

Migrant rights defenders | Prestigious human rights prize awarded to refugee rights defender

13.02.2019

A Sudanese refugee activist held in the Australian immigration detention and processing system for over five years, Abdul Aziz Muhamat, is the 2019 Martin Ennals Award Laureate. He was among three finalists, selected by a jury of ten of the world's leading human rights organisations, together with Marino Cordoba Berrio (Colombia) and Eren Keskin (Turkey). The three of them were honoured today during a ceremony organised by the City of Geneva.



'This award sheds light on the very cruel refugee policy of the Australian Government. It also brings international attention to the dangers and ill-treatment faced by refugees all over the world, including in countries that claim they uphold the Refugee Convention', Muhamat declared in accepting the Award.

Safe and free

Abdul Aziz Muhamat fled from the war in Darfur and sought refuge in Australia. In October 2013, he was forcibly transferred to the island of Manus (Papua New Guinea), as part of Australia's 'offshore' refugee policy, when the boat he was on was intercepted by the authorities. More than five years on, he is still stranded on the island, like hundreds of refugees and asylum seekers, and subject to deprivation, harassment, humiliation and violence. 12 men have died in Australia's offshore detention and transit centres in the last few years, murdered by guards, dying for lack of medical treatment, or committing suicide after losing hope.

'This young man was only 20 when he first arrived on Manus island. Since then, he never stopped raising his voice for those who have been stripped of their most basic rights together with him. He shows extraordinary tenacity and courage, always resisting peacefully even after a police officer shot him in the leg', explained Dick Oosting, Chair of the Martin Ennals Foundation. 'The Australian Government must meet its international obligations and put an end to these inhumane practices.'

Living conditions on Manus island have been denounced by human rights organisations. 'Men are dying, notably for lack of appropriate medical care. Some of them committed suicide. We need safety, we need freedom, we need hope. Opposing this cruel system helps preserve my self-esteem and my human dignity', Muhamat explained. 'I will continue to fight until all of us are safe and free.'

'This Award recognises courage in the face of cruelty, resilience in the face of repression. It is because of the front line testimony and advocacy of defenders like Abdul Aziz Muhamat that the world is awakening to the illegality and immorality of Australia's refugee and asylum seeker policy and increasing pressure for change,' said ISHR Director Phil Lynch.

Marginalised groups

Two other human rights defenders were among the finalists for the 2019 Martin Ennals Award.

Marino Cordoba Berrio (Colombia) is a leading figure within the Afro-Colombian community, which has been repeatedly stripped of its rights and lands. For two decades, he has struggled for the rights of his ethnic and other marginalised groups, at the risk of his own life in a country where more than 400 social leaders and human rights defenders have been killed in the past two years.

'Historically, we have suffered from political, economic and social exclusion. To seek and obtain justice for my people is crucial for our survival. Under the peace agreement and thanks to our efforts, ethnic groups' rights are recognized and so is the need to protect them. It's high time for the government of Colombia to meet its commitments and put an end to the escalating violence affecting our communities', stressed Marino Cordoba Berrio.

Eren Keskin (Turkey) is a lawyer who has been engaged for over 30 years in advancing the rights of women, Kurds and LGBTI persons. Recently, she was sentenced to twelve and a half years in prison for supporting the shuttered pro-Kurdish newspaper Özgür Gündem. She has been accused of 'denigrating the Nation' and 'insulting the President' in her chronicles.

'Freedom of expression and freedom of thought are severely punished in Turkey nowadays. The government tolerates no dissenting voices. I know that by resisting we can change the world. Thank you for not forgetting us. Your solidarity and support give me the courage to continue the struggle', she said.

The Martin Ennals Award for human rights defenders is given out since 1994. It honours individuals who have shown outstanding commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights, despite the risks involved. The award aims at shedding light on their situation and their work. It provides them with international recognition and protection, as well as financial support to pursue their activities.

With the active support of the City of Geneva, the Award was presented to the laureate by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, during a ceremony in Geneva. Two out of three finalists attended the ceremony. Unfortunately, Eren Keskin is banned from traveling and has therefore not been allowed to leave Turkey.

The jury of the Martin Ennals Award comprises of ten of the world's leading human rights organisations: Amnesty International, FIDH, Human Rights First, HURIDOCs, International Service For Human Rights, Brot für die Welt, Front Line Defenders, Human Rights Watch, the International Commission of Jurists and the World Organization Against Torture.

For more information:

- Phil Lynch, Director, International Service for Human Rights, at p.lynch@ishr.ch or +41 76 708 4738
- Michael Khambatta, Martin Ennals Foundation, at khambatta@martinennalsaward.org or +41 79 474 8208

Photo: <http://www.martinennalsaward.org/>