the list as soon as further evidence is collected. "This is just the beginning", he said.

Asked whether the committee would be prepared to urge the Academy to take further steps if the appeal has no effect, Kates said that the committee would proceed one step at a time. The ultimate sanction available to the Academy would be to back out of an exchange agreement with a country which persists in acts of political repression against scientists. In any case, there seems to be a strong body of opinion within the Academy supporting the committee's moves so far. Kates said last week that a letter sent to Academy members asking for their support in writing to foreign officials to protest acts of political repression produced 258 positive responses.

The specific action taken last week was to ask scientists to write to officials in Argentina, Uruguay and the Soviet Union in support of the eight scientists.

In Argentina, the five physicists are Federico Alvarez Rojas, Gabriela Carabelli, Juan Carlos Gallardo, Antonio Misetich, and Eduardo Pasquini. All disappeared during 1976, presumably arrested, but the government claims to have no knowledge of them. The Academy is asking that they be permitted to see their families and that scientists be allowed to visit them to determine their state of health. In addition, the Academy is calling for the physicists either to be charged or released and that observers be permitted at any trial. In fact, however, members of the Academy's committee said that there is no guarantee that the five are even alive.

The Uruguayan mathematician, José Luís Massera, was arrested in October 1975, held incommunicado for a year and is now being tried in camera on charges of "subversive association". According to Lipman Bers, a member of the Academy's human rights committee, Massera, who is 62, is "the most distinguished mathematician in Uruguay" and he has a worldwide reputation. An avowed Communist, Massera has been "subject to severe torture", Bers said. In this case, the Academy is again asking for permission for Massera's family members and representatives of the world community of scientists to visit the mathematician, for observers to be permitted at his trial, and for him to be given access to books and other scientific material.

The two Soviet scientists are Sergei Kovalev, a biologist who is now serving seven years' hard labour and three years' exile for alleged activities against the Soviet state, and Yuriy Orlov, a physicist who was arrested in February 1977 and is awaiting trial on as yet unspecified charges. In Kovalev's case, the Academy is concerned about his ill health, and is appealing for commutation of his sentence to the time already served. The Academy is also requesting scientists to appeal directly to the Soviet authorities on Kovalev's behalf and to provide Kovalev himself "with every feasible manner of moral and professional support". As for Orlov, he has been a leading participant in the Soviet human rights movement associated with Sakharov, and was arrested as part of the recent crackdown on the dissident movement. The Academy is inquiring about his legal status and place of detention through a letter sent last week to the Soviet Ambassador in Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, and the human rights committee will "take appropriate action".

The Academy's new, more aggressive policy puts it in marked contrast to the Royal Society. In a speech to Royal Society Fellows last November, Lord Todd, the Society's President, expressed concern about the widespread political repression of scientists in many countries and about more subtle infringements of scientific freedom, but he said that the Royal Society should steer clear of making public pronouncements on the matter. Instead, Todd said that Royal Society officials would continue to make private representations on behalf of scientists whose human rights are being infringed.

Further details of the individual cases raised by the Academy last week, and addresses of government officials to whom correspondence should be addressed, can be obtained from the Committee on Human Rights, National Academy of Sciences, 2101 Constitution Avenue NW, Washington DC 20428. □



Sergei Kovalev