Defending ‘Dangerous’ Minds
Reflections on the work of the Scholars at Risk Network

By Robert Quinn

Attacks on scholars and academic communities are not new. They date back at least as far as the 15th century when Greek scholars fled to Italy at the dawn of the Renaissance. Widespread persecution of scholars throughout Europe in the 1930s and 1940s is well-known. Fewer people realize that such attacks have continued right up to the present. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Cold War fueled purges of scholars throughout Eastern Europe, mirrored by anti-communist purges in America and elsewhere. The 1970s and 1980s saw anti-intellectual movements in China and Southeast Asia, and the rending of Latin America’s universities by civil wars and dictatorships. In the 1990s, African scholars and universities have suffered immensely from international and national conflicts and resource deprivation.

The Scholars at Risk Network exists to respond to such attacks. Its basic mission is to promote academic freedom by defending the human rights of scholars worldwide. Since it was founded in 2000, the Network has examined more than 450 cases and arranged more than 50 temporary visits to Network member universities and colleges for scholars experiencing persecution because of their work, prominence or exercise of their fundamental human rights.

Why are scholars attacked?
Evidence suggests that academic communities remain favorite targets for repression. In the information age, the scholar’s role in shaping the quality and flow of information in society is an unquestionable source of power. Repressive authorities intent on controlling societies naturally seek to control that power. Scholars are obstacles to these goals because the nature of their work requires the development of ideas, exchange of information, and expression of new opinions. Where the ideas, information and opinions are perceived by authorities as threatening, individual scholars are particularly vulnerable. Such scholars are labeled—explicitly or implicitly—as “dangerous,” “suspect,” “disloyal,” “dissident,” or “enemy” of the state, society, faith, family, culture, etc.

Examples of these types of targeted attacks are instructive. One professor of public health in North Africa published findings showing infant mortality at rates much higher than government figures. He was imprisoned. A political scientist from Southeast Asia and another from Europe published articles condemning violence by separatist movements in their respective countries and (continued on page 2)
calling for public rejection of violence and promotion of nonviolent conflict resolution. The former was assassinated outside his university, the latter survived an attempt on his life when a bomb planted in his car detonated too early. A sociologist from the Middle East conducted election monitoring with results strongly suggesting election fraud by the ruling party. He and more than a dozen colleagues were arrested, tried and imprisoned. In each case, the message of the scholar’s work was effectively repressed, at least within the scholar’s home country.

But what if the expressive activity that triggers the attack is not directly related to the scholar’s work? Physicists, for example, frequently find themselves harassed and even imprisoned but almost never as a result of their physics. Rather, in naturally pursuing their academic research they need contact with laboratories and colleagues in other countries. When authorities excessively restrict travel and other means of collaboration, dedicated scholars may begin publicly calling for greater openness, transparency and liberalization.

Sometimes it is not the scholar’s conduct at all but his or her status that triggers an attack. Because of their education, frequent travel and professional status, scholars are often prominent members of their community. This is especially true where a scholar is a member of a political, ethnic or religious minority, for female scholars and for scholars in developing countries where opportunities for advanced education are dearly limited. In these circumstances, an attack on an individual scholar may be a highly visible, highly efficient means for a repressive agent to intimidate and silence an entire community of people.

Most difficult are those situations where a scholar suffers very real threats to his or her security but where these same threats are experienced by the community in general: situations of internal armed, civil or international wars for example, where masses of persons are threatened with random violence.

Who is behind these attacks?
There is a tendency to assume that attacks on scholars are committed by a repressive state power—a dictator or junta. And sometimes that perception is correct. But the defense of academic freedom requires a more studied model. In some places the repressive agent is only one branch or wing of a government, like the military, the secret police, a ruling political party or sub-national authority. At other times it may be a non-government agent, including militants and paramilitaries. (Indeed, in some places scholars have come under attack from both the left, in the form of left-wing armed guerrilla movements, and the right, in the form of armed paramilitary death squads.) These also include religious authorities, criminal organizations or even otherwise-legal commercial enterprises.

