



Science and human rights

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Under a banner proclaiming ‘Science and Human Rights: A Crucial Alliance’, the International Human Rights Network (IHRN) of Academies and Scholarly Societies met in Taiwan from 23 May to 26 May 2012 for its tenth biennial meeting. Formed in the dying days of the Cold War (1993), this network was intended to build on the gains made in protecting and defending the rights of academics in the then Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The series of meetings which constituted the recent gathering were hosted by the Academia Sinica (the Taiwanese Academy of Science) and held on their magnificent campus in Taipei.

Many modern academies of science have human rights committees. The IHRN draws on the work of these committees and attempts to make low-key interventions targeting cases of human rights abuses, which are coordinated through a largely volunteer-based secretariat which operates out of the US National Academy of Sciences in Washington DC. In the past 3 years, petitions to foreign governments made by this secretariat, on behalf of scientists, doctors and engineers, have helped to free 36 imprisoned scientists. The countries involved were the USA (a Libyan and an Afghani citizen), Cuba, the Philippines, Myanmar, Vietnam, Russia, Uzbekistan, China, Syria and Bahrain. Unfortunately, this work is endless and is increased with every new social and political convulsion. The Arab Spring, for example, has deepened the assault on the rights of professionals, especially in the medical profession, in both Bahrain and Syria.

The non-partisan nature of the work of the IHRN is central to its success. Its leitmotif draws from various United Nations’ documents, particularly the articles in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which deal with freedom of movement, free speech, freedom of association, and the freedom associated with ‘scientific advancement’, which is enshrined in Article 17 of the Charter. Interestingly, the distinguished Chinese physicist and dissident, Fang Lizhi, who passed away in April this year, reinforced the importance of these particular freedoms in ‘five axioms of science’ which he claimed had drawn him to champion human rights. Although these ‘axioms’^{1,2} were not discussed at the Taipei meeting, they are worth repeating because they underscore the importance of the work of the network:

1. ‘Science begins with doubt,’ whereas in Mao’s China students were taught to begin with fixed beliefs.
2. Science stresses independence of judgment, not conformity to the judgment of others.
3. ‘Science is egalitarian’; no one’s subjective view starts ahead of anyone else’s in the pursuit of objective truth.
4. Science needs a free flow of information, and cannot thrive in a system that restricts access to information.
5. Scientific truths, like human rights principles, are universal; they do not change when one crosses a political border.

The Taipei meeting was preoccupied with a number of themes: perhaps, as someone put it, ‘too many ideas’. These themes ranged from the applied end of high-level medicine – ‘Taking Life-Saving Science from Lab to Village’ – and the possibilities of developing a ‘Global Medical Oath’ to a discussion on the effective nationalisation of the Turkish Academy of Science, the thorny issues of ‘Science and Indigenous People’ and the ‘Criminalisation of Medical Neutrality’. There can be no doubt that South African scientists should have an interest in these matters: indeed, they may well bear a special responsibility to protect the human rights of fellow scientists throughout the world. Our turbulent history is littered with examples of state action – no, brutality – against scientists. Of course, it might give offence to name names: many South Africans suffered and singling out individuals might all too readily give the impression that their cases were more important than others. But, perhaps on the occasion of drawing attention to the importance of human rights and science, both across the world and in South Africa, one can be forgiven for illustrating the point by drawing as examples on four people who might well have been regular readers of this journal.

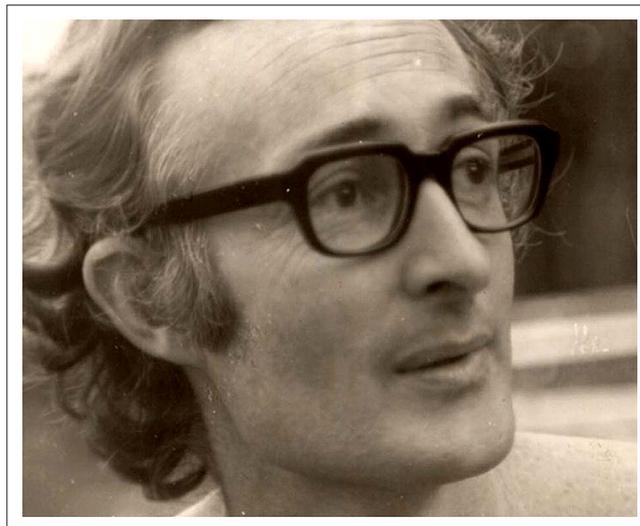
The Yale and London School of Economics-trained anthropologist Z.K. Matthews, who was released from the Treason Trial in 1958, resigned his post as the Vice-Principal of the University



of Fort Hare because of a government decision to strip the institution of its university status – effectively, making it a tribal college. Matthews went on to a stellar career in the international world of NGOs and became Botswana's Ambassador to the USA. This case is eerily like the current situation in Turkey, where simple-minded government fiat has changed the status of the Turkish Academy of Science. Another South African who built a distinguished career after leaving this country was the University of Cape Town (UCT) endocrinologist Bill Hoffenberg, who chose to leave the country when he was served with a banning order in 1968. He went on to a career in research and teaching in Britain and became, in 1983, the president of the Royal College of Physicians and, later, President of Wolfson College, Oxford.

Then, there is the tragic case of the political scientist Rick Turner, who was trained both at UCT and the Sorbonne, and who was gunned down in front of his children in the doorway of his Durban home on 08 January 1978, 2 months before the expiry of a banning order. Turner was not only an inspiring teacher, his seminal book, *The Eye of the Needle* (1972), remains compulsory reading for those who are interested in understanding South Africa, both past and present. Finally, as we have seen, the IHRN includes members of the medical profession under its remit. So, the Universities of Fort Hare and Natal-trained Fabian Ribeiro, a Mamelodi general practitioner, who was assassinated with his wife, Florence, in the courtyard of the family home on 01 December 1986, must be counted amongst this group. The Ribeiro tragedy followed upon months of security police harassment, which included threats to the lives of this highly respected professional couple.

How are South African scientists to live up to their special responsibilities in defending threats to the human rights of their colleagues in other parts of the world? Association with the IHRN is certainly a good place to start supporting this work but it is not accessible – except electronically, of course – to all. We certainly need to do more. In particular, the attention of a younger cohort of scientists, who have benefitted from the sacrifices made by these four (and many others, of course), needs to be drawn to the issue. After all, human rights and



Rick Turner (photo provided by Jann Turner).

science – as someone remarked in Taipei – are in a 'yin and yang-type relationship'. But how is more to be done?

One idea might be that leadership in South Africa's three academies – Die Suid Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns, the Academy of Science of South Africa and the Royal Society of South Africa – might set their many differences aside and establish a South African committee on science and human rights with the aim of deepening the national conversation on the issue, and explore the excellent work of the IHRN which plans to gather in Costa Rica in 2014.

Peter Vale has represented the Academy of Science of South Africa at meetings of the IHRN for several years.

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