



DOE LABORATORIES

Spy Inquiry Is Taking Toll on Non-U.S. Researchers

The escalating political crossfire over alleged Chinese spying at U.S. nuclear weapons laboratories has produced its first scientific casualties. This week, officials at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico said that new Department of Energy (DOE) restrictions designed to prevent spying by foreign scientists have led to the departure of at least one highly regarded researcher, while several foreign-born scientists have turned down postdoctoral fellowships because of concerns about their working conditions. The new rules also have made it more difficult for scientists from "sensitive" nations, including China, India, and Russia, to obtain research funds, computing time, and visitation permits.

DOE researchers say these developments highlight the negative impact on the lab of an inquiry into China's efforts to acquire U.S. technology that has centered on physicist Wen Ho Lee, a naturalized U.S. citizen from Taiwan (*Science*, 26 March, p. 1986). Lee was fired from Los Alamos in March for breaching security rules but has not been charged with any crime. By then, however, DOE had adopted new policies that researchers say strike hardest at the pool of young scientists that the lab is most eager to attract. But the changes didn't stop Republicans in Congress from stepping up the pressure last week for a moratorium on scientific exchanges that bring thousands of researchers from sensitive nations to the United States each year, mostly to work on unclassified projects.

Such restrictions are fiercely opposed by the Clinton Administration. "Anyone who wants to close off our labs will have to go through me—and I never give in," Energy Secretary Bill Richardson, a former congressional representative from New Mexico, vowed last week in a Washington speech. In particular, DOE officials worry that a moratorium could disrupt exchanges aimed at securing Russia's nuclear stockpile.

One of the bills drawing Richardson's ire would block researchers from sensitive nations from visiting DOE's three weapons labs—Los Alamos, the Sandia National Laboratory in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in

California—unless they receive special DOE and congressional authorization. Congress could rescind the ban once it concluded that DOE had suitable counterintelligence measures in place. Introduced in March by a junior member of the House, Representative Jim Ryun (R-KS), the measure was given little chance of success until last week, when Senator Richard Shelby (R-AL), chair of the Select Intelligence Committee, introduced a similar bill in the Senate.

Even with Shelby's backing, however,



Hitting the road. Russian-born researcher Peter Vorobieff says new limits on foreign scientists are causing him to leave Los Alamos.

the measures face an uncertain future. Some lawmakers say they have seen no evidence that the exchanges have led to any loss of military secrets. Such views got a boost last week when Senator Pete Domenici (R-NM), an influential senior member long seen as a patron of the Los Alamos and Sandia labs, distanced himself from the proposals. The exchanges, he told *The Washington Post*, are "the very lifeblood of these labs."

The increasingly hostile atmosphere, however, has already affected the career of Los Alamos postdoctoral researcher Peter Vorobieff. The Russian mechanical engineer—who for 3 years has been part of a prominent team studying turbulence in soap films and other nonlinear phenomena—

recently learned that new DOE policies would prevent most scientists from sensitive nations from receiving funds from the lab's nuclear weapons research budget, which supports the bulk of the lab's classified and non-classified science. As a result of the changes, which began late last year, Los Alamos "couldn't hire Peter the way we would have under normal circumstances," says one lab administrator. So this summer Vorobieff will leave one of the lab's nonclassified groups for an academic appointment at the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

Vorobieff regrets having to leave but considers himself lucky to have found an academic post. Other foreign postdocs, he says, have fewer options and "are considering dropping out of science entirely. ... Few of the [researchers from sensitive nations] feel like they will be able to stay around for long." About half of the lab's 365 postdocs are foreign-born, with most coming from China, India, and Russia. Fewer than 500 of its approximately 10,000 full-time employees are foreign nationals.

The funding restrictions come on top of new rules that limit foreign researchers' access to several of the lab's high-powered computers and require visitors to wait up to 8 weeks for background checks. Together they present a major recruitment hurdle. Several senior researchers note that two highly recruited candidates, one Chinese and the other Russian, recently turned down offers from the lab, citing worries about the political climate. "Would you want to come to work at a place where you are viewed as a potential spy?" asks one researcher familiar with both cases.

The controversy "is just destroying the morale of foreign visitors," says physicist David Campbell, a longtime Los Alamos researcher who now heads the physics department at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. In particular, Campbell is disturbed by what he sees as antiforeigner overtones in public discussion of the spying allegations against Lee. "Xenophobia is a dangerous pastime for a nation of immigrants," he warns.

DOE officials, meanwhile, are bracing for more bad news: A congressional study critical of lab security, some of whose contents have already been disclosed, could be released as early as this week. The ongoing controversy, Assistant Secretary of Energy Ernie Moniz speculated recently, could "cast a shadow over the labs' activities for the rest of the year."

—DAVID MALAKOFF

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