

Somalia Pledges Human Rights Reforms

Under pressure from international human rights groups and the U.S. Congress, the government of Somalia has announced a series of human rights initiatives, including the release of all political prisoners.

They include 12 scientists and engineers, 2 of whom were condemned to death last year but reprieved following international pressure including pleas from the National Academy of Sciences.

The Somali prime minister, General Mohamed Ali Samater, said during a visit to Washington early this month that the prisoners would be released "very quickly," perhaps within weeks. He said that more than 100 prisoners had already been released and that about 200 remained. Other estimates put the number as high as 1000.

Samater also announced that unconditional amnesty had been offered to all Somalis living abroad, that an investigation was under way on "alleged human rights

abuses," and that Amnesty International and other human rights organizations have been invited to visit the country. An Amnesty representative is scheduled to arrive on 25 April, he said.

Congress is withholding \$19 million of general economic support in foreign assistance appropriations for fiscal 1988, pending assurances from Amnesty International and the State Department that the government has taken the promised steps. Fiscal 1989 economic aid is also on hold, according to a House staff member. The country gets about \$55 million a year from the United States, \$5 million for "nonlethal" military aid.

The military government of President Mohamed Siad Barre has been increasingly threatened by armed attacks from the opposition. There have been recent allegations that it is being supplied with nerve gas from Libya. ■ CONSTANCE HOLDEN

NIH: Calling All Alumni

The National Institutes of Health, which has many attributes of a university despite its niche in the federal government, has formed an alumni association to promote conviviality and the good name of biomedical research. So far, the Washington, D.C., chapter, with 400 members signed up, is off and partying. But the goal is an alumni association with branches all over the United States and, perhaps, all over the world.

Trouble is NIH doesn't know where most of its alumni are. Altogether, NIH estimates that it has 20,000 alumni; 7,000 of them are of known address. The other 13,000 must be counted as missing, but wanted. Inspiration for the alumni association, which already has an office in Bethesda not far from the NIH campus, came in part from James B. Wyngaarden, the institutes' current director, who told the Washington chapter's first meeting that "We need to develop a more active constituency."

What might local NIH clubs do? Hold seminars—on topics such as the use of animals in research. Invite the NIH brass to speak. Set up a speakers bureau of people who could speak to community groups on biomedical and environmental issues. Encourage young postdocs to spend a year or two in Bethes-

da. Or just get together.

Dues are \$25 a year; life memberships are \$250 (so far about 40 alumni have committed themselves to NIH for life); inquiries can be made of Ms. Harriet Greenwald, NIH Alumni Association, 9101 Old Georgetown Road, Bethesda, Maryland 20814.

This is NIH's second attempt to rally its alumni. An earlier effort in 1975 "petered out," according to the *NIH Record*. Former NIH administrator Cal Baldwin says success this time around will depend on the energy of those who can be tapped (or volunteer) to launch local clubs.

■ BARBARA J. CULLITON



Washington alumni James Wyngaarden (left) and Christian Anfinsen at the chapter's first meeting.

Rifkin Battles Gene Transfer Experiment

On 30 January activist Jeremy Rifkin filed suit in federal court to block the first gene transfer experiment in humans, which was approved by the federal government just 2 weeks earlier. Rifkin alleges that the National Institutes of Health followed inadequate review procedures in approving the precedent-setting experiment.

Because this will be the first approved insertion of a foreign gene into humans, the experiment has undergone intense scrutiny at both NIH and the Food and Drug Administration during the past 7 months. The proposal, by NIH researchers W. French Anderson, Steven A. Rosenberg, and R. Michael Blase, involves inserting a marker gene into terminally ill patients to track the progress of an experimental cancer treatment.

The review, however, has been rocky (11 November, p. 856). In July and September, the human gene therapy subcommittee of NIH's Recombinant DNA Advisory Committee (RAC) deferred a decision on the experiment because of insufficient information. On 3 October the RAC, which by that time had received the additional data the subcommittee had requested, approved the experiment by a vote of 16 to 5. But NIH director James B. Wyngaarden refused to sign off on it, instead sending it back to the subcommittee for a second review. That review, and unanimous subcommittee approval, came on 9 December. The full RAC then approved the experiment again by mail vote in December. "The Anderson and Rosenberg protocol was very adequately reviewed," says Wyngaarden, who signed off on it on 19 January.

Rifkin takes particular issue with RAC's mail vote, which he says denied the public the right to be present for the final review. NIH officials maintain, however, that the final mail ballot was simply a "courtesy" to the RAC, as official RAC approval was given on 3 October. RAC members also point out that Rifkin did not lodge a single complaint about the experiment during any one of three lengthy public review meetings.

At last week's RAC meeting Rifkin also called for a moratorium on all human gene therapy research until NIH establishes an "Advisory Committee on Human Eugenics" to review the social and ethical implications of human genetic engineering. The RAC, which took obvious offense at Rifkin's use of "eugenics," turned down his proposal, saying that current mechanisms are sufficient. ■ LESLIE ROBERTS