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**À:** Jean-Pierre Lees  
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## International Herald Tribune

- *Classement de l'article*
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### A physicist lingers in French custody

Colleagues and family of scientist held without charge begin to speak out

*“ It seems to us that there is no justification for the prolonged detention of almost 14 months so far.”*

When Adlène Hicheur, a French-Algerian physicist working on antimatter at CERN's enormous particle collider outside Geneva, was arrested on Oct. 8, 2009, on suspicion of conspiring with an Algerian branch of Al Qaeda, fears of doomsday plots rippled through the tabloid press.

CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, felt obliged to reassure the public that Dr. Hicheur did not have access to anything dangerous and that antimatter bombs as featured in the Dan Brown novel “ Angels and Demons” were for all practical purposes flights of fancy.

More than 500 days later, Dr. Hicheur, now 34, remains in preventive detention in a Paris prison, and has not been charged with any crime. Nor, say his lawyers and his family, has any evidence been produced that he did anything more than surf Islamic political Web sites. No trial has been scheduled.

After months of silence, Dr. Hicheur's family and colleagues have recently begun to speak out, urging his release. The issue, they say, is a simple matter of human rights. The long incarceration has turned Dr. Hicheur's life into a Kafka novel, they say, and is endangering his physical and mental health, as well as his career and his family.

Dr. Hicheur walks with a cane because of a herniated disc that was aggravated by his arrest and initial interrogation, his family said. Recently he was beaten up by another inmate in the Fresnes prison, his lawyer says. What physics news he gets comes by mail and during the three visits a week he is allowed with colleagues and family in a room one of his visitors described as barely bigger than a phone booth.

Under French law, a person suspected of terrorist connections can be held in “ provisional detention” for up to four years, depending on the nature of the alleged offense, without being charged or tried. Dr. Hicheur could be detained for up to two years, according to his lawyer, Dominique Beyreuther-Minkov.

Press officers for the French interior minister, Claude Guéant, did not respond to telephone and e-mail requests for comment on the case.

“ Somebody who is in prison without a charge, this is against all international laws,” said Michael Dittmar, a CERN physicist and leader of a lab group known as the ConCERNed for Humanity club, which discussed Dr. Hicheur's plight at a meeting last week. “ It's shocking how a person can disappear.”

Last fall, the Swiss government closed its own investigation of Dr. Hicheur, saying it had found no evidence of wrongdoing, but in France, Dr. Hicheur's detention was extended. Last month, it was extended again, by four months.

“ He’s losing hope of being released some day,” said Jean-Pierre Lees, a professor at the Laboratory of Particle Physics in Annecy-le-Vieux, France, where Dr. Hicheur earned his Ph. D. Dr. Lees has organized an international support committee.

“ Personally, I don’t believe he did anything wrong,” Dr. Lees said. “ He went on the Internet, chatting in a forum. The police tried to build a picture of a potential terrorist, but discussion does not make you a terrorist.”

Nearly 100 scientists, including the Nobel laureate Jack Steinberger of CERN, signed a letter to the French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, in December. They wrote: “ It seems to us that there is no justification for the prolonged detention, of almost 14 months so far, of Dr. Adlène Hicheur, an internationally recognized scientist, held in much esteem by his colleagues.”

At CERN, where the pursuit of nature’s secrets traditionally takes place in a bubble free of national or ethnic tensions, Dr. Hicheur’s situation has come as a shock, said Maurizio Pierini, a CERN physicist. “ The reality of the international situation came to us with some violence, while we were thinking we were not too much a part of it,” he said in an e-mail. “ And we were quite unprepared.”

As an international organization, CERN cannot get involved in legal proceedings of its member states, the lab’s spokesman, James Gillies, said by email.

Family and friends describe Dr. Hicheur as an observant Muslim and a shy but genial colleague and friend. His brother, Halim Hicheur, a physiology researcher in Grenoble, France, called him “ a good guy” and said he was the kind of “ theorist who just wants to understand.”

Dr. Hicheur was arrested at his parents’ apartment in Vienne just as he was about to travel to Setif, the Algerian town where he was born, to meet with a contractor about building a house on land he had recently bought there, and for which he had transferred about \$ 18,000, his brother said. He was also planning to meet with physicists at the University of Setif as part of a long range goal to establish research collaborations with physicists in Algeria.

According to press reports, Dr. Hicheur had been under surveillance for a year and had been in Internet contact with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the group’s North African affiliate. Shortly after the arrest, a French police official told Le Monde that Dr. Hicheur had planned to attack a military base in Annecy, France, that is home to an elite force that had recently left for Afghanistan. The French authorities have been silent ever since.

Dr. Hicheur’s lawyer, Ms. Beyreuther-Minkov, said she had petitioned for his release at least 15 times and was taking the case to France’s supreme court.

“ I feel like David facing Goliath,” she said by e-mail, “ but everybody knows the end of the story.”