

May 26, 2010

Ms. Irina Bokova
Director General, UNESCO
UNESCO Headquarters
7, Place de Fontenoy
75352 Paris 07 SP
France

Cc: UNESCO Executive Board, via email

Dear Ms. Bokova:

RE: Public health and science professionals ask UNESCO to abolish the UNESCO-Obiang Nguema Mbasogo International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences

We, the undersigned professionals, scholars, advocates, and other members of the public health and science community write to you with the hope that UNESCO will reconsider its decision to establish and award the UNESCO-Obiang Nguema Mbasogo International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences, and will abolish this prize, named for and funded by President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea.

As professionals concerned with advancing the public's health and well-being, and alleviating mass suffering that comes from poverty and disregard for human rights, we are concerned about the message UNESCO conveys by linking such a prize with President Obiang's name. Thirty years after Mr. Obiang declared himself President of Equatorial Guinea and fifteen years since the discovery of oil, the country has the highest GDP per capita on the continent. Yet health indicators reflect shockingly poor governance and widespread suffering.

Despite a per capita GDP comparable to that of wealthy nations like Italy and Spain, life expectancy in Equatorial Guinea is a mere 49.9 years, putting the country at number 168 of the 182 countries ranked by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Only 43 percent of the population has access to clean drinking water, and only 51 percent has access to toilet facilities. More than one out of five infants fail to survive to their fifth year, giving Equatorial Guinea the fourth worst under-5 mortality ranking in the world, according to UNICEF. The government spends only seven percent of its total expenditure on health (ranking it at 153 of the 191 states measured by UNDP).

Compounding these problems, President Obiang's government tolerates virtually no opposition or dissent. Although, technically, the law provides for human rights NGOs to exist, none focusing on abuse of civil or political rights by the government or on official corruption seems to have been able to register or make public reports. UN human rights experts and other respected human rights monitors have repeatedly criticized the government for its use of unfair trials, arbitrary arrests, incommunicado detentions, and systematic torture.

We believe the most perfunctory examination of President Obiang's record on human rights and meeting the needs of the people makes it clear that he is cynically attempting to use UNESCO to legitimize his abusive regime.

We understand UNESCO believes "each UNESCO Prize carries a moral and symbolic value" and that "the Director-General shall ensure all necessary ethical considerations have been undertaken regarding the integrity of donor before a prize donation is accepted". We believe that if UNESCO is to stay true to its mission and advance its commitment to human dignity for all, the UNESCO-Obiang Nguema Mbasogo Prize must be ended.

We look forward to your reply and invite you to remain in contact with the undersigned via Francoise Girard, Director, Open Society Institute Public Health Program, at concernedpublichealthgroups@sorosny.org.

Yours,

Organizations

Africa Action
African Services Committee
AIDS-Free World
Center for a Livable Future, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
Center for Reproductive Rights
Healthright International
Human Rights Center, University of California at Berkeley
The International Federation of Health and Human Rights Organisations
Open Society Institute - Public Health Program
Physicians for Human Rights
Zimbabwe Association of Doctors for Human Rights

Members of the Executive Committee of the International Human Rights Network of Academies and Scholarly Societies

Arjuna Aluwihare, Professor of Surgery, University of Peradeniya (Sri Lanka)
Claude Cohen-Tannoudji, Nobel Prize in Physics, 1997 (France)
Abdallah S. Daar, UNESCO Avicenna Prize for Ethics in Science, 2005; Member, UNESCO International Bioethics Committee (Oman/Canada)
Felton Earls, Professor of Human Behavior and Development, Department of Society, Human Development, and Health, Harvard School of Public Health (United States of America)
Belita Koiller, L'Oreal UNESCO Laureate for Women in Physical Sciences, 2005 (Brazil)
Ida Nicolaisen, Former Vice-chair of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (Denmark)
John Polanyi, Nobel Prize in Chemistry, 1986 (Canada)
Alenka Selih, Professor Emeritus, University of Ljubljana Faculty of Law, former member, Steering Committee on Crime Problems, Council of Europe (Slovenia)

Scholars and Professionals (*Organizational affiliation listed for identification purposes only.*)

Dr. Chris Beyrer, Professor, John Hopkins School of Public Health
Sofia Gruskin, Associate Professor, Director of the Program on International Health and Human Rights, Department of Global Health and Population, Harvard School of Public Health
Dr. Robert S. Lawrence, Professor of Environmental Health Sciences, Health Policy, and International Health, Director, Center for a Livable Future, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
Martin McKee, Professor, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine
David Stuckler, Research Fellow, Department of Sociology, Christ Church, Oxford University
Gill Walt, Professor, International Health Policy, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine

Additional Individual Signatories (*Updated June 10*)

Yuan Tseh Lee, Nobel Prize in Chemistry, 1986 (Taiwan)
Judy Oder, Africa Programme, Interights (United Kingdom)
Dr. Saman Yazdani Khan, Centre for Health and Population Studies (Pakistan)

Additional Organizational Signatories (*Updated June 10*)

Socio-Economic Rights Accountability Project (Nigeria)
The Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (Egypt)