

# Physics centre re-launches search for new director

Munich. Praveen Chaudhari, a Pakistan-born senior physicist at IBM's Thomas Watson Research Center in New York, last week formally turned down the directorship of the International Centre for Theoretical Physics (ICTP) in Trieste, northern Italy, after more than six months of negotiations had failed to achieve agreement on the terms of his contract.

Speaking during an earlier visit to India, Chaudhari said that he had withdrawn for "personal" reasons unrelated to the nature of the position. He said that he could have taken up the post next year, but that at present it was "not possible" to move from New York.

The loss of Chaudhari, who had been a popular choice, is a blow to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which established the centre in 1964 to provide high-level training for physicists from developing countries. Last month the Italian government, which pays around 90 per cent of the ICTP's costs, approved the transfer of administrative responsibility for the centre from IAEA to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (Unesco) in 1996, and IAEA is keen to have a new director in place by then.

The new director will succeed Abdus Salam, the ICTP's first — and so far only — director, who retired last year at the age of 78. Under Salam's guidance, the budget of the centre has increased from US\$350,000 when it was founded to more than US\$20 million, and it now receives more than 4,000 visiting scientists, mostly from developing countries, each year.

The search committee that put forward Chaudhari's name — made up of two representatives each of the Italian government, Unesco and IAEA, and two members of the centre's science committee — has now been reconvened. According to sources within the IAEA, the committee is unlikely to rec-

ommend a second name from the original short-list of four candidates, all citizens of developing countries, as none is likely to attract sufficient support.

Although there is no rule specifying that the director should be from a developing country, it is widely expected. But some scientists have been concerned about pressure from the Italian government to secure the appointment of an Italian scientist. Although denied by the IAEA and members of the selection committee, it is clear that there has been some attempted manoeuvring behind the scenes.

Antonino Zichichi, for example, director of the World Laboratory, which was set up in 1986 in Switzerland and receives two-thirds of its budget from Italy, says he has been approached "many times, by the Italian government, the search committee and the science committee" to allow his name to be put forward. He says that he declined because the director should be a theoretical physicist, rather than an experimental physicist like himself.

ICTP has always had to survive in an intensely political environment. In the early 1960s, as the Cold War gathered momentum, the Italian government successfully bid for the centre to be built in Trieste, close to the border with the former Yugoslavia, to help prevent the town from becoming isolated. Since then the centre has received generous support from successive Christian Democrat governments.

With the fall of the Christian Democrats, however, its close political connections with Rome have been severed. In the current political uncertainty, continued funding on the generous levels of the past can no longer be taken for granted. Financing is secure until the end of 1998. But a new law will be needed to continue funding for the centre after that.

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