

Forgotten plights

Scientists' human-rights groups deserve stronger backing.

"First they came for the Socialists, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Socialist... Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak up for me." Martin Niemöller's poem, criticizing the inaction of German intellectuals in the face of the rise of the Nazis, serves as a powerful analogy for why scientists should be concerned by abuses of academic freedom, wherever they occur.

Most readers of Nature take it for granted that they can travel to work each day, free to enquire, express opinions and criticize government policy, without fear of intimidation or reprisals — let alone imprisonment or torture. Sadly, these freedoms can only be dreamt of in many countries of the world, where academics must live with, and often suffer directly, human-rights abuses. Their plight is our business.

But beyond humanitarian grounds, in this interconnected world we are engaged in a battle of ideas, and the failure to defend any abuse of academic freedom undermines the very principles that guarantee the rights we currently enjoy. Oppressive regimes typically stifle enquiry, as critical minds will inevitably also scrutinize their leaders. Enquiry is further undermined in such environments by the award of senior academic posts to the politically loyal rather than the competent, and the selection of policies or actions that suit governments' agendas, regardless of the scientific evidence.

Many learned societies, including the American Physical Society and the American Chemical Society, as well as several scientific academies, have human-rights committees that play an active role in defending individuals at risk. This diverse range, and the mechanism whereby one body takes the lead on a case where it knows the community, is an effective way of dividing up resources. Cases are many, and no one community can give sustained attention to them all.

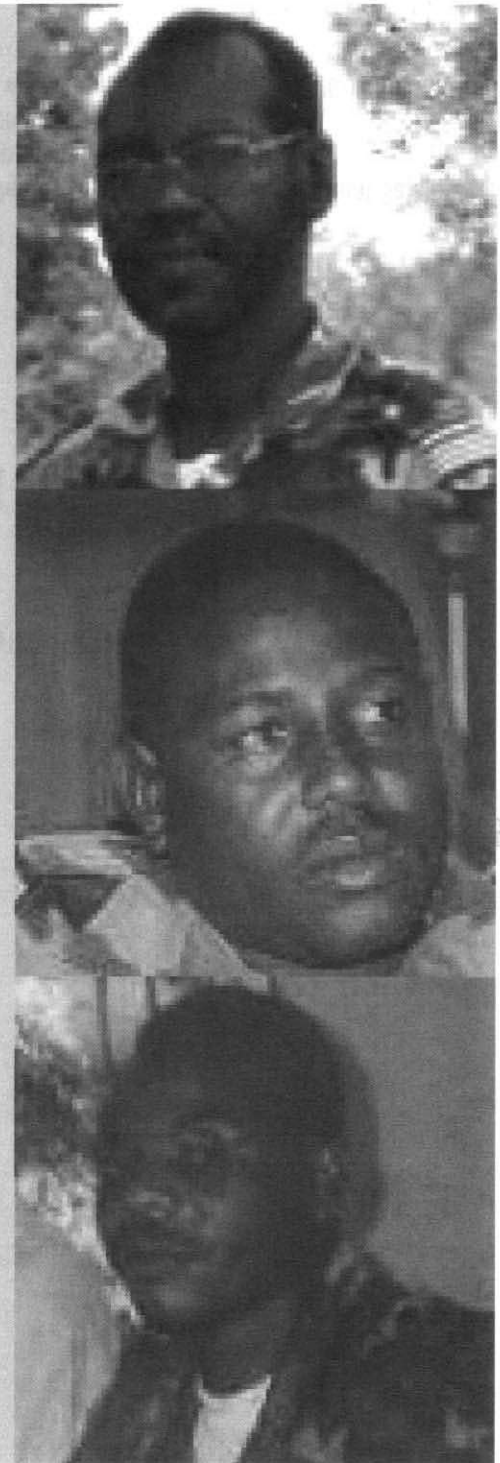
Most societies' human-rights activities are run on a shoestring by volunteers. The US National Academies' Committee on Human Rights is among the most effective, and has a full-time secretariat. Yet it runs on a budget of just \$0.5 million a year, most of it contributed by philanthropies. Scientists must find the means to better fund and professionalize such activities.

Often these committees use political contacts and letter-writing campaigns to try to influence the outcome of particular cases. At the very least, this serves to remind perpetrators that they are under international scrutiny. Scientists who have been freed testify that, although difficult to pin down, such support is crucial. All scientists can contribute, by making themselves aware of current cases of human-rights abuses and by lending their support to campaigns against them.

