

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE AMS COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS OF MATHEMATICIANS

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This is a report on recent activities of the American Mathematical Society (AMS)
Human Rights Committee.

1. Human rights abuses of individual mathematicians

This committee was originally formed to look into cases of mathematicians in other countries who were victims of persecution for political, religious, or other reasons, and to try to remedy abuses of the human rights of our colleagues abroad. In the past year, the committee investigated three cases of mathematicians whose human rights may have been violated. In two cases it was determined that the cases had merit, and that the mathematicians and their families were in danger. In the first case, a possible assassination attempt by car bombing had failed, and the targeted mathematician was seeking political asylum in Europe. In the second case, a mathematician had been arrested and jailed for taking part in a political protest. In both cases, the AMS president wrote letters to the relevant authorities on behalf of the mathematicians. Asylum was granted in the first case, and in the second the mathematician was fined and released. These positive outcomes were obviously not the direct consequence of AMS intervention, but the fact that the mathematical community in the United States made public statements on behalf of the afflicted scientists must certainly have helped them. Historically, scientists suffering from political or other persecution have only been helped when their cases were publicized in the US and scientific societies made public statements on their behalf.

2. AAAS Science and Human Rights Coalition

The AAAS Science and Human Rights Coalition was launched in January 2009. The Coalition is a network of scientific and engineering membership organizations that recognize a role for scientists and engineers in human rights. Its member organizations include the American Physical Society, the American Chemical Society, the American Statistical Association, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and many others. The AMS Human Rights Committee recommended last year that the AMS join the AAAS Coalition, and this recommendation was adopted by the AMS. We are now a member of the Coalition.

The Coalition has working groups in different areas. The Welfare of Scientists group considers the cases of individual mathematicians whose human rights are threatened. In the case of the mathematician seeking asylum in Europe, I informed the working group chair, and he publicized the case through his network and additional letters were sent to the immigration court in Europe. The AAAS Coalition is also concerned with broader issues of science and human rights. For example, Article 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights states that there is a right to enjoy the benefits of science, but this provision of the treaty has never been explored or articulated. The AAAS Coalition is working with the United Nations to develop the content of Article 15.

When the AMS joined the AAAS Science and Human Rights Coalition, there were no fees and no obligation other than to send representatives to the January and July meetings in Washington. The AAAS is now asking member organizations to pay dues to help defray the expenses of the Coalition. I strongly recommend that the AMS continue its membership in the Coalition. It is important that the AMS demonstrate that it understands that human rights and science are related, that there is a human right to do science and benefit from the advances of science, that we are committed to protecting the human rights of scientists around the world, and that we will work with other American scientific societies in these endeavors.

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