

The region's residents have also endured decades of mineral exploitation, controversial interventions from the United Nations and foreign governments, and political corruption.

Now, Ebola responders are asking for the trust of communities that had never heard of this strange and terrifying disease before the current outbreak — and many residents are wary. Conflicts unrelated to Ebola are also surging. At least 160 people have been massacred in the eastern DRC during the past few weeks, and 300,000 people have fled violence in Ituri, one of the two provinces where Ebola is spreading (see 'Danger zone').

Vanishingly few humanitarian and health organizations will send health workers to battle Ebola under such conditions, but the WHO remains.

Marie-Roseline Darnycka Bélizaire, a Haitian epidemiologist, is helping to coordinate the WHO's Ebola response in Katwa, a town in the DRC's North Kivu province. "It is very intense, but I am totally devoted to serving the people," she says.

When Bélizaire's team chases the virus into a new town, she tries to meet with different groups in the community to explain what the health workers are doing, and why. "If you go to New York, you would talk with the gangsters, the vendors, all the different types of people," says Bélizaire. "So I talk with them and explain Ebola and why they need to take care."

She is all too aware of the dangers that such work can bring. In mid-April, Bélizaire visited another epidemiologist, Richard Mouzoko, at



Marie-Claire Kolié, a doctor from Guinea, works at a treatment centre that has been shot at and set on fire.

a hospital in Butembo to discuss a patient. The next day, assailants stormed the ward and shot and killed Mouzoko.

Bélizaire eventually returned to the hospital, where walls are pocked with bullet marks from the attack that killed Mouzoko. "Even if you are down, you cannot be down, because when you are a leader, you need to be strong," she says. "If I am not strong, they will say this job is not for women."

On a warm June day, Bélizaire is sitting in the shade with Marie-Claire Kolié, a

Guinean doctor and veteran of the largest Ebola epidemic on record, which struck West Africa from 2014 to 2016. Kolié has had her own brush with violence during this outbreak. She was on her way to work at an Ebola treatment centre in February when assailants shot at the facility and set it on fire.

Kolié still treats people at the centre, which is now fortified by a barricade and snipers — and she rejects the idea that doing so is brave. "It's nothing special," she says. "Everyone here knows it is dangerous, but we're committed." ■

## LAW

# Iranian biologists face US trial for trying to transport proteins

*At issue is whether growth factors are exempt from export restrictions.*

BY MICHELE CATANZARO & SARA REARDON

Three Iranian biologists are facing trial in a US court over charges that they violated trade sanctions by attempting to export chemicals known as growth factors, which are commonly used in medical research.

The scientists have asked a federal district court judge in Atlanta, Georgia, to dismiss the criminal charges against them. They argue that the materials in question — eight vials of proteins that scientists use to help culture cells — are exempt from US controls on exports to Iran because they are used for medical purposes. But the government says that the researchers violated the law by attempting to "smuggle" the chemicals to Iran without permission from

the US treasury department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC).

On 17 June, government prosecutors filed their response to the scientists' motions to dismiss the case; the scientists have until 1 July to reply. The judge handling the case will then decide whether it goes to trial.

One of the defendants, Masoud Soleimani, a prominent stem-cell researcher at Tarbiat Modares University in Tehran, has spent eight months in an Atlanta jail. The others, former students of Soleimani's who live in the United States, are free on bail.

Legal experts say that the case highlights the confusion surrounding the United States' complex policies on Iran, which have undergone major changes twice since 2015. Many lawyers

who specialize in US national-security issues are surprised that the government brought criminal charges against the Iranian researchers, rather than treating the matter as a regulatory issue and imposing a fine.

"I don't see any evidence that there was criminal intent here," says Clif Burns, a lawyer at Crowell & Moring in Washington DC. He says that government prosecutors have not presented any evidence suggesting that the scientists attempted to hide the vials of growth hormone — for instance, by disguising them as another substance during transport.

Kevin Wolf, a lawyer at Akin Gump in Washington DC, says that violations of OFAC regulations are usually settled out of court and rarely proceed to trial by jury. In criminal ►

► cases involving export controls, he says, the onus is on the US government to prove that the defendants knowingly violated sanctions.

According to court documents, Soleimani's former student Mahboobe Ghaedi bought the growth factors on his behalf in early 2016. At the time, Ghaedi was a researcher in laboratory medicine at Yale University School of Medicine in New Haven, Connecticut. Now a principal scientist at the drug firm AstraZeneca in Gaithersburg, Maryland, Ghaedi told *Nature* that she bought the proteins in part because they are cheaper and more readily available in the United States than in Iran.

Ghaedi then sent the vials to another former student of Soleimani's, Maryam Jazayeri, a biochemist in Louisville, Kentucky, who had agreed to take them to Soleimani during her next trip to Iran. But when she tried to board her plane at the Atlanta airport in September 2016, US border agents searched her luggage and confiscated the growth factors.

Jazayeri had no further contact with US law-enforcement officials until February 2018, when she was again stopped by border agents at the Atlanta airport. They asked her about the vials they had confiscated in 2016, and Jazayeri said that she had agreed to transport the growth factors to Soleimani as a favour, without knowing that this was prohibited. According to court documents, she also told the agents that the

proteins were to be used for "medical purposes such as stem cell research, cancer research, and transplantation".

Eight months later, on 24 October 2018, a federal grand jury indicted all three scientists under seal — or behind closed doors — on two counts of conspiring to export goods to Iran without authorization. At the time, Soleimani was en route to the United States to take up a temporary research position at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. Federal agents arrested him when he arrived in the United States on 25 October, and the government revoked

his visa. Ghaedi, a US permanent resident, and Jazayeri, a US citizen born in Iran, were arrested soon afterwards.

The case hinges in part on whether the growth factors qualify as medicine or medical devices under US laws regarding Iran, as the scientists have argued. That classification could enable export of the materials without a specific licence under certain circumstances, including on humanitarian grounds.

But in a document filed with the federal court on 17 June, government prosecutors reject such arguments. They say that the

proteins do not qualify as medicine or medical devices, in part because the company that sold them says the proteins are intended only for research use.

A lawyer for Soleimani, Mehrnosh Yazdanyar, says her client thought that buying the proteins in the United States and taking them to Iran was legal. "If he'd known or thought or had reason to believe this was illegal, he would not have carried it out," says Yazdanyar, who is based in Beverly Hills, California.

She also notes that Soleimani attempted to obtain the growth factors less than a year after then-president Barack Obama relaxed long-standing trade sanctions against Iran. Yazdanyar says that the shift, prompted by Iran's agreement to limit its nuclear programme, left many people confused about whether it was still illegal to transport personal property to Iran. Obama's successor, Donald Trump, reinstated strict sanctions against Iran last year.

"This case exemplifies what happens when two countries decide that they will not have relations, but there are thousands of people going back and forth," Yazdanyar says.

It is unclear when the judge in Atlanta will rule on whether the case can proceed to trial. In the meantime, more than 2,500 Iranians, including numerous scholars, have signed a petition in support of the researchers. ■

***"This case exemplifies what happens when two countries decide that they will not have relations."***

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