THE MISSING ARE NOT FORGOTTEN

CHAD MUST ACCOUNT
FOR AT LEAST 22 VICTIMS OF
ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES
SINCE APRIL 2006

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



END ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES NOW!

**AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL**



Opposition political leader Ibni Oumar Mahamat Saleh was arrested at his home by members of the Chadian security forces on 3 February 2008. Three months earlier, on 30 November 2007, eight people were arrested in the eastern town of Guéréda. In April 2006, at least 13 high-ranking officers and civilians were arrested by Chadian security forces. Since their arrests, none of their families have heard anything – they do not even know if they are alive or dead.

All 22 men were arrested by Chadian security officers in the aftermath of armed attacks by opposition groups. The Chadian Government is responsible for what has happened to them.

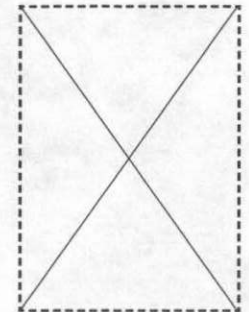
I call on the Chadian authorities to disclose the whereabouts of these men and publicly confirm whether they are alive or dead. If they are alive, they should be released.

Name

Address

.....

Signature



H.E. Idriss Déby Itno
President of Chad
Présidence de la République
BP 74
Fax: +235 251 45 01
N'Djaména
Chad

Images: Some of the disappeared. Clockwise from left: Ibni Oumar Mahamat Saleh, Adile Ousmane, Ahmet Haroun and Adam Ahmat Guite. © Private Amnesty International, International Secretariat, Peter Benenson House, 1 Easton Street, London WC1X 0DW, UK. www.amnesty.org Index: AFR 20/005/2008

According to information being circulated by French mathematical societies (SMF and SMAI), Mr. Saleh is a mathematician, trained at l'Universite d'Orleans, who has been a professor at the universite de N'Djamena since 1985, serving as head of the mathematics department (1985), Director of the Center for Scientific Research (1986), and Rector of the university (1990-1991). On February 3rd he was reportedly taken from his home by members of the President's guard and put in a secret detention center where he was severely beaten--and perhaps killed.

HIGHLIGHTS OF ACTIVITIES IN 14 COUNTRIES – 2007

CHINA

Appealed on behalf of Dr. Gao Yaojie, who is being kept under house arrest and subjected to harassment because of her work on behalf of AIDS patients. She was detained in February and forced to write a false letter citing poor health as her reason for not attending a banquet to be held in her honor in Washington, D.C.

Protested the detention of Dr. Gao and Dr. Jiang Yangyong, who were both prevented from traveling to New York to receive the Heinz R. Pagels Human Rights Award from the New York Academy of Sciences. Dr. Jiang Yanyong received the award in recognition of his work to contain the infectious epidemic of SARS.

Deplored the assault on Zhang Zongai, a former lecturer at Xi'an's Northwest University and the Xi'an Institute of Statistics, who was abducted by local officials and physically attacked while campaigning peacefully as an anti-corruption candidate. Zhang was threatened with death if he continued to campaign, and his name was removed from the list of candidates.

VIETNAM

Called for the release of Nguyen Vu Binh, an economist and activist who had been imprisoned since 2003. He was detained in 2001 after publicly endorsing a petition to form a citizens' watchdog group against corruption. In 2003 he was convicted for writing and posting on the Internet articles of a "reactionary nature" and was sentenced to seven years in prison and three years of house arrest. Binh was reportedly in very poor health and was not allowed any medical treatment in prison. In June he was granted amnesty and released.

BANGLADESH

Expressed concern for the safety of economist and former cabinet member Dr. Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, who was arrested in January and charged with treason and sedition. Dr. Alamgir is kept mostly in solitary confinement and complete darkness. He has not been granted access to any legal assistance and is to be tried before a special tribunal without due process.

Protested the arrest and alleged torture of Dr. Anwar Hossain and eleven of his academic colleagues at the University of Dhaka and Rajshahi University on August 23, 2007. The arrests followed a soccer game at Dhaka University where a clash between soldiers and students led to a riot. The professors are being held in prison with minimal access to family, attorneys, and medical care. They have not been charged with any crime.

IRAN

Appealed on behalf of Haleh Esfandiari, the director of the Middle East Program at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, who was detained in Tehran in December 2006 during a visit to her mother, repeatedly interrogated about the activities of the Wilson Center and incarcerated in Evin Prison. She was released in August and allowed to return to the United States.

