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Physicist's Jailing Is Veiled in Mystery

By DENNIS OVERBYE

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.

Last fall, the Swiss government closed its 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. Press officers for France's interior minister, Claude Guéant, did not respond to telephone and e-mail requests for comment on the case.

So, more than 500 days after his arrest, Dr. Hicheur, now 34, remains in preventive detention in a Paris prison without having been charged with any crime. Nor, say his lawyers and his family, has any evidence been produced that he did anything more than browse 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 disk 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 regular mail during the three visits a week he is allowed with colleagues and family members, in a room that one visitor described as barely bigger than a phone booth.

"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 recent meeting. "It's shocking how a person can disappear."

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.

"He's losing hope to be 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 Jack Steinberger of CERN, winner of a Nobel Prize in Physics, 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."

The unusual thing about Dr. Hicheur's case, say his friends and supporters, is that it is happening to a scientist.

At CERN, where the pursuit of nature's secrets traditionally takes place in a setting 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 become involved in legal proceedings of its member states, the laboratory's spokesman, James Gillies, said by e-mail.

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 born in Sétif, Algeria, one of six children of a mason and a homemaker. When he was 1, the family moved to Vienne, France.

He and his siblings were first drawn to science in high school because it allowed the most flexibility in college, Halim Hicheur said by e-mail.

"We then, my brother and myself, graduated and became really passionate about science," he said, "first enjoying thinking about the origins of the universe, and myself being more attracted by life science -- by the brain in fact!"

Dr. Hicheur has spent his professional life trying to understand the difference between matter and antimatter, to explain why the universe is made of matter and antimatter. He has been the author or co-author of more than 100 papers.

After obtaining his Ph.D. under Dr. Lees at the Annecy laboratory, for work done partly at the SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory at Stanford, Dr. Hicheur worked at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory in Britain and then joined the Laboratory for High Energy Physics at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne in Switzerland. There, he is part of a team that operates LHCb, one of the giant particle detectors on CERN's Large Hadron Collider.

Dr. Hicheur was arrested at his parents' apartment in Vienne just as he was about to travel to

Sétif 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 to Algeria, his brother said. He was also planning to meet with physicists at the University of Sétif as part of a long-range goal to establish research collaborations with physicists in Algeria.

According to news reports, Dr. Hicheur had been under surveillance for a year and had been in Internet contact with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Al Qaeda'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 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."