

People

Scientists call for jailed Iranian student's release

Support is building for the jailed Iranian physicist Omid Kokabee on the second anniversary of his arrest. An open letter asking for Kokabee's "immediate release" was issued last month by the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) – a Tucson-based international society that "fosters the study of the Middle East". The letter came just a month after the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and Amnesty International set up an event in Washington DC to garner support for Kokabee and other jailed academics.

Born in Iran in 1982, Kokabee started a PhD in physics in 2007 at the Institute of Photonic Sciences in Spain, before moving to the University of Texas at Austin in 2010 to continue his studies. In February 2011, after a visit to Iran, Kokabee was arrested as he tried to go to Dubai, on his way back to the US. He was given a 10-year jail sentence in May 2012 for "illegal earnings" and "communication with a hostile government".

Friends of Kokabee, who prefer to remain anonymous, point out



Behind bars
Scientific societies have come out in support of Omid Kokabee, who was arrested two years ago this month.

that his many trips back to Iran – he made four or five in 2010 – may have raised suspicions, but they maintain he is not a political activist nor a scientist involved in nuclear research. Indeed, Kokabee himself has denied all charges in two open letters that he has written from jail. He claims not to have been allowed to meet his lawyer and denounced being held in solitary confinement.

"Kokabee has been treated in a manner that violates Iran's own constitutional guarantees to its citi-

zens," Charles Butterworth – chair of MESA's Middle East and North Africa committee for academic freedom – told *Physics World*.

The initiatives by the AAAS and MESA add to other petitions and letters in support of Kokabee, including those last year from the Committee of Concerned Scientists, the American Physical Society (APS) and the International Society for Optics and Photonics (SPIE). "This story is chilling for the free movement of talent," says SPIE director Eugene Arthurs. "Iranian students in the US are rethinking their intention to go back home."

Herbert Berk, chair of the APS committee on international freedom of scientists, says that Iranian scientists in the US are hoping that the regime will pardon Kokabee during the anniversary of the Iranian revolution this month, or at the latest at the next election planned for June. "There may even be a small probability that he has some fault, but the treatment he has received is anyway highly irregular," Berk says.

Michele Catanzaro

Funding

Russia announces massive \$70bn space boost

Russia is to spend 2.1 trillion rubles (\$70bn) over the next seven years on an ambitious programme to reassert the nation's position as a global space power. The space plan, the full details of which were published by the Russian space agency Roscosmos last month, aims to reinvigorate the country's ailing space industry as well as guarantee its access to space and space-based technologies. "The programme will enable our country to participate in forward-looking projects such as the International Space Station, the study of the Moon, Mars and other celestial bodies in the solar system," Russian prime minister Dmitry Medvedev told a press conference in Moscow in December 2012.

As well as bringing Russia's share of the space-technology market up from its current 10.7% to 16% by the end of the decade, the goals outlined in the programme include replacing the ageing Proton workhorse with

Bold ambitions

Russia is looking to revamp its ailing space industry with a new \$70bn package of measures.

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the Angara launch vehicle and completing the Vostochny spaceport that the government is currently building near Ulgorsk in the far east of Russia. Roscosmos chief Vladimir Popovkin revealed last month that the first mission to take off from the new base will be a lunar lander – dubbed Lunar-Glob – scheduled for 2015.

Russia's new space programme also reiterates plans to establish three separate space telescopes, which will operate at ultraviolet, sub-millimetre

and gamma-ray wavelengths, as well as improvements to the GLONASS satellite navigation system. Significant changes in the way the country's space industry is managed are proposed as well, including moving dozens of government-funded space enterprises under the umbrella of a handful of state-owned holding companies. The government hopes this will improve the skills of the workforce in the sector and get more private firms involved in developing space technology and infrastructure.

Russia's scientific and commercial space programme has been under the spotlight in recent months in the wake of a series of high-profile mission failures and other problems. The most recent was last December, when the upper stage of a Proton rocket failed, leading to a telecommunications satellite being placed in the wrong orbit. Underfunding is thought to be a significant factor in many of these difficulties, with the country's budget for space programmes languishing at \$3.3bn in 2010 and 2011 – around a sixth of NASA's budget for the same period.

Simon Perks