Protested the prosecution of Dr. Hesam Firouzi, a physician who was charged with "hiding an escaped prisoner," "acting against the security of the system" by giving interviews to foreign radio stations about the torture of prisoners, and "possessing a satellite dish." Dr. Firouzi had provided treatment in his office to Ahmad Batebi, a student who was imprisoned and tortured in connection with the so-called "18 Tir" demonstration in July 1999.

Expressed concern about reports that Baha'i students in Iran have been denied access to their National Entrance Examination scores. Without these scores, the students cannot complete the university admission process. Officials at the National Education Measurement and Evaluation Organization admitted that they had "received orders from above not to score the tests of Baha'i students" and suggested that students would be able to receive their test scores only if they renounced their faith.

LIBYA

Called for the release of `Abd al-Rahman al-Qotaiwi and Jum`a Boufayed, who have been missing since their arrests in February. `Abd al-Rahman al-Qotaiwi, a fourth-year medical student, was arrested in connection with a peaceful demonstration that he was reportedly organizing to take place in Tripoli. Jum`a Boufayed was arrested after giving a interview about the arrest of his brother Dr. Idris Boufayed, another organizer of the demonstration. Dr. Idris Boufayed, a physician, is on trial along with 11 other men for "planning to overthrow the government," "possession of arms," and "meeting with an official from a foreign government." These charges carry a possible death sentence.

Wrote again on behalf of the five Bulgarian nurses, Valya Georgieva Cherveniyashka, Snezhanka Ivanova Dimitrova, Nasya Stojcheva Nenova, Valentina Manolova Siropulo, and Kristiana Malinova Valcheva, and a Palestinian doctor, Ashraf Ahmad Jum'a, arrested in 1999 and convicted of deliberately infecting Libyan children with HIV. They were released in July after being tried repeatedly and held in prison for eight years.

ETHIOPIA

Called for the release of Anteneh Getnet, Meqcha Mengistu, and Woldie Dana, members of the Ethiopian Teachers' Association (ETA), who have previously been tortured and are being held in Addis Ababa. They are accused of being members of an illegal organization called the Ethiopian Patriotic Front. The ETA has been critical of government education policies and has been subject to numerous government attempts to close it. Hundreds of teachers and ETA members have been detained or arbitrarily dismissed.

BELARUS

Urged the release of Dr. Kanstantsin Lukashou, a researcher with the Geochemistry and Geophysics Institute of the National Academy of Sciences, who was imprisoned in Minsk since December 2006. He was arrested in connection with his work on behalf of pro-democracy candidates for parliament and given a two years' suspended sentence. In April it was announced that the sentence had been overturned.

SWEDEN

Protested the treatment of Dr. Oleg Viro and Dr. Burglind Jöricke, tenured mathematics professors who resigned their positions at Uppsala University under duress after being threatened with disciplinary proceedings. It appeared that they were targeted for opposing the appointment of a particular mathematician to the department.

VENEZUELA

Appealed on behalf of Dr. Claudio Mendoza, a physicist who was head of the laboratory of Fisica Computacional at the Instituto Venezolano de Investigaciones Cientificas. He was removed from his position and accused of false testimony and treason in connection with an article he published regarding the making of a nuclear bomb. The latter charge carries a penalty of up to thirty years in prison.

GUATEMALA

Called again for an end to the death threats made against members of the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG), in particular its Executive Director, the anthropologist Fredy Peccerelli, and his family. It is thought that military officers who were active during the civil war are afraid of the work FAFG has been doing, exhuming the mass graves of people massacred during the conflict and providing documentary evidence of massacres they carried out.

CUBA

Urged the release of Francisco Pastor Chaviano González, a mathematician and teacher who has been imprisoned for more than 12 years and requires urgent medical treatment. Mr. Chaviano was arrested shortly after signing a joint letter to President Fidel Castro that called for the release of all political prisoners and the legal recognition of national human rights groups. He was convicted of "revealing state security secrets" and "falsifying public documents" and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment.

Appealed for the early release of Dr. José Luis García Paneque, a doctor and journalist who was sentenced to 24 years in prison in April 2003. It appears that his arrest was linked to his pro-democracy activities in the 1990s and to his involvement in founding the independent Libertad news agency. He also supported an independent network of librarians providing access to books banned in Cuba. Dr. García Paneque is malnourished and requires surgery for a cyst on his kidney. His family's request for medical parole has not been answered.

