

May 10, 2010

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

Cc: The Executive Board of UNESCO

RE: Failure to Halt the UNESCO-Obiang International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences

Dear Ms. Bokova,

We are writing to you again regarding the UNESCO-Obiang Nguema Mbasogo International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences, this time to convey our deep disappointment that UNESCO has not cancelled this award, which is named after and funded by the highly corrupt and abusive ruler of Equatorial Guinea, President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo.

As you are aware, a number of countries represented on UNESCO's governing Executive Board objected to the prize when it was established at the 180th session of the Executive Board in October 2008. More recently, UNESCO received several communications from Equatoguinean human rights defenders, global civil society groups, scholars, and others that urged that it cancel the prize without delay.

Nevertheless, on April 22 UNESCO informed governments that it plans to award the UNESCO-Obiang prize for the first time at the end of June 2010. This announcement came shortly after the UNESCO Executive Board concluded its 184th session on April 15 without taking any action to end the long standing controversy over this prize.

We are troubled by the manner in which the decision to proceed with this prize was made and communicated. After several of our groups registered our concerns with you and the full Executive Board in a letter dated January 21, 2010, and others wrote to you and the Executive Board on March 4, 2010, we received a response from UNESCO indicating that the matter of the UNESCO-Obiang prize "is the prerogative of UNESCO's governing bodies," notably its Executive Board. However, at the recent meeting of the Executive Board you did not provide any indication that UNESCO was preparing to move ahead with the prize. To the contrary, you noted the controversy surrounding this prize in an April 6 speech and announced that it once again had been postponed. No timeline for the postponement was specified, nor at that time do you appear to have invited the Executive Board to decide how to proceed with this sensitive matter. It thus came as a shock and a major disappointment to learn that the UNESCO-Obiang prize is now set to be awarded in June 2010.

With this decision, UNESCO has squandered a critical opportunity to safeguard its reputation. UNESCO's credibility is irreparably harmed when it disregards the dire conditions faced by the people of Equatorial Guinea and permits an autocrat to use the organization to launder his image. The grim irony of awarding a prize recognizing "scientific achievements that improve the quality of human life," while naming it for a president whose thirty-year rule has been marked by the brutal poverty and fear of his people and a global reputation for governmental corruption, would bring shame on UNESCO.

Other UN agencies, by contrast, have been clear about the disastrous development and human rights record of Equatorial Guinea. Among other problems, they have documented rampant torture by the police, pervasive repression, the absence of media freedom, widespread discrimination, neglect and deterioration of economic and social rights, and needless poverty attributable to extensive official corruption and mismanagement. Many governments that are Member States of UNESCO likewise have been outspoken about the severe human rights problems in Equatorial Guinea, including during recent sessions of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. UNESCO's valuable work risks being overshadowed by this ill-conceived alliance with one of the world's most infamous dictators. We urge you to reverse course before it is too late.

Moreover, we would like to highlight the urgent need for UNESCO to investigate the source of the millions UNESCO accepted from an autocrat who enjoys fabulous wealth from his nation's petroleum riches while keeping his people mired in poverty. Equatorial Guinea's oil wealth gives the country a per capita GDP on a par with Italy, South Korea, and Israel, yet its own government acknowledges that over 75 percent of Equatorial Guinea's population lives in poverty, inevitably begging the question where the money has gone. Yet President Obiang's government has distinguished itself for its unwillingness to implement meaningful transparency regarding its oil revenues, as exemplified by its expulsion from the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative just last month. According to evidence produced in 2004 and 2010 investigations by the U.S. Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, President Obiang and close family members have diverted tens of millions of dollars of State resource earnings for their private benefit. Some of these charges are now under judicial investigation in Spain.

Under these circumstances, the blurred distinction between national wealth and the private holdings of Equatorial Guinea's elite may be seen in the financing of the UNESCO-Obiang prize itself. While UNESCO documents credit the \$3 million grant to what sounds to be a private philanthropic entity—the "Obiang Nguema Mbasogo Foundation for the Preservation of Life"—the Executive Board documentation also states that it is "the Government of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea [that] proposed to establish and finance [the] prize." This matter merits careful scrutiny and public clarification.

Finally, we repeat our call for the \$3 million that UNESCO has accepted from President Obiang to be applied to the education and welfare of Equatoguineans, rather than the glorification of their president. We respectfully propose that these funds be used to provide rudimentary educational supplies for primary schools and to address other long neglected needs in Equatorial Guinea.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We look forward to your response, which you may direct to the undersigned via Tutu Alicante, executive director of EG Justice, at tutu@egjustice.org.

Yours,

Basil Fernando, Executive Director
Asian Legal Resource Center (Hong Kong)

Manuel Ollé Sesé, President
Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos de España (Spain)

William Bourdon, President
Association Sherpa (France)

Moataz El Fegiery, Executive Director
Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (Egypt)

Moses Mkandawire, Director, Church and Society Program
CCAP Synod of Livingstonia (Malawi)

Gastón Chillier, Executive Director
Center for Legal and Social Studies (Argentina)

Ignacio Saiz, Executive Director
Center for Economic and Social Rights (International)

Undule Mwakasungula, Executive Director
Center for Human Rights and Rehabilitation (Malawi)

Gustavo Gallón, Director
Colombian Commission of Jurists (Colombia)
and Former Special Representative on the situation of human rights in Equatorial Guinea,
United Nations Commission on Human Rights (replaced by the Human Rights Council)

Bubelwa Kaiza, Executive Director
Concern for Development Initiatives in Africa
and Coordinator
Publish What You Pay Coalition (Tanzania)

Giyani Dube, Acting CEO
Creative Writers and Arts Workshop (South Africa)

Ka Hsaw Wa, Co-Founder and Executive Director
EarthRights International (International)

Rev. Malcolm Damon, Executive Director
Economic Justice Network (South Africa)

Tutu Alicante, Executive Director
EG Justice (United States)

Simon Taylor, Director
Global Witness (International)

Elizabeth Chyrum, Executive Director
Human Rights Concern (Eritrea)

Kenneth Roth, Executive Director
Human Rights Watch (International)

Phebe Mavungu Clement, Legal Officer, Africa Regional Program
International Commission of Jurists (South Africa)

Yves Tankwey Sapa, Coordinator
Jeunesse Unie pour le Développement Intégral (Democratic Republic of Congo)

Liudmilla Alexeeva, Chair
Moscow Helsinki Group (Russian Federation)

James A. Goldston, Executive Director
Open Society Justice Initiative (International)

Bernard Taylor, Executive Director
Partnership Africa Canada (Canada)

Max M. de Mesa, Chairperson
Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (Philippines)

Hernán Charosky, Executive Director
Fundación Poder Ciudadano (Argentina)

Paul Cook, Advocacy and Media Director
Tearfund (United Kingdom)

Solange Fiaty, Secretariat Coordinator
West Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (Togo)

Caroline Claire Yankep, President
World Dynamics of Young People (Cameroon)

Gabriel Shumba, Executive Director
Zimbabwe Exiles Forum (South Africa)