

Press freedom orgs, journos against UNESCO-Obiang priz

African and international press freedom groups, civil society organisation and concerned journalists have signed a letter addressed to the UNESCO Executive Board calling for abolishment of the UNESCO Obiang Nguema Mbasogo International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences.

“ Dear Executive Board Delegates, We, the undersigned Africa-based press freedom organizations and journalists, write to express our firm opposition to the UNESCO Obiang Nguema Mbasogo International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences and to call on you to revoke the prize at your upcoming session. UNESCO, as an organization that champions freedom of expression and promotes press freedom in particular, should never have accepted the \$3 million donation that President Obiang of Equatorial Guinea made to fund a prize. President Obiang's regime, in power for 32 years, has routinely stifled press freedom and silenced critical voices. Although a small percentage of the local population is able to access foreign news via internet and satellite broadcasts, the government tightly controls most forms of media, limiting citizens' access to information. The government or members of President Obiang's family control the country's television and radio stations, and all regularly produced print media are controlled by the state or the president's close associates. Both domestic and foreign journalists are routinely harassed, detained, and censored. In February 2011, the government banned local broadcasters from reporting on the Arab Spring uprisings. A presenter of the state-controlled radio station was subsequently suspended for mentioning Libya on air. In June 2011, a German television crew had their footage destroyed by authorities before being deported from the country, after filming in poor neighborhoods of the capital and interviewing a human rights lawyer and an opposition party member. We understand that President Obiang has offered to remove his name from the prize, but that does not erase our serious concern that his \$3 million donation links him and the abuses of his government to UNESCO, thereby undercutting the organization's worthy mission. We also are aware of concerns that the funds may be tainted by the high-level corruption for which Equatorial Guinea is well-known. It is public record that ongoing corruption investigations in France and the U.S. have led to the seizure of assets belonging to President Obiang's son, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue. Documents released as part of separate investigations by the U.S. Senate and the U.S. Department of Justice suggest a pattern of systematic corruption at the highest levels of President Obiang's regime. Unfortunately, journalists inside the country are not able to report on these developments, given the severe restrictions they face. As an organization that advocates "access to information and knowledge," UNESCO should not accept money from a leader whose decades-long record represents an affront to those principles. We urge you to definitively abolish the UNESCO Obiang prize and implement new guidelines that will prevent in the future the creation of prizes that directly or indirectly, through their association with individuals or governments, contradict UNESCO's core mandate. Sincerely, ”

The letter was signed by African journalists and African-based media freedom organisations, including:

Donat Mbaya, president, Tshivis T. Tshivuadi, secretary general of Journaliste en danger (JED) (Democratic Republic of Congo); West African Journalists Association (International); Trevor Ncube, executive deputy chairman and CEO of the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper and chairman of Alpha Media Holdings (Zimbabwe); Gabriel Baglo, Director, International Federation of Journalists Africa Office (International); M. Omar Faruk Osman Nur, President of Federation of African Journalists (International); Cheriff Moumina Sy, chairperson of African Editors' Forum (International); Makan Kone, president of Maison de la Presse du Mali (Mali); Stéphane Goué, secretary general of Comité Ivoirien pour la Protection des Journalistes (Cote d'Ivoire); Alex Gustave Azébazé, secretary general of Syndicat national des journalistes du Cameroun (Cameroon); Fatou Jagne Senghore, regional representative of ARTICLE 19 West Africa (International); Célestin Lingg, secretary general of Réseau Médias pour les Elections (Cameroon); Kader Diop, a retired journalist (Senegal); Kenneth Y. Best, senior managing director of Liberian Observer Corporation (Liberia); Gwen Lister, founding editor of *The Namibian* (Namibia); William Saidi, retired journalist (Zimbabwe); Boubacar Diallo, president of la Maison de la presse du Niger and l'Association nigérienne des éditeurs de la presse

indépendant (Niger); Stanis Nkundiye Angalikiyana, president of L'Union des Syndicats des Professionnel de la Presse d'Afrique Centrale (Central African Republic); Peta Thornycroft, freelance journalist (Zimbabwe); Kwame Karikari, executive director of the Media Foundation of West Africa (Ghana); Andrew Mwenda, managing editor of *The Independent* (Uganda); Fred M'membe, editor in chief of *The Post* (Zambia); Raymond Louw, veteran journalist and former editor of *Rand Daily Mail* and *Southern Africa Report* (South Africa); and Rafael Marques de Morais, award-winning investigative journalist and human rights activist (Angola).

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