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Human Rights Defenders from Iran and Zimbabwe receive 2006 Martin Ennals Award

Akbar Ganji, an Iranian investigative journalist turned activist, and Arnold Tsunga, a lawyer and a radio commentator from Zimbabwe, will receive the 2006 Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders (MEA) tomorrow.

Louise Arbour, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, will present the award at a ceremony at the Bâtiment des Forces Motrices in Geneva (Switzerland) on Wednesday 11 October 2006, 17h30, within the framework of the International North South Media Festival.

The Chairman of the Jury of the MEA, Hans Thoolen, described the laureates as “symbols of the human rights movement in their respective countries, where standing up for human rights and democracy is a dangerous activity; they continue to be involved in this struggle despite repressive measures and harassment”.

Akbar Ganji was detained in 2000 after he wrote articles implicating several officials in a string of murders of opposition intellectuals and writers in 1998. Later he was sentenced to imprisonment for “collecting confidential information harmful to national security and spreading propaganda against the Islamic system”. He was held for 6 years in punitive prison conditions in violation of international human rights standards. He was beaten by his guards and placed in solitary confinement. After a hunger strike last year and a spell in hospital, he was conditionally released in March. After a short recovery, he started a tour in order to introduce Iranian intellectual movements and democratic circles to leading philosophers, theorists, and human right activists. He has written extensively in reformist newspapers, many of which were shut down. While in prison, his writings were smuggled out and widely distributed, especially on the web. Most notably he wrote a Republican Manifesto in six chapters in March 2002, laying out his proposal for a fully-fledged democratic republic for Iran.

Arnold Tsunga is the chairperson of the Zimbabwe Human Rights Association (ZimRights) and trustee of the radio station Voice of the People (VOP), and one of the leading human rights lawyers in Zimbabwe. In recognition of his legal work on human rights and strong reputation in his field he became the new director of Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) in early 2003. Despite great personal risk, Arnold Tsunga has been representing individuals arrested under new, repressive legislation, including individuals who have been physically abused in custody. For representing these victims of human rights violations and denouncing the legal system and the human rights situation, he is constantly harassed and threatened. He was arrested several times and recently released on bail. His courage and work are internationally recognized: last June he was requested to speak out on behalf of human rights organizations at the first

session of the new United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva.

Background

The Martin Ennals Award for Human Rights Defenders (MEA) is a unique collaboration among eleven of the world's leading human rights organizations to give protection to human rights defenders worldwide. The Jury is composed of the following NGOs: Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Human Rights First, International Federation for Human Rights, World Organization Against Torture, International Service for Human Rights, Front Line, International Commission of Jurists, Diakonie Germany, International Alert, Huridocs.

The previous laureates are: Aktham Naisse, Syria (2005); Lida Yusupova, Russia; Alirio Uribe Muñoz, Colombia; Jacqueline Moudeina, Chad; Peace Brigades International; Immaculee Birhaheka, DR Congo; Natasha Kandic, Yugoslavia; Eyad El Sarraj, Palestine; Samuel Ruiz, Mexico; Clement Nwankwo, Nigeria; Asma Jahangir, Pakistan; Harry Wu, China (1994).

MEA Patrons: Asma Jahangir, Barbara Hendricks, Jose Ramos-Horta, Adama Dieng, Leandro Despouy, Robert Fulghum and Theo van Boven.

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