



SEARCH APS NEWS

Sreenivasan Is New ICTP Director

Katepalli Sreenivasan, a distinguished university professor of physics and mechanical engineering at the University of Maryland, College Park, has been appointed as the new director for the Abdus Salam International Center for Theoretical Physics (ICTP) in Trieste, Italy. He succeeds retiring director Miguel Virasoro, who has held the post since 1993.

Founded in 1964 by Pakistani physicist Abdus Salam, the ICTP's mission is to provide opportunities for physicists from developing countries to interact with those from developed countries, while encouraging them to remain in their home countries. Its contributions to the international physics enterprise include visiting programs for international scholars, scientific workshops and conferences, remedial courses in science education, and distribution to developing countries of scientific journals, conference proceedings, and electronic databases. The Center houses a small but excellent permanent scientific staff in high energy physics, mathematics, condensed matter and statistical physics, and physics of weather and climate.



Photo Credit: Lalena Lancaster

Incoming ICTP Director Katepalli Sreenivasan (second center) meets at APS headquarters with Executive Officer of APS and Secretary-General of IUPAP Judy Franz (left); Chair of the APS Committee on International Scientific Affairs Peter Barnes (right); and APS Director of International Affairs Irving Lerch (standing).

Known as "Sreeni" to friends and colleagues, Sreenivasan received his education in India, first at the University of Bangalore and then at the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore, where he earned a doctorate in aerospace engineering in 1975. After two years of postdoctoral study in Sydney and Newcastle, Australia, he came to the U.S. as a researcher at Johns Hopkins University. Later he became the Harold W. Cheel professor of mechanical engineering and professor of physics, applied physics and mathematics at Yale University. He moved to Maryland in January 2001, where he directs the university's Institute for

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Physical Science and Technology. His primary fields of research are fluid dynamics and turbulence, and he has published extensively on these and other related subjects.

"Sreeni is a world renowned experimental physicist with an appreciation for theory and has a deep understanding of both the frontier research enterprise and the potential of intellectual talent in developing countries," said Irving Lerch, APS director of international scientific affairs of Sreenivasan's appointment. It comes at a particularly critical time in the Center's 30-year history. Originally the operation of the institute was the responsibility of the International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA), with additional support provided by UNESCO and the Italian government. Since 1992, governing authority has been transferred to UNESCO, and according to Lerch, with Virasoro's retirement, UNESCO is considering the tightening of the ICTP management. The implications of the new policy remain to be seen, but as the new director, Sreenivasan will play an important role in the future of the Center.

Furthermore, the Italian government is by far the largest financial supporter of the ICTP, and Lerch believes that "there is a real danger that the Center will be absorbed into the Italian institutional system and lose its original purpose." Sreenivasan, however, does not anticipate such an occurrence, since thus far the ICTP has been left autonomous. "Everyone recognizes that the Center is truly scientific in nature," he says. "It's worked very well thus far and there is no reason to change it now." His focus will be on improvements in management, a renewed commitment to the Center's original mission, and achieving greater renown for the quality of the scientific research done at the Center.

Sreenivasan also takes the helm in a radically changed international climate in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, with much harsher restrictions on travel and more difficulty in acquiring visas to travel to other countries, even for scientific exchange. However, Sreenivasan, a self-described optimist at heart, also believes that the tragedy has had a positive impact in terms of fostering the notion of an international community. "I think people have a greater understanding about why it is important to engage the rest of the world in some constructive way in order to be at peace ourselves," he said. "We recognize better now that events occurring on the other side of the world can affect us here in the U.S."

In fact, it was the chance to make a difference internationally and give something back to the world physics community that attracted Sreenivasan to the post, despite the personal sacrifices associated with accepting it. It means not only a substantial reduction in salary, but also the necessity of leaving his wife, a psychiatrist, and teenaged son in New Haven, Connecticut, at least until his son completes high school. "I am from one such developing country and I was received in the U.S. science community very well; I spent many years on the receiving end," he said. "I have done my best to create opportunities for others in turn, but this is an opportunity where the scope is substantially larger."

"I have always viewed physics as a unifying feature among the many divisions we have as human beings, bringing together physicists of different cultures, origin, background and economic progress," he said. "And perhaps many will act as ambassadors for this grand notion of a unified world." His belief in, and commitment to, the unity of physics is even reflected in his title: in addition to being director, he will also be the Abdus Salam professor. "I thought it would be nice to have an Indian with the title of a Pakistani professorship," he said. "I hope it is a symbol I can carry forward in my work with the ICTP."

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