

Sakharov Prize: "Prize ensures winners' voices are heard throughout the world"



Nobel Peace laureate Shirin Ebadi (left) and Karim Lahidji, founder of the Iranian Association of Jurists and of The League for the Defence of Human Rights in Iran

Harassed, arrested but not forgotten. Film director Jafar Panahi and Lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh are paying the price for defending human rights in their native Iran as Mr Sotoudeh is now in prison and Ms Panahi is facing a six-year sentence. Yet, their struggle has not gone unrecognised. This year the European Parliament awarded them the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought. As they were unable to pick it up in person, they designated people to represent them during the ceremony on 12 December.

We had an interview with two of their representatives: Nobel Peace laureate Shirin Ebadi and Karim Lahidji, founder of the Iranian Association of Jurists and of the League for the Defence of Human Rights in Iran.

What will be the impact of this year's Sakharov Prize on the situation in Iran?

Shirin Ebadi: It drew international attention to the fight of political prisoners in Iran, especially the imprisoned lawyers.

Karim Lahidji: On the one hand the Sakharov Prize sends out a message of gratitude to political prisoners, on the other hand it is also a message of solidarity with people who are defending human rights and the whole of civil society in Iran.

How do you think this prize will change the lives of the laureates?

S. E.: The Sakharov Prize provided the laureates with a platform which ensures that their voices are heard throughout the world. Thanks to this prize, the laureates will be able to achieve their objectives sooner.

K. L.: Most political prisoners in Iran are completely isolated. They don't only struggle to contact the outside world, but also their own families. As a result, they are not able to pass on a message or to know what is happening on the outside. This prize is a message aimed directly at political prisoners, human rights activists and Jafar Panahi and Nasrin Sotoudeh

What more do you think the EU and the Parliament could do to help improve the situation in Iran?

S. E.: The EU has to add more names to the black list it compiled of individuals from Iran who violated human rights. It should also increase the sanctions. But the sanctions should be smart: they should weaken the government without harming the people. One concrete suggestion to the European Parliament is to forbid Iran's government's use of European satellites for broadcasting their international state media programmes.

K. L.: Next June there will be presidential elections in Iran. We would like to have international observers to keep an eye on the proceedings.