

ICTP

Nuclear proliferation denied

Over the last year Abdus Salam has had to navigate his International Centre for Theoretical Physics through particularly rough seas. First came a legislative log-jam in Rome, which led to ICTP being saved from financial embarrassment only by an interest-free loan courtesy of Iran (see *Physics World* December 1991 p6). Hot on its heels came a story in the *Washington Post* at the end of last year – subsequently refuted – that painted the ICTP as a hive of nuclear proliferation. Meanwhile, responsibilities for the Institute are shifting away from the International Atomic Energy Agency.

The newspaper article sought “to portray the institution as one that could be used by scientists from developing nations to conduct research related to nuclear weapons, missile systems or other technologies”, according to the IAEA. It followed a visit to the ICTP, in Trieste, by a journalist who, scanning through the lists of scientists attending courses on atomic, molecular and condensed matter physics, discovered names from countries such as Iran and Pakistan. The story accused ICTP of being too careless with sensitive information.

The assertion that the ICTP is a third-world learning institute for the development of know-how regarding nuclear weapons has been hotly denied by scien-



Salam – troubled times at ICTP

tists in Trieste, including Nobel laureates Salam and Carlo Rubbia. The IAEA last month also issued a strong rebuttal, with spokesman David Kyd dismissing the entire story as “egregious rubbish”.

According to an IAEA statement, “no courses or research occur in the fields of enrichment of uranium, reprocessing or the production of heavy water. Opinions may vary on where the line should be drawn in curricula to avoid unintentionally providing training that would be of real use for military purposes, but this line has been drawn with adequate prudence in Trieste”.

But there has been a lingering bad taste. The *Washington Post* mentioned visiting scientists from the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran, the government’s main nuclear facility. In the same breath, the article mentioned the loan from Iran. The Italian press has been full of accusations and counter-accusations from Washington,

Vienna (home of the IAEA) and Trieste. Some scientists in Trieste maintain that certain American factions would like to see the ICTP and its third-world orientation out of the IAEA.

Amongst the anger and intrigue, there has been an administrative shuffle. The IAEA, which runs the ICTP along with UNESCO, has taken the decision to move administrative responsibility for the ICTP to UNESCO. The main funds will continue to come from Italy and other nations including the UK and Canada. The IAEA’s board was due to meet at the end of February to authorise the director-general Hans Blix to conclude and implement agreements with UNESCO and the Italian government.

According to Kyd, the IAEA will still take an interest in the ICTP – the administrative formula is expected to be announced in May. The Italian parliament has to ratify any decision because of its heavy financial involvement, and this is likely to take anything up to six months. The official reason for the shift is that the ICTP has outgrown the IAEA’s mandate to concentrate on nuclear-related topics.

Following the ICTP’s difficulties and with Salam’s health in a fragile state, there have been suggestions that he might “shed some of his day-to-day duties to his deputy Luciano Bertocchi, leaving himself freer for his scientific work”, said Kyd. However, Salam’s health has improved and the IAEA says that “he is continuing to perform all duties”, with significant personal and professional support from Hassan Delafi, a scientist originally from Tehran.

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