CHILE

Pressed for action in the case of Dr. Boris Weisfeiler, who has been missing in Chile since 1985. Although President Michelle Bachelet gave assurances that the investigation would be pursued, no significant progress has been made. We called on President Bachelet both to ensure that the Chilean police force cooperates with the FBI and to allow the FBI more freedom to use its own methods in the investigation.

UNITED KINGDOM

Protested a motion to boycott all Israeli academic institutions which was proposed at the University and College Union's first Congress. The UCU was formed by the merger of two unions, AUT and NATFHE, that had entertained similar boycott proposals in the past. In September the UCU announced that, after seeking legal advice, they had determined that an academic boycott of Israel would be unlawful and could not be implemented.

UNITED STATES

Wrote on behalf of Dr. Robert Ferrell, Professor of Human Genetics at the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health, who is charged with "mail fraud" and "wire fraud" for having ordered a sample of *S. marcescens*, a non-pathogenic bacterium, and for having sent it to Steven Kurtz, a Buffalo, NY artist. Because of his serious illness, Dr. Ferrell chose to plead guilty rather than face a prolonged trial.

Good News

Dr. Berhanu Nega, a professor of economics and mayor-elect of Addis Ababa, was freed in August after having been held as a political prisoner in Ethiopia since 2005.

Nguyen Vu Binh (see Vietnam, above) was granted amnesty in June and released.

Dr. Haleh Esfandiari (see Iran, above) was released in August and allowed to leave Iran.

The five Bulgarian nurses and the Palestinian doctor on whose behalf we have written repeatedly were finally released after being imprisoned and repeatedly tried in Libya since 1999.

The sentence handed down to Dr. Kanstantsin Lukashou (see Belarus, above) has been vacated.

The UCU (see United Kingdom, above) was forced to abandon its latest boycott proposal against Israeli universities after determining that the boycott would be unlawful.

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August 08, 2008

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CHR Correspondence

National Academy of Sciences National Academy of Engineering Institute of Medicine

ACTION ALERT: Syrian Colleagues on Trial for Peaceful Political Activities

August 8, 2008

Three medical doctors, a dentist, and an engineer are currently on trial in Syria on charges that appear to stem from their peaceful criticism of the Syrian government and their involvement in the National Council of the Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change (DDDNC), an umbrella organization comprised of representatives of opposition political parties and pro-democracy groups in Syria. They were among the 163 Syrians who attended the first meeting of the National Council of the DDDNC on December 1, 2007. The DDDNC, often referred to as the [Damascus Declaration](#), is a document—first made public on October 16, 2005—that calls for the establishment of a democratic system in Syria that respects citizens' rights, ensures freedom of speech and association, and ends discrimination based on religious or political beliefs. National Council members reportedly are from every Syrian province and from every sect, ethnic group, and political leaning, including leftists, liberals, conservatives, Kurds, and moderate Islamists.

The Syrian government, which considers the National Council of the DDDNC to be an illegal organization, has arrested 50 people who participated in the December meeting, including the five professional colleagues whose names are listed below. (Please click on the names to view a summary of each case.)

Medical doctors: [Walid al-Bunni](#)
 [Yasser al-'Eiti](#)
 [Feda'a al-Horani](#)

Dentist: [Ahmad To'meh](#)

Engineer: [Marwan al-'Ush](#)

Although most of those arrested following the December meeting were held without charge for a few days and then released, the five individuals on the list above remain in prison pending the outcome of their trial, which began on July 30, 2008. The charges, under Syria's Penal Code, include "weakening national sentiments and awakening racism and sectarianism" (Article 285), "broadcasting false or exaggerated news which would affect the morale of the country" (Article 286), joining an "organization formed with the purpose of changing the financial or social status of the state" (Articles 304 and 306), "carrying out acts or writing material the aim of which is to inflame sectarian or racist feelings or to provoke conflict between the sects and the rest of the nation" (Article 307), and "joining a secret organization" (Article 327). Amnesty International (AI) considers all five to be prisoners of conscience and has called for their release.

In addition to those listed above, the CHR is investigating the cases of two other National Council members who attended the December 2007 meeting. Usama 'Ashour, an agronomist who was arrested on July 29, 2008 by Syrian Military Intelligence, is being detained incommunicado and without charge at the Military Security Branch in Aleppo. Kamal al-Mwayel, a medical doctor, has been "disappeared" since February 21, 2008, when he was summoned to the Military Security Branch in Damascus. He has not been seen since and his whereabouts are unknown. According to AI, both Mr. 'Ashour and Dr. al-Mwayel are at risk of torture and other ill-treatment.

