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Scientific groups have long campaigned on behalf of oppressed researchers and physicians, bolstering international protests such as this candle-light vigil in 2004 for medical workers imprisoned in Libya.

SCIENTIFIC SOCIETIES

Human-rights shift under fire

Critics concerned by scientific bodies' move away from traditional campaigning on behalf of oppressed researchers.

BY DECLAN BUTLER

Leading scientific societies in the United States are being challenged by critics who say the societies are curtailing their defence of individual cases of persecuted academics.

The critics welcome the fact that the societies, which include the New York Academy of Sciences (NYAS), the American Association

for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and the American Chemical Society (ACS), are broadening their activities to include scientific diplomacy, and trying to improve access to basic human rights such as clean water, food, health care and education. But they fear that this shift is reducing the emphasis on direct campaigning on behalf of individuals whose human rights have been violated.

Some have also raised concerns about

what they say is a growing reluctance among scientists in general about speaking out on human-rights abuses, in order to avoid interfering with collaborations with scientific powers that have a poor human-rights record, such as China. "I think they should be called out on that," says Robert Quinn, executive director of the Scholars at Risk Network based in New York City, which campaigns on behalf of persecuted academics.

But the societies insist that, far from any retreat from the defence of human rights, their broader and more collaborative approach may help to persuade governments to improve their human-rights records across the board. In addition, the ACS denies that it is reducing its case work on human rights.

Nature has learned that in May, the NYAS gave its Committee on Human Rights of Scientists (CHRS) the draft of a new mandate that would curtail its scope to defend individual cases of human-rights abuse, largely restricting it to lending support to cases taken up by other scientific organizations. The NYAS itself would speak out only on exceptional cases.

Ellis Rubinstein, president and chief executive of the NYAS, emphasizes that the mandate has not been finalized. But he argues that the world has changed since the cold war, when most academic human-rights committees were set up, and when "publicly embarrassing" a country was one of the few ways to defend persecuted academics. Today, international science, technology and education partnerships offer opportunities to spur wholesale change in countries, he says, especially for an organization with limited resources, such as the NYAS. The challenge is to find where the NYAS can be most effective, he adds: "You might not be able to help one person, in exchange for trying to help thousands by getting a country to open up."

The CHRS was created in 1978, and made a name for itself when Andrei Sakharov, a Soviet dissident, nuclear-weapons scientist and recipient of the 1975 Nobel Peace Prize, credited it with helping to win his release from internal exile in 1986. It has since engaged in letter writing and other campaigning on behalf of many individual academics, in part to remind oppressive regimes that their handling of such cases is under international scrutiny. Scientists who have suffered abuses, including ▶

imprisonment, say that such support is crucial.

Tension has been rising between the CHRS and the NYAS administration since 2007, when the CHRS awarded its annual human-rights prize to two Chinese physicians. China pressured at least one of the recipients, Jiang Yanyong — who was involved in exposing China's cover-up of the SARS epidemic in 2003 — into not travelling to New York to accept the prize. The CHRS wanted to protest against this, but the NYAS administration refused, arguing that such action could damage its relations with China, according to minutes of internal meetings seen by *Nature*. The controversy prompted Svetlana Stone Wachtell, director of the human-rights programme at the NYAS, to resign, and Eugene Chudnovsky, a physicist at the City University of New York, to step down as chair of the CHRS.

Rubinstein argues that the case for protesting to China was less convincing than if the two doctors had been imprisoned. "These people were not being persecuted any more than we sometimes in our own country don't give people visas for a variety of different reasons," he asserts.

LACKING BACKBONE

The NYAS board has subsequently vetoed all of the CHRS's letters of support for persecuted individuals, "except for letters to Cuba, Iran and Chad", leaving the committee moribund, says Sophie Cook, a member of the CHRS and executive director of the Committee of Concerned Scientists, a human-rights body based in New York City. Rubinstein insists that the academy will not hesitate to speak out on "egregious" individual abuses of human rights, and says that the vetoed letters addressed cases that were not compelling or involved people other than scientists and engineers. Chudnovsky disputes this, arguing that they involved clear cases of human-rights concerns.

