

Stand up against the anti-technology terrorists

Home-made bombs are being sent to physicists in Mexico.
Colleagues around the world should ensure their own security,
urges Gerardo Herrera Corral

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My elder brother, Armando Herrera Corral, was this month sent a tube of dynamite by terrorists who oppose his scientific research. The home-made bomb, which was in a shoe-box-sized package labelled as an award for his personal attention, exploded when he pulled at the adhesive tape wrapped around it. My brother, director of the technology park at the Monterrey Institute of Technology in Mexico, was standing at the time, and suffered burns to his legs and a perforated eardrum. More severely injured by the blast was his friend and colleague Alejandro Aceves López, whom my brother had gone to see in his office to share a cup of coffee and open the award. Aceves López was sitting down when my brother opened the package; he took the brunt of the explosion in his chest, and shrapnel pierced one of his lungs.

Both scientists are now recovering from their injuries, but they were extremely fortunate to survive. The bomb failed to go off properly, and only a fraction of the 20-centimetre-long cylinder of dynamite ignited. The police estimate that the package contained enough explosive to take down part of the building, had it worked as intended.

The next day, I, too, was sent a suspicious package. I have been advised by the police not to offer details of why the package was judged of concern, but it arrived by an unusual procedure, and on a Sunday. It tested positive for explosives, and was taken away by the bomb squad, which declared a false alarm after finding that the parcel contained only books. My first reaction was to leave the country. Now, I am confused as to how I should respond.

As an academic scientist, why was my brother singled out in this way? He does not work in a field that is usually considered high-risk for terrorist activity, such as medical research on animals. He works on computer science, and Aceves López is an expert in robotics. I am a high-energy physicist and coordinate the Mexican contribution to research using the Large Hadron Collider at CERN, Europe's particle-physics laboratory; I have worked in the field for 15 years.

An extremist anarchist group known as Individuals Tending to Savagery (ITS) has claimed responsibility for the attack on my brother. This is confirmed by a partially burned note found by the authorities at the bomb site, signed by the ITS and with a message along the lines of: "If this does not get to the newspapers we will produce more explosions. Wounding or killing teachers and students does not matter to us."

In statements posted on the Internet, the ITS expresses particular hostility towards nanotechnology and computer scientists. It claims that nanotechnology will lead to the downfall of mankind, and predicts that the world will become dominated by self-aware artificial-intelligence technology. Scientists who work to advance such technology, it says, are seeking to advance control over people by 'the system'. The group praises Theodore Kaczynski, the Unabomber, whose anti-technology crusade in the United States in 1978–95 killed three people and injured many others.

The group's rhetoric is absurd, but I urge colleagues around the world to take the threat that it poses to researchers seriously. Information gathered by Mexican federal authorities and Interpol link it to actions in countries including Spain, France and

Chile. In April this year, the ITS sent a bomb — similar to the one posted to my brother — to the head of the Nanotechnology Engineering Division at the Polytechnic University of Mexico Valley in Tlaxitlan, although that device did not explode. In May, the university received a second parcel bomb, with a message reading: "This is not a joke: last month we targeted Oscar Camacho, today the institution, tomorrow who knows? Open fire on nanotechnology and those who support it!"

I believe that terror should not succeed in establishing fear and imposing conduct.

The scientific community must be made aware of such organizations, and of their capacity for destruction. Nanotechnology-research institutes and departments, companies and professional associations must beef up their security procedures, particularly on how they receive and accept parcels and letters.

I would like to stand up and speak in this way because I believe that terror should not succeed in establishing fear and imposing conduct that takes us far from the freedom we enjoy. I would like the police to take these events seriously; they are becoming a real threat to society. I would also like to express my solidarity with the Monterrey Institute of Technology — the institution that gave me both financial support to pursue my undergraduate studies and high-level academic training.

To oppose technology is not an unacceptable way to think. We may well debate the desirability of further technical development in our society. Yet radical groups such as the ITS overlook a crucial detail: it is not technology that is the problem, but how we use it. After Alfred Nobel invented dynamite he became a rich man, because it found use in mining, quarrying, construction and demolition. But people can also decide to put dynamite into a parcel and address it to somebody with the intention of killing them.

Additional information

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