What types of attacks are we talking about?
While any given scholar may suffer one or more types of incidents, frequently scholars experience a “dynamic of iso-
lation,” a pattern of incidents which escalate in intensity leaving a scholar alone and vulnerable to more serious, more violent attacks. For example a scholar typically will initially suffer some form of harassment, including perhaps warnings and surveillance. This may escalate to denial of accesses or permissions, confiscation of notes and computers files, professional or personal slander or defamation, or even physical or sexual intimidation. Somewhere along the way the scholar’s colleagues may themselves be warned to avoid the scholar, or may do so themselves, so as to avoid a similar fate. This leaves the scholar increasingly vulnerable to more serious pressures, including arbitrary dismissal, exile, arrest on false charges, detention with or without trial, imprisonment, even torture, disappearance and death.

Also worth noting are the types of wider attacks suffered by university communities as a whole. These include ideological pressure and censorship (including imposition of approved national ideology, book burning and ideological revisionism), closing of schools and universities, suppression of strikes/protests, restrictions on travel and exchange of information, discriminatory restrictions on academic resources including discrimination against women, indigenous peoples, and cultural or ethnic minorities.

**Why do we care about attacks on scholars?**

This is a question really in two parts. First, why should we care about scholars and academic freedom at all? In sum, we should care about increasing the quality and flow of information and understanding in the world, and academic freedom and scholarship promote these goals. Moreover, by defending scholars and promoting academic freedom in other countries, we invariably open discussions of the importance of academic freedom in our own communities—the results of which can only be constructive.

Second, and more difficult, is the question of why we should care about any particular scholars from countries other than our own. One simple answer is because their lives are at risk and we have the ability to save their lives.

Deeper answers are found in the reasons scholars are attacked. Scholars at Risk works not only to save lives but to save important voices. In those cases where scholars are attacked for the content of their work, we should ask ourselves what it is about that work that a state or other agent finds so threatening? More often than not, we will find truth and merit in the ideas or opinions expressed. By responding to these attacks, we gain insight and understanding for ourselves and help preserve the local intellectual capital of societies under threat.

When scholars are attacked as examples or to chill wider society, our efforts not only preserve voices but may help to forestall wider violations. Evidence from a number of countries strongly suggests that attacks on intellectuals precede wider violations of rights generally. By paying attention to these attacks on scholars early on, we may help to sound an alarm which can help to delay or forestall attacks on the

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**Some Do Not . . .**

In July of 2003, Dr. Alexander Naty, Department of Anthropology and Archeology at the University of Asmara, Eritrea, attended an international conference on Ethiopian Studies in Germany. He presented a paper on “Protestant Christianity among the Aari of Southwest Ethiopia.” Upon his return to Eritrea, he was briefly detained by the government, had his passport confiscated, and was fired from his position at the university. The charges against him were attending an “unauthorized” conference which “gave aid and comfort to the enemy.” Ethiopia and Eritrea have been at war off-and-on for the last 40 years. In the months following Dr. Naty’s dismissal, a long-standing illness grew rapidly worse. In December 2003, he died. Individual and institutional protest against his treatment went unheeded by both the Government of Eritrea and the closely associated administration of the University of Asmara.
wider community. At a minimum, by vigorously responding to attacks we raise the costs to the oppressors, which taxes their resources and over time may reduce the severity and frequency of attacks.

Finally, by responding to attacks Scholars at Risk and its member-institutions build solidarity within the global academic community. Through the Network, academic communities are directly involved in the defense of academic communities. Recognizing that a threat to freedom of thought and opinion anywhere is a threat to these freedoms everywhere, Scholars at Risk and its members give concrete example to a better, brighter future.

What have we learned?
Scholars at Risk’s experience indicates that a great deal can be done to reduce the severity and frequency of attacks. This is because of the simple fact that the primary tool of repressive agents is isolation, not violence.