The NYAS administration "doesn't want to admit to itself that it is just being cowardly", says Joel Lebowitz, director of the Center for Mathematical Sciences Research at Rutgers University in Piscataway, New Jersey, and a member of the CHRS. Scientific societies "should have a bit more backbone" when it comes to speaking out on human-rights abuses involving countries with which they collaborate.

"That's a reasonable criticism," says Torsten Wiesel, emeritus chairman of the NYAS board of governors and winner of the 1981 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. "If we had more resources, I would probably fight to see that this activity was not lost." Raising funding for defending human-rights cases has become more difficult than in the past, he adds.

But Quinn believes that the leadership of academic societies too often pitch what he sees as a false dichotomy: that there has to be a choice between human rights and outreach and engagement. Lebowitz agrees, but says

"One should collaborate, but not overlook abuses."

that the leaders of the NYAS seem to be honestly convinced that greater engagement and collaborations through outreach may, in the long run, lead to greater improvements in human rights than defending every individual case. "My own feeling is that you should do both," he says. "One should collaborate, but not overlook abuses."

That's a view shared by William Colglazier, who retired a few weeks ago as executive director of the US National Academy of Sciences (NAS), which has an extremely active human-rights committee, and often pursues lengthy behind-the-scenes diplomatic efforts, often at high level within governments. "The NAS's view is that both are extremely important," he says, adding that defending individual cases need not conflict with broader outreach efforts. The NAS is currently working on about 100 human-rights cases. The academy leadership strongly supports such efforts, he says, and they are one of the "most popular activities" with members. He adds that there is "strength" in having a number of organizations supporting any given campaign.

At the NYAS, Wiesel hopes that its outreach programmes could become a useful vehicle for applying pressure in support of individual cases, adding that he is "certainly going to be keeping an eye open to try to see that important cases aren't forgotten".

The NYAS is not alone in reassessing its policy on human-rights issues. In June, the AAAS folded its Science and Human Rights programme into a broader new effort, the Scientific Responsibility, Human Rights and Law Program. This reorganization will help the

AAAS to focus its activities on areas where it can be most effective, such as engaging policy-makers and the public on the social, ethical and legal implications of advances in science and technology, says Jessica Wyndham, associate director of the new programme.

The AAAS had already shut down its substantial programme for taking direct action on cases of persecuted scientists in 2007. Through its new Science and Human Rights Coalition, the association is now educating its members on how to take action on their own to defend individual academics, Wyndham notes.

The AAAS had been one of the few societies, along with the NAS, with the resources to investigate cases in depth. The loss of this capacity is disappointing, says Quinn.

At the ACS, human-rights policy is also in flux. Last year, the ACS's Subcommittee on Scientific Freedom and Human Rights sent five letters defending persecuted scientists to the organization's board for approval. They received no response, says Alec Greer, an organic chemist at Brooklyn College in New York and co-chair of the subcommittee. Last December, the ACS dissolved the committee altogether, and cases will now be reviewed by its Committee on International Activities before the society decides to take action. In a letter sent to the ACS board on 24 May, all ten members of the human-rights subcommittee protested at the dissolution and warned that the new procedures would dilute the ACS's defence of persecuted scientists. Bonnie Charpentier, chair of the ACS, disagreed in a reply dated 5 July: "Far from being dilutive, the new procedures are meant to be more inclusive and effective," she said. The ACS has, since then, sent out one appeal under the new system.

Michele Irwin, administrator of the American Physical Society's Committee on International Freedom of Scientists, says that the human-rights committees of scientific societies bear some responsibility for the changes. She says they have too often worked in isolation from their parent organizations' other programmes, remained overly focused on letter writing, and some have been slow to adapt to a more interconnected world. "I don't think the community has done a good job of convincing people why their work is important, and relevant to what their society is doing," she says. ■

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