

Indian science

Visa row threatens conferences

New Delhi

INDIA is unlikely to act as host to international science conferences in future because of a tiff between the International Committee of Scientific Unions (ICSU) and its affiliate, the Indian National Science Academy (INSA), over the unconditional right of entry of scientists wishing to attend the conferences. The question has cropped up because of allegations that South African scientists have had difficulty in obtaining visas to attend ICSU-sponsored meetings in India.

The Indian government, whose anti-apartheid policy is well known, does not ban entry of South African scientists. But visas are issued only to those who declare opposition to apartheid in writing, which many South African scientists do not want to do for fear of reprisals at home. ICSU wants this condition lifted as it violates the charter of "complete freedom of movement of scientists" to which INSA subscribes. In a letter to INSA, it threatened to withdraw support and recognition for international conferences in India if blanket entry permission was not provided irrespective of nationality.

INSA, which is partly funded by the government, is not in a position to challenge the government's policy of conditional entry to South African scientists and INSA president, Professor C.N.R. Rao says the Indian policy is justified. He says that while ICSU is asking India to abide by its charter on freedom of movement, it is not asking South Africa to conform to its rules banning racial discrimination. ICSU has never imposed any sanctions against the South African science community although its black scientists do not enjoy the same dignity and respect as the whites. Rao, who is also chairman of the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry (IUPAC), twice turned down invitations from the South African Academy of Sciences because the invitations said he would be treated as an "honorary white", which he believes is a clear admission of apartheid in science. INSA alleges that ICSU has singled out India while several other nations continue to deny visas to scientists for various reasons.

Despite restrictions, South African scientists have been attending conferences in India. The conference of the International Astronomical Union (IAU) last year was attended by a team from South Africa and IAU's vice president himself was a South African. But the special treatment meted out to South African delegates is a topic raised in every international meet. Some years ago, a conference on the mossbauer effect was postponed at the last moment following a protest from South African scientists whose visas were not

cleared. The issue came up again at the eleventh conference of the International Sociological Association (ISA) held recently in New Delhi. The British sociologist and ISA president Mrs Margaret Archer, disclosing how a South African delegate faced 'serious' problems in getting a visa, said she would have favoured shifting the venue if there had been total opposition to South African participation. Local organisers whose biggest headache is obtaining government clearance for South African delegates say their responsibility ends with the submission of their names to the Foreign Office.

The result of ICSU-INSA row is that India may not host any ICSU-supported conferences in the future. INSA has already advised scientific institutions in the country not to seek any support from ICSU or its member unions for holding meetings. According to Rao, India can find enough resources on its own to organise small international conferences. One other reper-

cussion is that some of the proposed international meetings in India are in jeopardy. Among them are the colloquium of the International Mathematical Union (1988), Conference on General Relativity (1989) sponsored by the International Union of General Relativity and Gravitation, and Biophysics Congress (1990) sponsored by the International Union of Pure and Applied Biology. If these conferences are held, they will be without ICSU support, says Rao. Also in doubt is the participation of eight South African eye specialists in a conference in December this year by the National Society for Prevention of Blindness, a private body. ICSU's retaliatory move against India, spearheaded by the standing committee for freedom of movement of scientists with generous backing from some western scientists, is seen by INSA as nothing but politics, and Indian politicians just back from the non-aligned meeting at Harare, where they mounted a vigorous attack against apartheid, are in no mood to change their government's declared policy in order to accommodate ICSU's demands.

K.S. Jayaraman

Appeal launched for Soviet biologist

DR Alex Goldfarb, the son of David Goldfarb, the Soviet Jewish molecular biologist implicated in the case of the United States journalist and alleged spy, Mr Nick Daniloff, has called for a campaign of telegrams from western scientists on his father's behalf.

David Goldfarb, a diabetic, is seriously ill in a Moscow hospital, awaiting amputation of his remaining leg for gangrene. Developments of the Daniloff case last weekend have led his son to fear that, without strong international protests, the operation might be fatally delayed or withheld.

David Goldfarb is a long-time acquaintance of Daniloff who regularly supplied him with genetically-engineered insulin from the United States. Recently, he revealed that in the Spring of 1984 when he was preparing to leave the Soviet Union, he was approached by the KGB to plant classified material on Daniloff. When he refused, his exit visa was withdrawn and he himself was accused of trying to remove from the Soviet Union material of national importance — certain bacterial strains used in his research — although these had originally been obtained in the west (see *Nature* 301, 104, 1984).

Last Saturday, Gennadii Gerasimov, a Soviet government press spokesman, denied this story and said that David Goldfarb had admitted to a TASS reporter that it was untrue. But Alex Goldfarb alleges that it is Gerasimov who is lying and asks his father's colleagues to demand that an international press team be allowed to visit his father. He also calls for a campaign to

get his father transferred to a hospital in the United States, or failing that, for visas to be granted to the two US doctors, Kenneth Prager of Columbia Medical School and Glen Geelhoed, of George Washington University, who have agreed to attend him in Moscow. Vera Rich

Comet coming



Pasadena

A new comet, discovered last month by Christine Wilson, a graduate student at Cal Tech, may put on quite a show in April 1987, when its orbit will bring it within about 110 million miles from the Sun. Comet Wilson was discovered while using the 48-inch Schmidt Telescope at the Palomar Observatory for the Palomar sky survey. Estimates suggest its brightness will reach 3.5, about the same as Halley's Comet. Initial observations suggest Comet Wilson is a long period comet, with an orbital span in the millions of years. It will be visible only from the southern hemisphere.

Joseph Palca