

## SCIENTIFIC EXCHANGES

## DOE Blocks Physicists From Indian Meeting

**CHICAGO**—The U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) has refused to allow physicists at its national laboratories to travel to a major particle physics conference in India this week in apparent retaliation for that country's series of nuclear tests last May. At least seven physicists from the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory and Argonne National Laboratory, both outside Chicago, were denied requests for travel to the 13th Topical Conference on Hadron Collider Physics, which began yesterday at the Tata Institute for Fundamental Research in Mumbai (formerly Bombay). Scientists say that such bans were not imposed even at the height of the Cold War for similar travel to the Soviet Union and China.

The decision, which does not affect U.S. university researchers, has generated confusion and shock among physicists and lab officials, who fear they have become pawns in a political chess match. The conference "has nothing to do with weapons," says Daniel Green, a Fermilab physicist scheduled to give an overview talk on particle experiments at the conference before DOE denied his travel request. "We never even did this with the Russians at the worst part of the Cold War," says John Peoples, Fermilab's director. "This is a precedent."

Just as onerous, according to Peoples, was a separate decision last summer not to allow Indian physicists from the Tata Institute to continue their collaboration on the D0 project at Fermilab—even though the Indian government has already contributed half a million dollars' worth of hardware for detectors, which track collisions of subatomic particles. As a Kafkaesque touch, Peoples says that DOE also ordered him—in writing—to remove the Indian flag from the United Nations-like display in front of Fermilab's main building. "I think that a public outcry is called for," says Andrew Sessler of Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory in California, who is president of the American Physical Society. The Indian organizer of the conference, Tata's Vemuri S. Narasimham, called the decision "scientific harassment" and said the invitees "will certainly be missed."

Tata, one of the country's most prestigious scientific institutes, was placed on a list of restricted sites because it conducts joint research with the Bhabha Atomic Research Center, "which is at the heart of India's nucle-

ar weapons program," says an official at the State Department, which made the final decision. "For this reason, we concluded that participation by [DOE] lab scientists in a conference sponsored by the Tata Institute was not appropriate," he says. "We're very disappointed," says Harry Weerts, a D0 spokesperson at Michigan State University in East Lansing who will speak at the conference. "Our research has nothing to do with the people who make atomic bombs."

Scientists at national labs must receive approval for any foreign travel. The first hint of possible trouble came last fall when Fermilab's Rajendran Raja, an Indian-born U.S. citizen, was asked by D0 colleagues to submit his request as a "test case." After some delay, Raja and other physicists were told late last month that their requests had been denied because of Tata's sta-

tus in the wake of the nuclear tests.

"This will alienate the Indian scientific community, which is largely pro-U.S.," says Raja, who has received permission from Peoples to travel on his own time to give his talk and visit family. "And it'll strengthen the hard-liners in India." —JAMES GLANZ

## FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

## Scientific Leaders Balk At Broad Data Release

Prompted by concerns that the public may soon get access to all federally funded researchers' records, Congress, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), federal research agencies, and the scientific community are on the verge of a great debate over the meaning of the word "all." By the end of this month—possibly within a few days—OMB is expected to take the first step toward implementing a new congressional mandate that "all data" produced with federal funding be given to anyone who seeks them under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) (*Science*, 6 November 1998, p. 1023).

But even before OMB formally launches the debate—it plans to issue a Notice of Proposed Rule Making and ask for public comment—science policy officials have begun building a case against too freewheeling an interpretation of the new law. Together with key congressional allies, they warn that federally funded research could be hobbled if scientists are forced to

disclose experimental results before they are published in a scientific journal, before the end of an ongoing clinical trial, in a form in which human research subjects might be identifiable, or in a manner in which confidential data provided by collaborators might be revealed, among other issues.

Officials are urging scientists and scientific organizations to weigh in with their own worries. The Association of American Universities and the Council of Government Relations already have done so. In a 4 December 1998 letter to OMB, they not only cautioned against too-broad FOIA disclosure but also asked for clarification of who should bear the potentially "significant" costs involved.

National Institutes of Health (NIH) director Harold Varmus calls the provision "a potential burden—even a threat—to our investigators." A National Science Foundation (NSF) spokesperson says it could create "tremendous burdens" for both scientists and the agency. "Most of us believe there should be procedures in place and understanding of how you do share data," says Wendy Baldwin, NIH deputy director for extramural research. "The problem is, this is too blunt an instrument."

Not just blunt, but sudden. The FOIA provision, sponsored by Senator Richard Shelby (R-AL), was written into last October's massive omnibus appropriations bill at virtually the last moment, replacing language that originally ordered OMB simply to study the issue. The new 106th Congress could back away from Shelby's sweeping new FOIA requirement, and some members say it should. Representative George Brown (D-CA), ranking Democrat on the House Science Committee, last week introduced legislation to repeal the provision and start over—with hearings to determine what the data-access problem really is. "Documentation of this problem has been no more than anecdotal," said Brown in a statement. "We should not jeopardize this [government-sponsored research] enterprise by taking a hasty, ill-considered approach to remedy an alleged problem."

Even though FOIA provides exemptions for personal and proprietary data, Brown said individuals and companies might shy away. "Significant loss of voluntary participation in public health and biomedical research would be devastating," he said, adding that mandating release of all data "would undermine" intellectual property protections.

In addition, 22 other House members—six Republicans and 16 Democrats—joined Brown in a 7 December 1998 letter to

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—John Peoples



Opening the files?  
Wendy Baldwin of NIH.