ICSU to raise human rights issue at 50 meetings

This summer, a new committee on the 'Safeguard of the Pursuit of Science' of the International Council of Scientific Unions delivered its first report to the ICSU general assembly. The purpose of the committee is to investigate and record cases of scientists unwarrantedly dismissed from their posts or otherwise hampered from pursuing their careers. During its first year's work, the Committee had been apprised of around a dozen such cases, in countries ranging across the whole political spectrum.

This low count, however, does not represent a sudden worldwide liberalization of hitherto oppressive regimes. Rather does it reflect the extremely unobtrusive manner in which the Committee has commenced its activities. For example, not a single case of *berufsverbot* was notified to the Committee. This does not, alas, mean that after all, there are no West German scientists suffering for their allegedly left-wing views. A few days ago, Dr Andreas Dress of Bielefeld University, a leading campaigner against *berufsverbot* in science, told *Nature* that he had not heard of the Committee.

At the 1978 General Assembly of ICSU, when the Committee's founding statement was finally approved (this is a most diplomatically worded document, incidentally, avoiding all such emotive terms as 'human rights'), it was decided that the work of the Committee was an internal affair of ICSU. Accordingly, the statement was never officially issued to the general or scientific press, and only reached *Nature* by informal means almost a year later. Information about the Committee, it was decided, should be disseminated via the usual channels — the national representatives to ICSU (normally national academies of science or their equivalents).

This inevitably suggests a Catch-22 situation. An academy which was actively or passively endorsing the kind of discrimination and repression which it is the Committee's brief to monitor, would hardly be expected to pass on information to its potential victims as to how to obtain a measure of redress. The Committee, however, is less pessimistic. Its Secretary, Professor John Humphrey of the Royal Post-Graduate Medical School, London, told *Nature* that "We start with the premise that the national representatives are no happier than we are that their scientists are being removed from academic life". He admitted, however, that one cannot assume that in such countries the scientific establishment would disseminate news of the Committee very vigorously.

To spread the word more rapidly, therefore, the Committee has decided on a limited publicity campaign. They will display and distribute the founding statement and the forms for reporting

abuses at some 50 international scientific meetings in different countries and different disciplines. Visiting scientists, who have not yet heard of the committee through their own national organizations will, it is hoped, be able to publicise the committee when they return home.

The committee's main brief is to investigate and record abuses of a scientist's right to work in his profession. ICSU is a prestigious body, and it is hoped that the moral censure it can impose will have a considerable restraining influence. In the case of highly oppressive or arbitrary regimes, where citizens are likely to disappear without trace, it has been suggested that the committee should play a more active role. Instead of waiting for cases to be reported, the committee could keep a list of all known scientists working in the country, and take as a warning signal any untoward silences or absences from

conferences at which they might be expected to appear.

Moreover, in the coming year, the Committee plans to extend its activity to a more general impediment to the free pursuit of science — the vexed question of official secrecy. A working part is to meet to discuss "the losses to science that arise from all kinds of restriction on communication". A total disappearance of the concept of 'classified information' is not envisaged, Professor Humphrey stressed. Rather there would be discussions of how to remove unnecessary restrictions, whether scientists possess any special status, the significance of boycott to the growth of science and so on. It would be, he added "a Pugwash kind of thing, dealing with the impact of restriction of communication of world science, rather than with the rights of scientists."

Vera Rich

Bulgaria — proud of science on the farm

"If we say that land is unproductive, it is we who are to blame. It simply means that we have not yet discovered the most rational type of crops for it". So Professor Milko Iordanov, a leading Bulgarian agronomist, told journalists recently. Appropriately, he was speaking at one of the show-pieces of Bulgaria's latest development in agricultural planning and research, the "Georgi Dimitrov agro-industrial complex", in the Rhodope foot-hills.

Agro-industrial complexes, explained Professor Iordanov, are essentially a further stage in the process of amalgamation which, "from 9 September, 1945" onwards, led to the formation of large collectives and cooperatives out of peasant small-holdings. By 1970, he said, it was clear that even cooperatives of 6000 to 12,000 ha still did not permit the "optimal use" of modern technology. Accordingly, the Party adopted as a special aim, the creation of agro-industrial complexes, in which several villages are combined into a single production unit, with its own food-processing plants and agricultural research institutes. Within each complex, said Professor Iordanov, each farm still retains considerable autonomy. The complex, however, is the "general leader", in charge of capital investment and overall policy. Typically, each complex will produce a wide range of crops. At the "George Dimitrov", these change with altitude from orchard fruit, through grapes, tomatoes, hazel nuts and almonds, to potatoes, and finally, sheep grazing.

The research institutes established, in Professor Iordanov's words "for complexes working on a large scale" are subsidised by national funds. Their results and experience are passed on free of charge to any other complexes which are interested although, should experts as well

Irrigation in the Rhodope

as information be required, it appears that some kind of bilateral contract is established between the complexes, National funding, Professor Iordanov intimated, is given "according to progress", and the research plans are in a considerable extent tied in to the national economic plans. Thus, at the "Georgi Dimitrov", work is going forward not only on specific agricultural problems but also the more general themes of saving energy and material resources. Already, said Professor Iordanov, they have succeeded, by combining a modified American "tiler" cultivator and a Soviet tractor, to obtain the same productivity with a considerable saving of metal.

For the most part, however, research is concentrated on crop investment and the selection of the most productive strains. There is considerable emphasis on "technologies for abroad". Libya already has orchards grown from Bulgarian seeds, and is sending back fruit under a compensation deal. Within Comecon, which has a common research programme on crop selection, the Bulgarian agro-industrial complexes likewise play a major role — indeed, Professor Iordanov admitted — he himself happens to be coordinator for the whole programme.

Vera Rich