

edited by RICHARD STONE



**Jail-turned-tourist-site.** The Al-Qala prison, a Syrian fortress dating back to the Crusades, once held scientists as prisoners.

## NAS Probes Abuse of Syrian Scientists

When the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) investigated the abuse of scientists in Guatemala last year, it had free rein to interview people throughout the country and meet with government officials (*Science*, 20 September, 1992, p. 1851). But when the academy tried to go to Syria on a similar mission last year, it ran into a brick wall. According to a report released last week,\* the Syrian government refused to release names of jailed scientists and barred NAS officials from traveling to Syria to investigate charges of political persecution.

But the lack of cooperation didn't stop the investigation. Relying on studies by human rights groups and an interview with a

firsthand witness, the NAS Committee on Human Rights assembled a grim portrait of Syrian president Hafez al-Assad's reign. By the committee's estimate, 238 scientists, engineers, and physicians are jailed in Syria, more than in any other country.

"We don't know if [the report's charges] are true or not," says a spokeswoman for the Syrian embassy in Washington, D.C. The Syrian government did invite NAS officials to "Science Week," the country's yearly conference, in 1992. NAS officials agreed to go if Syria allowed them to investigate human rights for a few days. But the Syrians refused, and the NAS, by policy, was forced to decline the visit, says Roberta Cohen, an NAS official who helped write the committee report. But the NAS is hoping the adverse publicity will prod the Syrians into coming clean with a current list of imprisoned scientists.

\*"Scientists and Human Rights in Syria," National Academy of Sciences, March 1993.

## Snipping at the Science Budget

Members of Congress who'd like to trim President Clinton's proposed economic package are reaching for their scissors and snipping at science and technology.

Worried about new taxes, legislators are saying the economy isn't as bad as it once seemed, and that Clinton's \$16 billion, short-term stimulus package should be scaled back. Among the elements that could be trimmed is a proposed \$207 million 1993 supplemental appropriation for the National Science Foundation (NSF) (*Science*, 26 February, p. 1244). Some members of Congress argue that there's no urgent need to fund research grants, and a decision to increase NSF's budget could be put off until later in the year.

Meanwhile, the budget committees on both sides of the Hill

have taken a close look at the long-term costs of Clinton's package and recommended some additional trimming. The House budget committee has suggested slicing \$800 million from the anticipated general science proposals in 1994, trimming "function 250"—the category that includes NSF, the space program, public housing, and veterans hospitals. And the Senate budget committee has proposed a smaller cut of more than \$600 million. Neither panel specified where the cuts should be made, though some legislators wanted to target the space station or the Superconducting Super Collider. The majority decided to leave the details until later in the year. Congress intends to vote on the supplemental request and the broad budget goals before leaving for Easter break on 2 April.

## Mathematician Settles Berkeley Suit

Mathematician Jenny Harrison and the University of California (UC) have reached an agreement to resolve their differences in Harrison's high-profile sex-discrimination case. Harrison was denied tenure by the UC Berkeley math department in 1986 and filed a sex-discrimination lawsuit over the decision in 1989 (*Science*, 28 June 1991, p. 1781).



Jenny Harrison

While neither side is commenting on the case, sources say the out-of-court settlement between Harrison and UC calls for a group of mathematicians from outside the university to review Harrison's work and make a recommendation on whether she should be reinstated with tenure. The process is similar to one used to resolve a sex-discrimination lawsuit in the UC Berkeley law school. The committee's recommendation would not be binding, but in the previous case the chancellor followed the committee's lead.

Neither the university nor Harrison has disclosed the details of the settlement, although both have confirmed that Harrison's candidacy for a tenured position is again under review. Harrison says she is "delighted," an emotion not shared by those in the math department who were opposed to her tenure. "Why should an outside committee be telling Berkeley whom to hire?" asks Berkeley mathematician Robion Kirby.

## New WHO on the Block?

For years, the World Health Organization (WHO) has had the field to itself as the premier international agency addressing the health concerns of developing nations. But now a potential rival has appeared, even as WHO is reeling from a bitter fight over its leadership and future direction.

The new agency—dedicated to putting health care systems around the world on a sound scientific footing—was officially launched in Geneva last week. Called the Council on Health Research for Development (COHRED), it will help developing countries employ scientists, politicians, and others to plan research agendas on everything from basic biomedical science to health care provision. Already 22 countries plan to use COHRED's services.

COHRED's initial budget is small—just \$2 million a year—contributed by a dozen agencies and foundations. But its coordinator, Richard Wilson, foresees a major role for the council in channeling money from Western donors to Third World research. Sound like a miniature WHO? Perhaps, but Wilson promises that his agency won't be hampered by the bureaucratic morass that many perceive at WHO. Nor will COHRED find itself affected by anti-WHO fever, which is running high among many funders of WHO research programs following the renomination in January of WHO's controversial director-general, Hiroshi Nakajima. All the more reason why health policy experts are watching to see if aid donors will begin to redirect money from WHO to COHRED.