

Mordechai Vanunu gets 18 years for treason - archive, 1988

28 March 1988: Vanunu gave the *Sunday Times* details of his eight years employment at a top-secret nuclear research centre in Israel

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Vanunu holds a copy of the original newspaper in which he revealed Israel's nuclear secrets, in Jerusalem, 2004. Photograph: Oded Balilty/AP

Mordechai Vanunu, the former technician convicted last week of treason and espionage for revealing the secrets of Israel's nuclear arsenal to a British newspaper, was yesterday sentenced to 18 years in prison.

The three judges in the Jerusalem district court said in passing sentence that they had taken into consideration Vanunu's solitary confinement in prison and his co-operation with the authorities.

But they rejected defence arguments that his motives were ideological.

Vanunu, aged 34, gave the *Sunday Times* details of his eight years employment at the top-secret Dimona nuclear research centre in the Negev desert. The paper concluded that Israel ranked as the world's sixth nuclear power and possessed as many as 200 atomic warheads.

Mr Avigdor Feldman, Vanunu's lawyer, repeated that he will appeal to the High Court of Justice. Mr Feldman maintained throughout the trial, which began last August, that Israeli courts had no jurisdiction in the case since his client was abducted abroad and brought home illegally to stand trial.

Vanunu's brother, Asher, said outside the guarded courtroom: 'I felt an injustice was committed against him. The trial was not conducted legitimately. No one was inside to see what was going on.'

Mr Feldman submitted a petition signed by 20 leading scientists, including 12 Nobel prize laureates, portraying Vanunu as 'a man of conscience'. The signatories, who included Linus Pauling and Carl Sagan, wrote: 'No greater regard can be shown by the court for the decent opinion of humankind than by acknowledging the lonely courage of Mordechai Vanunu.' Vanunu himself has been nominated for the 1988 Nobel peace prize by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation. Professor Richard Falk, an international law expert from Princeton University, was not allowed to testify on Vanunu's behalf. The court said it had already received a written deposition from him.

But he said afterwards: 'Secret acquisition of nuclear weapons is a very dangerous thing for a country, in particular for a political democracy. What made this a legitimate undertaking by Vanunu was that Israel is operating within the framework of a constitutional democracy.'

'Individual conscience is more important in the nuclear age than the security of the state. We cannot expect the state to always be right. It's necessary that individual citizens also take responsibility.'

Asked if it was not fair to charge Vanunu with treason, Professor Falk said: 'There may be a case for charging him with treason, but whether there's a persuasive case for convicting him of treason is another thing. Treason depends on intent.'

'I've never known of a case where someone has been nominated for the Nobel prize and convicted of treason at the same time.'

The state resisted attempts by the defence to open the case to the press and public.

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