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January 31, 2018

Dr. Alejandro Ceccatto

President, National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET)

Godoy Cruz 2290 (C1425FQB)

Buenos Aires, Argentina

Your Excellency,

I am writing to you as the Chair of the Committee on Human Rights (CHR) of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in the United States to express concern regarding criminal charges that have been brought against our scientific colleague, the internationally respected glaciologist Dr. Ricardo Villalba. The CHR advocates in support of scientists, engineers, and health professionals anywhere in the world who are, *inter alia*, facing charges as a result of their legitimate professional work. It is our understanding that, on November 27, 2017, Dr. Villalba was indicted for the crime of “abuse of authority” for allegedly failing to protect water sources in Argentina under a law meant to preserve glaciated areas.

It has come to our attention that, as the former Director of the National Institute of Snow, Ice and Environmental Research (IANIGLA) in Mendoza, Dr. Villalba led the first comprehensive glacier inventory in Argentina in 2012, and that the minimum glacier size set by this inventory was one hectare. Reports indicate that the legal case against Dr. Villalba is based on the argument that the inventory’s cut-off opened the way for a mining operation in northwestern Argentina near bodies of ice measuring less than one hectare, which in turn resulted in cyanide spills into the Jáchal watershed.

We are troubled greatly by the fact that the legal case against Dr. Villalba reflects a lack of understanding of the international scientific standards related to his work. As you know, hundreds of experts from Argentina and around the world have publicly vouched for Dr. Villalba’s scientific integrity and the glacier mapping methodology implemented in the IANIGLA inventory. Notably, the International Glaciological Society has expressed concern about the indictment, noting that the minimum threshold used in the inventory is common practice worldwide and scientifically justified.

It is our understanding that Dr. Villalba appealed his indictment on December 4 and is waiting to see whether the case will go to trial. In the interim, the court has ordered Dr. Villalba not to leave the country and has authorized a lien on his property. Apart from the negative impact on Dr. Villalba personally, the indictment in this case is likely to have a chilling effect on future environmental research in Argentina. We therefore respectfully request that you provide Dr. Villalba with the assistance he needs in order to ensure that the very worrying charges against him are dropped.

† Nobel Laureate
* ex officio member

The views expressed are those of the Committee on Human Rights.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Martin Chalfie".

Martin Chalfie
(2008 Nobel Laureate, Chemistry)

cc.

His Excellency Fernando Oris de Roa, Ambassador of Argentina to the United States of America

The Honorable Thomas Cooney, Chargé d'Affaires, Embassy of the United States of America to Argentina