

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

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COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS
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March 20, 1986

Dr. Marshall Nirenberg
1C-27, Building 36
National Institutes of Health
Bethesda, Maryland 20892

Dear Dr. Nirenberg:

At the last meeting of the Committee on Human Rights, it was decided that I should write to all NAS members who are not correspondents of the Committee. Thus, as the Committee's chairman, I am writing to tell you about its important work and to invite you to actively support our efforts by becoming a "correspondent."

The Committee on Human Rights was created in 1976, at the request of the NAS membership. Over the years the Committee has worked in behalf of more than 200 scientists, engineers, and medical professionals who have been, or still are, prisoners of conscience. Every year since its creation, the Committee has approached newly elected NAS members to invite them to become correspondents; more than 750 members of the NAS, NAE, and IOM have accepted our invitation.

The Committee takes on cases of individuals from the scientific community, anywhere in the world, who are believed to be victims of severe repression, that is, people who are imprisoned, have been sent into internal exile, or have "disappeared." We write letters of inquiry or appeals to government officials, prison directors, heads of scientific academies and societies, human rights organizations, and people who may have personal knowledge of or influence on a particular case. In a few instances, the Committee makes public statements or appeals. These public statements, which must be approved by the Council of the Academy, usually follow numerous unsuccessful private attempts by the Committee to obtain satisfactory results from the government of a country in which a colleague is being held.

While our work is often discouraging and we cannot claim sole responsibility for the release from prison or the amelioration of the plight of any one individual, we do believe that our activities have played an important part in the many efforts--occasionally successful efforts--made by groups and individuals in behalf of persecuted scientists.

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To give you an example of some of the cases that the Committee has worked on and which had favorable outcomes within the past year, I would like to describe those of Pedro Castillo in Chile, Ismail Mohamed in South Africa, and Anatoly Shcharansky in the Soviet Union.

Pedro Castillo is a surgeon, a member of the independent and highly respected Colegio Medico de Chile, and president of the unofficial National Commission against Torture. Dr. Castillo met with many representatives of human rights groups who had visited Chile, including Committee members Gerard Debreu and Robert Perry, NAS/IOM member Baruch Blumberg, and IOM member Robert Lawrence. He was arrested at his home in Santiago on August 4, 1985, and subsequently banished without charges or trial to a tiny and practically inaccessible island off the southern coast of Chile. The Committee immediately sent delegates to discuss Dr. Castillo's case with the Chilean Ambassador to Washington, sent telegrams to the Chilean authorities, and asked its correspondents to write individual appeals. In an unprecedented move, the government granted Dr. Castillo an unconditional release on August 22.

Ismail Mohamed is one of South Africa's leading algebraists. He is a professor at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and a leader of the United Democratic Front. He was arrested on February 19, 1985, and charged with high treason, a capital offense. The Committee took numerous private actions in Professor Mohamed's behalf, including letters to South African government officials, letters and telephone calls of moral support to Professor Mohamed and his wife, a request to the Committee's correspondents to write individual letters of concern, and requests for information to officials of the American Embassy in Pretoria. In October I received a letter from Professor Mohamed in which he wrote: "I am very grateful for the concern and support the National Academy of Sciences as well as yourself and Professor Lipman Bers have shown for the trial we have to face." He went on to say, "We are encouraged and strengthened by the continuing interest of the American people in the struggles we face." All charges against Professor Mohamed were dropped on December 10.

Soviet computer scientist Anatoly Shcharansky has been one of the Committee's most important and long-standing cases. He was arrested in March 1977, charged with anti-Soviet propaganda and espionage, and sentenced to 3 years in prison and 10 years' hard labor. Mr. Shcharansky was one of the founding members of the Moscow Helsinki Watch Group and a leading figure in the Jewish movement for emigration to Israel. Over the years the Committee made many efforts in Mr. Shcharansky's behalf, including three public statements. In 1981 his sentence was changed to a tougher one of 6 years in prison and 7 years' hard labor. In 1982, in response to the Committee's efforts, Mr. Shcharansky's wife, Avital, wrote to thank the Committee for its continued efforts and support. Mr. Shcharansky's release last month was a happy end to a long, difficult, and often seemingly hopeless journey.

Several times a year, for cases in which colleagues are in need of immediate and extensive appeals, we ask our Committee's correspondents to write politely worded letters, as individuals, to the authorities in a country in which a particular scientist is being held. Occasionally we also ask correspondents to write letters of support and to send scientific literature to a prisoner and to his or her family. These requests provide background on the individual and the case, information on the type of inquiry or appeal that should be written, and the names and addresses of people to whom letters should be written. Our correspondents also receive the Committee's in-house bulletin, Correspondence, which describes the status of cases in various countries and provides the names and addresses of officials to whom individual appeals can be sent.

We would welcome your assistance in our work on the problems of human rights abuses. Needless to say, becoming a correspondent does not obligate individuals to any specific action, nor does it imply blanket approval of past or future actions of the Committee. If you complete and return the enclosed card, your name will be added to our list of correspondents.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Eliot Stellar".

Eliot Stellar
Chairman

Enclosures: List of Committee Members
Membership Card

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NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

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*Date indicates end of term.