

APS Committee on International Freedom of Scientists (CIFS)

Annual Report 2007

By Juan C. Gallardo, Chair

Committee Members, 2007:

Juan Gallardo, *Chair*

John Gillespie, *Past Chair*

Noemi Mirkin

Pavel Podvig, *Vice Chair*

Michael Ramsey-Musolf

Khaled Sallam

Sally Seidel

Valerii Vinokour

Yue Wu

As in the past, the Committee's work in 2007 was primarily devoted to advocacy on behalf of persecuted and/or detained scientists. In addition, CIFS had the opportunity to collaborate with other human rights groups within the U.S. scientific community. A summary of these activities is provided below.

Bangladesh

Twelve professors at the University of Dhaka and Rajshahi University, including three professors of applied physics, were arrested in August and September, 2007. The arrests were in connection with student protests at the universities, some of which resulted in violence. Reports in the international press indicated that some of the professors—who were actually trying to serve as mediators between student protestors and the police—had been denied access to lawyers, their families, and medical care for extended periods of time. In response to an alert from the American Society of Plant Biologists, CIFS wrote letters to Bangladeshi authorities to urge that the rights of the professors be respected. By early 2008, five professors had been acquitted, and while the remaining seven were convicted, they were subsequently pardoned.

Iraq

CIFS maintained its efforts to express its dismay about the violence that has been targeted at academics in Iraq, including scientists. In 2007, CIFS urged U.S. and Iraqi authorities to insure the safety of colleagues in Iraq and to expedite the approval of visas to those that wish to immigrate to the U.S. While it is not entirely clear to us why they are being targeted, hundreds of Iraqi academics have been deliberately killed, kidnapped and disappeared over the past several years. In response to this as well as statements issued by ICSU and UNESCO condemning the violence, CIFS asked Panel on Public Affairs (POPA) to recommend action by APS. As a result, in June, the Executive Board requested that POPA "to consider a statement on treatment and protection for Iraqi scientists." In addition CIFS sent a letter to Dr. Marburger, Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, requesting his intervention to assure the protection of Iraqis scientists.

Libya

In 2007, the international scientific community continued its strong defense of five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian doctor who had been accused of deliberately infecting hundreds of Libyan children with HIV in 1999. Despite the fact that the accusations against them lacked any merit, the six medics had been sentenced to death. World renowned medical experts came together to demonstrate overwhelming scientific evidence that confirmed that the accused were innocent. CIFS wrote to the Libyan government to express its hope that the Libyan judicial system would accept those findings. After much advocacy on the part of the international community, the medics were freed and returned to Bulgaria in July, after 8 years in prison.

Russia

CIFS's efforts continue to focus on Russia where a number of scientists have been intimidated and prosecuted for many years as a result of collaborating with foreign researchers. In 2007, CIFS took action on behalf of several scientists: Oleg Mediannikov (biologist), Valentin Danilov (physicist), Oscar Kaibyshev (physicist), Igor Sutyagin (arms control researcher), and Oleg Korobeinichev (physical chemist).

A new case that developed in 2007 was that of Oleg Mediannikov. As reported in *Nature* (Volume 449, pages 122-123, 13 September 2007), Mediannikov was accused of attempting to smuggle bioweapons when taking samples to a collaborative institution in France. The Russian Federal Security Service prevented Mediannikov from leaving the country and began to investigate his scientific research. CIFS corresponded with Mediannikov concerning his situation, and a letter from the CIFS Chair was published in *Nature* (Volume 449, page 972, 25 October 2007) calling on scientists to speak up when scholars' rights are violated.

Other Inquiries

In addition to cases mentioned above, CIFS made an inquiry on behalf of a Ukrainian scientist. The scientist was allegedly fired from his leading research position at Kharkiv National University as a result of the criticism that he offered during the defense of the University Provost's doctoral thesis. CIFS wrote to the university to collect facts about the situation.

As mentioned in 2006, the Committee had contacted the director of the Venezuelan Institute for Scientific Research (IVIC) concerning physicist Claudio Mendoza who reportedly was threatened with sanctions and possible loss of his position because of an opinion article he wrote in a local newspaper. CIFS had requested clarification of the situation from IVIC and was informed that an investigation had been initiated. While Mendoza was ultimately not fired, he was removed from his position as head of the computational-physics department. CIFS's efforts on his behalf were mentioned in an article about Mendoza's case that was published in *Nature* (Volume 446, page 711, 12 April 2007).

CIFS also corresponded with biologist Jaime Lagunez Otero of UNAM, Mexico concerning his claim that he was fired from his job at UNAM for his political and human rights activities.

CIFS was unsuccessful in persuading SAR to take the case of Dr. Al-Arian.

Scholars at Risk Network

Gallardo and Gillespie attended the Scholars at Risk (SAR) biennial meeting and symposium, "Human Rights and Academic Repression," in April 2007. SAR assists scientists, lecturers, and other intellectuals who are threatened in their home countries by helping to identify temporary academic appointments abroad. The organization also occasionally issues alerts concerning academics who are in trouble.

AAAS Human Rights Coalition

In 2007, CIFS participated in the American Association for the Advancement of Science's (AAAS) effort to establish a Science and Human Rights Coalition. AAAS began hosting a number of meetings in 2007 to develop a mission and goals for the coalition. The coalition is made up of scientific societies and associations in the U.S. that are concerned about human rights issues and that would like to work together to address human rights concerns in the scientific community.