

Dr Condoleezza Rice  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20520

24 February, 2006

**Regarding: Visa policies and vetting practices for scientists visiting the USA**

Dear Dr Rice,

As Past-President and President-Elect of the International Council for Science (ICSU), we write to express grave concern about U.S. Government policies regarding the granting of visas to scientists. The immediate stimulus for our letter is the humiliating ordeal of our colleague Professor Goverdhan Mehta, a distinguished scientist and President of ICSU, when he applied for a visa on February 9, 2006 at the U.S. Consulate in Chennai. The details of his experience have been extensively covered in the media. Professor Mehta reports that he was treated rudely, insulted, and accused of being deceitful about his research, then sent home without a visa. The international scientific community has expressed outrage at this offensive treatment of a distinguished, highly decorated and decent scientist. We understand that the U.S. Ambassador to India has now telephoned Professor Mehta to apologize for this treatment and indicated that a visa will be granted shortly. Although we appreciate the efforts to begin to repair the harm done in this specific instance, we remain concerned about the difficulties that many scientists continue to have in obtaining visas and the messages that this sends to the world.

Professor Mehta is an eminent Indian chemist who has worked closely with scientists in the United States for many years. In 2001 he was a Tarrant Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University of Florida, the university whose recent invitation triggered the visa fiasco. Professor Mehta is a former President of the Indian National Science Academy and Director of the Indian Institute of Science – one of India's foremost research Institutes. His election as President of ICSU is strong testament to his international scientific stature and personal qualities. As President of ICSU, he represents the interests of the 104 National Member countries and the 29 scientific disciplines represented through their international Scientific Unions. We can personally attest to Professor Mehta's good judgement, decency, honesty, grace and wisdom, in addition to his acclaimed scientific contributions and reputation.

Professor Mehta's scientific contributions have significantly advanced science, and they underscore the key role that open exchange of scientists plays in enabling new discoveries that benefit society. These contributions have been possible in part because of his and other scientists' ability to travel to meetings, give lectures, interact freely with colleagues and students, and publish in the open literature. ICSU has long championed the importance of this open exchange of scientists and information. Until recently, the United States was widely viewed not only as a leader in science but also a strong proponent of the

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conditions for science to flourish. Recently, however, incidents such as the one involving Professor Mehta are communicating a very different message. Scientists from other nations no longer appear to be welcome in the U.S., and are often treated in a rude, hostile and degrading fashion. We are aware of many other instances in which the processes and treatment of scientists applying for U.S. visas are so onerous and degrading that those scientists and others are dissuaded from pursuing any further application.

In September 2002, ICSU wrote to Secretary Powell to express concern and offer assistance with regards to the impact that heightened security measures were having on scientific exchanges. In June 2004, one of us (JL) wrote to Dr. George Atkinson to express continuing concern over the same issue. Dr Atkinson's response, in September 2004, was encouraging and emphasized the importance for the U.S. of international cooperation in scientific education and research. He described a number of steps being taken to improve the situation and stated that the U.S. Government was reviewing procedures to facilitate the travel of scientific visitors attending conferences. We have witnessed progress on some fronts since then, but also continuing egregious problems such as Professor Mehta's recent humiliating treatment.

ICSU was created 75 years ago to facilitate the exchange of scientists and ensure that science contributes to a better world. We do not expect that scientists be exempt from legitimate concerns relating to national security but we do believe that science has a key role to play in overcoming those concerns, promoting common understanding among countries and enabling progress for the benefit of society. Non-discrimination and equity are essential elements of the Principle of the Universality of Science, a founding principle of ICSU, to which all our Members, including the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, are committed. We believe that respect for this Principle and for individual scientists should be the norm in any democratic society. The U.S. has always been a strong supporter of ICSU and its principles. We hope that U.S. support for these principles will soon be reflected not only in stated policies, but also in its practices.

The Executive Board of ICSU will be meeting in April and will consider what advice ICSU should give to its members in light of Professor Mehta's experience. On behalf of the international science community, we politely request that the necessary changes to procedures be rapidly implemented to ensure that *bona fide* scientists are not subjected to this type of hostility in the future.

Sincerely,



Jane Lubchenco  
ICSU Past-President



Catherine Bréchnignac  
ICSU President-Elect

Cc D. C. Mulford, U.S. Ambassador to India  
Dr G. H. Atkinson, State Department, Washington  
Dr J. H. Marburger, OSTP, Washington