

Copyright © 2006 by The Chronicle of Higher Education  
From the issue dated March 10, 2006

## **After Visa Delay, Prominent Indian Scientist Spurns U.S. Invitation**

**By BURTON BOLLAG and SHAILAJA NEELAKANTAN**

The U.S. government has taken "exceptional measures" to grant a visa to a prominent Indian scientist whose difficulties in obtaining a visa in February caused outrage in India. U.S. officials scrambled to resolve the dispute before President Bush's trip to India last week. But the scientist's decision to drop his travel plans left the United States with a public-relations embarrassment.

Goverdhan Mehta, a professor of organic chemistry, is a former director of the Indian Institute of Science, a leading center of research and graduate education in Bangalore. He is also a science adviser to the Indian prime minister.

Mr. Mehta was scheduled to speak at an international scientific conference in the United States and to deliver lectures at the University of Florida, where he was a distinguished visiting professor in 2001.

But he gave up plans for the visit after trying unsuccessfully to obtain a visa.

On February 9 he traveled to an American consular office in Chennai (formerly Madras), one of only four U.S. consulates in India. There he waited for three hours to be questioned by a consular officer, only to be told that he would have to submit additional information.

"I have never been so insulted in my life," said Mr. Mehta. "They told me to prove that my work was not related to chemical warfare, and when I denied it and said my work is in the public domain, they accused me of hiding things."

### **Not An Apology**

Mr. Mehta's experience got widespread coverage in the Indian press. Nine days after his visit to the U.S. consulate, the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi issued a statement saying it "regrets" that Mr. Mehta and Placid Rodrigues, a prominent scientist who faced similar problems, "were upset by the visa-interview process."

U.S. officials have emphasized, however, that the statement was not an apology, and that Mr. Mehta's case had been handled correctly. Angela P.

Aggeler, a spokeswoman for consular affairs at the State Department, said the consular official was required by law to submit Mr. Mehta's request for additional screening because his research is covered by a "technology-alert list" of specialties with the potential for use in terrorism.

With Mr. Bush's first visit to India only a few days off, however, the State Department then rushed to approve the visa. The department took "exceptional measures to ensure that Dr. Mehta can travel to the United States as planned," said Ms. Aggeler.

Mr. Mehta said the U.S. ambassador to India called him personally to apologize for the incident.

"I told him I'm no longer interested and have informed my hosts in the U.S. as well that I am not coming," the scientist said. When U.S. officials insisted that they still wanted to give him the visa, he told them, "Fine, you can give it to me. But I am in no mood to go." The U.S. embassy, which had picked up his passport, inserted the visa before returning it.

The Indian chemist is president of the Paris-based International Council for Science, which represents 104 national scientific bodies from around the world and promotes international interaction among scientists from all countries. The group issued a statement expressing its "grave concern at the hostile treatment" Mr. Mehta received when he applied for a U.S. visa.

Carthage J. Smith, deputy director of the council, said Mr. Mehta "was very offended and insulted but does not want to make a big personal incident out of this. More important is that many scientists are still being treated this way."

### Speeding Up Visas

U.S. visa rules were tightened after the attacks of September 11, 2001, resulting in long delays for applicants. But it has been widely acknowledged that procedures for granting visas have improved substantially in the past two years. Each month the State Department handles about 2,000 visa requests from foreign scientists working in the many areas covered by the watch list, Ms. Aggeler said. "The vast majority," she said, are decided within 14 days, compared with an average of 75 days two years ago.

The Board on International Scientific Organizations, which reports to the National Academies, received 495 complains from foreign scholars about problems obtaining U.S. visas last year, compared with 941 complaints in 2004.

The situation has "vastly improved," said Wendy D. White, the board's director. But she added that many other foreign scholars may simply have given up trying to obtain a U.S. visa.

Ms. White called the publicity surrounding Mr. Mehta's case particularly worrisome. "A lot of our efforts are negated," she said, "when you have the president of a major international organization prevented from coming here."

Mr. Mehta said he would not rule out future trips to the United States — assuming he can get a visa — but sees his plight in larger terms.

"Although every country has to take into account their legitimate security concerns, there have to be some boundaries," he said. "Governments all over the world must see that the academic and scientific communities are given a slightly different kind of treatment because it is so important for us to have free exchange of ideas and interactions. This is how the frontiers of knowledge are expanded."

Volume 52, Issue 27, Page A40