

October 7, 2010

Members of the Executive Board of UNESCO  
UNESCO Headquarters  
7, Place de Fontenoy  
75352 Paris 07 SP  
France

Cc: Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director-General

RE: A Plea to Cancel the UNESCO-Obiang International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences

Dear Members of the Executive Board:

The undersigned scholars, writers, and members of the literary community urge you to abolish the UNESCO-Obiang Nguema Mbasogo International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences, named for and funded by Equatorial Guinean President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo.

Public expression and the exchange of ideas define our very existence, as writers. We are thus troubled about the message UNESCO conveys by naming a prize after one of the world's most repressive dictators.

Thirty years after Mr. Obiang came to power and fifteen years since the discovery of oil, the country has the highest GDP per capita on the continent. Yet more than sixty percent of Equatoguineans live on less than one US dollar per day. Wealth that should be used to provide jobs, education, health care, and housing has instead been siphoned off by the ruling elite.] Censorship, kidnapping, indefinite detention and torture are regularly employed to maintain this *de facto* monopoly on the country's economic opportunities.

The United Nations Development Program found that of all countries tracked between 2000 and 2007, Equatorial Guinea spent the *least* portion of its government expenditures on education – a mere 4 percent. –The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture reported this year that in Equatorial Guinea “torture is systematically used by the police forces against persons who refuse to ‘cooperate.’” Reporters Sans Frontières has named President Obiang a “press freedom predator,” reporting that “there is virtually no diversity in the news media. The independent and opposition newspapers have an extremely limited readership, while the government keeps its monopoly of the broadcast media”. State-controlled radio famously broadcast in 2003 that Obiang was “the God of Equatorial Guinea” who could “decide to kill without having to give anyone an account and without going to hell”.

UNESCO's mission of safeguarding the free flow of ideas and promoting access to information and knowledge is undermined by honoring a man whose government shows absolute contempt for these concepts. We implore you to safeguard this mission by protecting UNESCO from becoming a vehicle for the self-aggrandizement of Equatorial Guinea's political elite at the expense of the human rights and dignity of its people.

The undersigned call on you to stand true to UNESCO's mission to "further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world," by taking clear, immediate steps to abolish the UNESCO-Obiang Prize and help UNESCO ensure that the \$3 million offered by President Obiang is instead used to address the education, health, and other basic rights of the people of Equatorial Guinea.

Sincerely yours,

Homero Aridjis, former Mexican ambassador to UNESCO, president emeritus of PEN International, president of the Grupo de los Cien (Mexico)

Mario Vargas Llosa, Nobel laureate (Peru/Spain)

Sergio Ramírez, member of the Academia de la Lengua (Spain and Nicaragua), former vice-president of Nicaragua (Nicaragua)

Gloria Guardia de Alfaro, member of the Academia de la Lengua (Panama, Spain, Colombia, and Nicaragua), vice-president of PEN International, president of the Iberoamerican Foundation of PEN International (Nicaragua)

Alejandro Jodorowsky (Chile)

Elena Poniatowska (Mexico)

Rubén Gallo (Mexico)

Juan Villoro (Mexico)

Francisco Martín Moreno (Mexico)

Alberto Ruy Sánchez (Mexico)

Ilan Stavans (Mexico)

Guadalupe Loaeza (Mexico)

Elsa Cross (Mexico)

Octavio Prenz (Argentina)

Horacio Armani, member of the Academia Argentina de Letras and corresponding member of the Real Academia Española (Argentina)

María Esther Vázquez, president of the Fundación Victoria Ocampo (Argentina)

Jaime Ingram Jaén, former Ambassador of Panama to Spain, director of the Editorial de la Universidad Nacional (Panama)

Omar Jaén Suárez, former Ambassador of Panama to France and former Permanent Representative of Panama to UNESCO (Panama)

Alfredo Figueroa Navarro, professor of sociology, Humanities Faculty, University of Panama (Panama)

Ana Elena Porras (Panama)

Francisco Goldman (Guatemala/United States)

Fernando Rendón, director of the Medellín International Poetry Festival, “Right Livelihood” prize winner (Colombia)

Cecilia Balcazar (Colombia)

Gabriel Jaime Franco (Colombia)

Sarah González de Mojica, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (Colombia)

Tatiana Lobo (Costa Rica)

Isabel Gamboa Barboza (Costa Rica)