Suggested Action

Please write to the Syrian officials listed below to express concern that the charges on which Dr. al-Bunni, Dr. al-'Eiti, Dr. al-Horani, Mr. To'meh, and Mr. al-'Ush are being tried appear to be based solely on the peaceful exercise of their rights to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly—as set out in the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights, to which Syria is a state party—and to appeal for their immediate release from prison. You might also remind the officials that Syria is a state party to the U.N. Convention against Torture and request assurances that, in the interim, these five individuals, as well as Mr. 'Ashour, and Dr. al-Mwayel will not be subjected to torture or other ill-treatment.

Please write to:

[Note: Postage for an airmail letter to Syria is \$.94.]

His Excellency President Bashar al-Assad
President of the Republic
Presidential Palace Abu Rummaneh
Al-Rashid Street
Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic
Fax: 011 963 11 332 3410
(suggested salutation: Excellency:)

His Excellency Muhammad al-Ghafari
Minister of Justice
Ministry of Justice
Al-Nasr Street
Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic
Fax: 011 963 11 666 2460
(suggested salutation: Excellency:)

His Excellency Walid Mu'allim
Minister of Foreign Affairs
Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Al-Rashid Street
Damascus, Syrian Arab Republic
Fax: 011-963-11-332-7620
(suggested salutation: Excellency:)

Copies to:

His Excellency Dr. Imad Moustapha
Ambassador of Syria to the United States
Embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic
2215 Wyoming Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20008

Fax: 202-234-9548
Email: info@syrembassy.net

Mr. Michael Corbin
Chargé d'Affaires
Embassy of the United States in Syria
Unit 70200, Box (D)
APO AE 09892-0200
Fax: 011-963-11-3391-3999

If you are a foreign associate, please send copies of your appeals to the Syrian ambassador to your country and to your country's ambassador to Syria.

Kindly send copies of your letters to the CHR by mail, fax, or email. (This is important because it allows the CHR to better assess its effectiveness and to demonstrate to potential funders the degree to which NAS, NAE and IOM members are committed to its work.)

Committee on Human Rights
The National Academies
500 Fifth Street, N.W, 5th floor.
Washington, D.C. 20001
Fax: 202 334 2225
Email: chr@nas.edu
Website: <http://nationalacademies.org/chr>



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His Majesty King Abdullah Bin 'Abdul 'Azziz Al-Saud
The Custodian of the two Holy Mosques
Office of His Majesty The King
Royal Court, Riyadh
KINGDOM OF SAUDI ARABIA

June 2d. 2008

Your Majesty:

We are an independent organization of scientists, physicians and scholars devoted to the protection and advancement of human rights and scientific freedom for colleagues all over the world. We write now in concern for Dr. Matrouk al-Faleh, Professor of Political Science at King Saud University in Riyadh, who was arrested by secret police on May 19, 2008, and is being held without charges.

According to Human Rights Watch, al-Faleh's arrest comes just days after he published an article criticizing conditions at Buraida General Prison. Al-Faleh was told by the brothers Isaa and Dr. Abdullah al-Hamid, who were jailed for supporting a demonstration by families of detainees in the prison, that the prison was overcrowded, dirty, and lacking health care. Dr. al-Faleh was previously arrested in 2004 after calling for political reform and released on August 8, 2005 after being granted a royal pardon by Your Majesty. Since his release he has not been permitted to travel abroad.

We urge you to immediately release Dr. al-Faleh and Isaa and Dr. Abdullah al-Hamid, in accordance with Article 32 of the Arab Charter of Human Rights (which Saudi Arabia signed in 2004, and which the Shura Council ratified in March 2008). Article 32 guarantees freedom of opinion and expression. We also urge you to improve the conditions of detention and health care for inmates at Buraida General Prison and to lift the restrictions on Dr. al-Faleh's travel. We note that in 2006, Saudi Arabia was elected to a three-year term on the United Nations Human Rights Council after pledging its commitment to the defense, protection and promotion of human rights.

Thank you for your consideration.

Yours sincerely,

Joel L. Lebowitz Walter Reich Paul H. Plotz
Co-Chair Co-Chair Co-Chair