

**Launch of the AAAS Science and Human Rights Coalition
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Peter Agre, MD

The role of scientists in human rights issues has produced positive outcomes in extremely dire situations. Often working privately and behind the scenes, the Committee on Human Rights (CHR) of the National Academies has contributed to the release of more than 600 persecuted scientists, engineers, and health professionals over the past four decades.

Three specific cases were discussed as examples.

Libya

Scientists played pivotal roles in gaining the release of five Bulgarian nurses and a Palestinian physician held eight years in prison in Libya. These individuals had been charged with intentionally infecting hundreds of children with HIV. Although these accusations were shown impossible by testimony from virologists Vittorio Colizzi (Rome) and Luc Montagnier (Paris), the medical personnel were sentenced to death by the firing squad. Release was gained in July 2007 after direct appeals of two National Academy members who privately presented face-saving alternatives to Libyan Leader Muammar Gaddafi and his son.

Ethiopia

Dr. Taye Woldesmiate is Professor of political science and President of the Ethiopian Teachers Association. Charged with treason after protesting for democratic changes, Dr. Taye was held six years of a 15-year sentence before gaining release in 2002. Protests following the 2005 national elections precipitated additional governmental crackdown and 42 deaths. While outside Ethiopia Dr. Taye was again charged and placed on a

³wanted list.² With assistance from the CHR, Dr. Taye received a teaching position and has been allowed to remain in the U.S.

United States

Following the 11 September 2001 air attacks, a series of unsolved anthrax deaths put the U.S. Department of Justice under pressure to demonstrate that it was tough on bioterrorism. Dr. Thomas Butler was studying antibiotic sensitivity of plague bacillus (*Yersinia pestis*) when he discovered samples were missing from his laboratory at Texas Tech University. This organism is listed on the Homeland Security list of potential bioterror weapons, and FBI officials were called to investigate but found no evidence of theft. Despite lack of harm or intention to harm, Dr. Butler was coerced into signing a statement that caused him to serve a two-year imprisonment. His case received national prominence and legal advice due to actions of the CHR.

The number of cases of human rights abuses worldwide is large and growing. The AAAS Human Rights Coalition will play an important role in the defense of persecuted individuals, and the engagement of both younger and older AAAS members will be exceedingly valuable.