Yes, violence is attendant to many attacks on scholars. Too many have been beaten, tortured, and even killed. But violence is often secondary. The primary tool of repressive agents is to isolate scholars, removing from society their voices, their thoughts, their ideas. Only the most clumsy of agents resort to open, physical elimination of individuals. Sophisticated oppressors use more subtle means of isolating, marginalizing, discriminating or stigmatizing scholars. As noted earlier, scholars may be barred from facilities or events, their travel restricted, their interactions with colleagues chilled by surveillance and other harassments; they may be discharged arbitrarily, or expelled from their community or forced into exile; they may be brought up on false charges, often alleging shameful or immoral conduct, or castigated in official media or local rumor networks. Often, these means of isolating scholars escalate in severity and danger. Beginning perhaps with friendly warnings about what would be good for one’s career, moving on to express directions to discontinue the disfavored activity, followed by physical threats against one’s self, family or friends—over time, as threats escalate, the scholar’s isolation deepens, leaving him alone and vulnerable. It is at this point that the scholar is at most risk of violence. Moreover, if it is not simply one scholar but many scholars in the same community who become isolated and cut off from each other in this way, entire campuses or academic systems can be threatened. We are nearing that point in some places today.

The good news is that with well planned, timely intervention this dynamic of isolation may be interrupted. And it is with that goal in mind that Scholars at Risk was founded.

After four years and more than 450 cases, we have learned a lot. Most of the 50 or so candidates who found positions through the Network had no other options. Sadly there are far more out there that we did not help. So we must continue and expand our efforts.

This work is essential, but it is not easy. Our mandate could not be more broad: to serve scholars from any country and any discipline. Language barriers make it hard to identify some deserving candidates, and harder still to assist those we do identify. We are working on solutions. Several scholars have taken intensive English-language training at the beginning of their visits. In one case we arranged for a scholar to teach courses in her native language (Chinese). In others we arranged for an advanced graduate teaching assistant or arranged co-teaching assignments. Non-U.S. host universities are essential to addressing this challenge over the long term. Already, Scholars at Risk has helped arrange visits to universities in France, Norway, Mexico, Australia, Nigeria and other countries. Over the next several years Scholars at Risk will actively seek new Network members outside the U.S., especially in countries where the language of instruction is not English.

Cultural barriers are also a challenge. Frequently new arrivals in the U.S. feel cut-off from the community or overwhelmed by the frenetic pace of the American university. Easy access to email and voicemail are new experiences. The related obsession with scheduling visits and even times to talk is confusing and off-putting. Academic cultures also differ greatly, where visiting scholars must adapt to students who expect more interactive teaching styles, greater in-class discussion and, frequently, fewer and shorter assignments. (One visiting scientist from Africa, for example, reported that his department chairman had to ask him to revise his grading scale upward because “American students expect to do better.”) None of these challenges are overwhelming nor are they necessarily unique to Scholars at Risk candidates, but they are important. Scholars at Risk is currently drafting a “best practices” manual that addresses these and other challenges.

Other challenges are unique to the population of visiting scholars assisted by the Network, and more specifically to those who are selected in part because of the risk or danger they face at home. The recent increase in processing times for visa requests not only in the U.S. but in most countries, for example, might further jeopardize scholars fleeing urgent dangers if they cannot obtain a visa in a timely fashion. Other scholars who do manage to leave their home country may need assistance in changing visa status to permit them to accept offered invitations or to remain lawfully within a third-country while their case is reviewed and a host institution identified.

Financial challenges have also been common, although not insurmountable. Scholars who have endured years of harassment (often including legal fees, other expenses or loss of income) or made hasty departures from danger frequently do not have much, if any, savings. If they do, the money is frequently not available once they leave their home country or would be so devalued by conversion as to be almost meaningless. Stipends and salaries normally would not begin until after the scholar’s arrival. An advance against these is often required to cover travel expenses, or to assist the scholar on
attachment, for example with the deposit on an apartment or to secure furnishings.

