

Iran bails out ICTP

The International Centre for Theoretical Physics (ICTP) in Trieste, Italy has been pulled back from the brink of a catastrophic financial crisis by the offer of a \$3m interest-free loan from the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The offer, which will be discussed early in December by the board of governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which administers ICTP, has meant that letters of dismissal about to be sent to all 140 ICTP staff have been put on hold.

The ICTP was founded in 1964 by the Nobel physics laureate Abdus Salam, who remains its director. It aims to foster the development of the fundamental sciences in the Third World (see box) and is funded primarily by the Italian government whose contribution, at L18bn (\$17m) a year, now amounts to around 90% of the ICTP budget administered through the IAEA headquarters in Vienna.

ICTP's financial crisis has arisen because of Italian parliamentary processes. In order to put funding on a longer-term basis than the current four-year agreements (the last was in force until the end of 1990), the Italian government has submitted a bill to parliament. This will cover 1991-98 and will raise its contribu-

tion to L20m. Procedural delays – which still continue – precipitated a cash crisis, despite staff agreeing to delay indefinitely a salary increase due in June 1990. "Towards the end of September the Agency realised there was not much money left in the ICTP budget, so it followed its rules very carefully and decided to send letters of dismissal to everyone from Abdus Salam down, at the end of October" says Seifallah Randjbar Daemi, who heads ICTP's high-energy research group. "The Italian government asked the Agency to postpone this until the end of November and accepted any financial damage that might cause. Abdus Salam at that point started an appeal for help."

Within days a response from Mostafa Moin, Iran's minister of culture and higher education (who has visited ICTP), indicated that the republic should be able to help. When its initial offer of a one-year loan proved unacceptable to the Agency, it was swiftly changed to a loan to be repaid only when the Italian funds became available. The interest-free loan is offered "in appreciation of all the services Professor Abdus Salam has done for science, and in the light of his commitment to the advancement of science in developing

ICTP activities

The chief objectives of the ICTP are:

- to help in fostering the growth of advanced studies and research in physical and mathematical sciences, especially in the developing countries;
- to provide an international forum for scientific contacts between scientists from all countries;
- to provide facilities for visitors, associates and fellows, principally from developing countries, to conduct original research.

The centre holds around 40 training courses, workshops and conferences each year and since 1964 has played host to more than 45000 scientists working at the centre for typically six-week periods. It operates three major laboratories – in microprocessors, high-temperature experimental superconductivity, and lasers and optical fibres – and runs numerous programmes and schemes outside Trieste.

countries". IAEA rules require the loan to be approved by its board of governors.

Sally Croft

● ICTP courses on computational physics (starting 13 January), electronic device simulation (3 February) and atom-radiation interactions (24 February) listed in the *Physics World* diary last month have been cancelled due to the situation.