Sensitivity to the trauma of forced relocation and past experiences is also essential. While most scholars are able to resume their work relatively easily, some invariably will benefit from supportive encounters with other refugees, or even counseling professionals. Scholars may have personal security concerns, either for themselves upon their hoped-for return to their home country at the end of a visit, or for family members or colleagues left behind. For this reason many scholars prefer not to be identified in Network media reports for fear of reprisals. (Others of course prefer to be identified in the hope that further international notoriety will add a measure of security upon their return.)

Many scholars will face a painful, personal decision concerning their long-term plans. Should they accept refugee status or live with the uncertainty of exile, holding on to the faintest of hopes that change is coming at home, that one’s safe return will be possible soon, if not this year then next? Family issues obviously play a part in these questions. Even scholars who are single adults generally leave extended family behind. Married scholars frequently are forced to leave spouses and children, at least for an initial period while they reestablish themselves. Scholars at Risk has worked to arrange invitations for some scholars with families. But limited resources require us to focus on the scholars themselves.

While neither the Scholars at Risk office nor any given host university should be expected to resolve all or even most these challenges, Scholars at Risk works with each scholar and each host institution on a case-by-case basis to do whatever time and resources permit. Rather than shying away from these challenges, they provide the strongest evidence of the need for an organized effort like Scholars at Risk that centralizes experience and can offer assistance and best practices to institutions and scholars alike.

What can you do to help?
The most important thing to do is to pay attention to attacks on scholars. Nearly every day major U.S. and international news media include reports on scholars somewhere facing harassment or threat. Read these stories, discuss them with colleagues, and when possible report them to Scholars at Risk. Anyone may nominate suitable candidates for assistance through the Network, or for a fellowship through the IIE Scholar Rescue Fund.

You may also urge your institution to become a member of the Network. Membership requires the institution to endorse a statement that academics should be free to do their work without fear of persecution, to designate an official liaison (or more than one) to be the point of contact with the Network office, and to receive through that liaison periodic reports on scholars seeking assistance. Network members are asked to review this information, to circulate it within the institution and, where possible, to consider inviting one of the scholars listed to campus for a temporary visit. Even if your institution does not anticipate hosting a scholar in the near term, just by receiving and reviewing occasional case information you help Scholars at Risk find hosts for candidates. This is because most placements result from personal contacts, word of mouth. The more institutions that receive and circulate the information, the more likely we are to find a match for a colleague in need.

Some campuses have even gone a step further, forming local Scholars at Risk committees to receive the candidate information and evaluate the cases. These committees have also scheduled lectures, panels or other public events through the Scholars at Risk Speaker Series as a means of educating their community to the importance of academic freedom. These events have great power. Not only do they help to raise awareness of problems in other countries, but when people—especially students—learn of the variety and breadth of obstacles placed in the way of learning communities elsewhere, they tend to appreciate more the opportunities they have on our campuses. They tend also to appreciate more the importance of academic freedom and open discourse, and become more engaged in its defense.

The future of Scholars at Risk
Scholars at Risk is working to build on our experience and to improve our services for scholars and member institutions. With our recent relocation to New York University (from the University of Chicago) we have hired a full-time program officer, established a Network-wide advisory committee and launched a speaker series featuring formerly threatened scholars.

Over the next few years we hope to add training programs for scholars hosted by Network member institutions, including arrival and adjustment training and job-searching skills training. We also look to increase research and advocacy capacity in the area of standards-building, monitoring and reporting of violations, and public education. At the same time, we are also actively seeking to grow the Network, inviting especially new members from outside the U.S., with a focus on French, Spanish and Russian language institutions.

The final and most serious challenge facing Scholars at Risk is lack of resources. We are currently seeking new sources of funding to support our efforts to assist scholars and universities. Without substantial new funding, our plans to expand and even to continue our efforts could be threatened.

Joseph Stalin said, "Ideas are more powerful than guns. We would not let our enemies have guns. Why should we let them have ideas?" As long as there remain those who share this thinking and seek to repress new ideas, there remains a need for Scholars at Risk and its Network member-institutions to oppose them.

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