Ladies, Ibrahim and Reporters joint Sakharov prize winners

European Parliament President Josep Borrell presented the 2005 Sakharov Prize for freedom of thought during Wednesday's plenary session in Strasbourg. The award recognises achievements in human rights, protection of minorities, defence of international cooperation and the development of democracy. This year it was awarded to three laureates: Cuban protest movement "Damas de Blanco", Nigerian human rights lawyer Hauwa Ibrahim and "Reporters without Borders".

"We have followed your work, we have followed your struggle" were the words President Borrell used to salute the Sakharov winners. He condemned the refusal of the Cuban authorities to allow the Ladies in White to attend but said that, as with some previous winners such as Nelson Mandela, the Parliament would continue with the award in spite of the oppressive restrictions imposed on the winners.

To the Ladies in White he praised their "willingness to say in public what the (political) prisoners could not." To Hauwa Ibrahim he spoke of the Parliament's admiration for "your determination to uphold the law" and her example to women "who want to escape from ignorance and poverty." Directing his comments towards Robert Ménard of Reporters without Borders, President Borrell praised their work by saying that "there cannot be democracy without pluralistic information." Finally, to assembled MEPs he ended his introduction by quoting Voltaire who said that "freedom of expression is what separates us from tyranny."

Speaking on behalf of the Ladies in White, Mrs Blanca Reyes said the ladies represented 75 detainees since the "black spring" of 2004 when their "beloved menfolk" were arrested. She said their struggle "was moved by pain and injustice and without political motivations." Mrs Reyes said that the Cuban government violated its citizen's human rights "on a daily basis," - for example by not allowing five Cuban ladies to attend the Parliament to receive their award. Regarding the Sakharov Prize, Mrs Reyes said it would "encourage us to continue our struggle," and by receiving such an award "everyone in the world will hear their voice."

Hauwa Ibrahim, the Nigerian lawyer defending women who face being stoned to death for adultery and young people who face amputation for theft under Islamic Sharia law, was the second laureate to receive the Sakharov Prize. She outlined her strategy in combating Sharia law. She said that she engaged the Mullahs and the religious leaders in her fight and tried to understand the dynamics of Nigerian society. "We act locally, but think globally" she said. Ms Ibrahim explained how she engaged with religious after being introduced to them by a local BBC journalist. She said she spoke for the powerless and the vulnerable and stood up for all unrepresented people. In 2005 in Nigeria under Sharia law, it was still possible for a woman to be stoned to death for hav-
ing child out of wedlock. The way to overcome this was through a bottom-up approach. “The European Parliament is one of the most important organs in the world and with it behind me, my voice for the unrepresented is louder and I have a deeper sense of mission for assisting the vulnerable and powerless”.

Robert MÉNARD, the Secretary General of Reporters without Borders said that it was a great honour for his organisation to receive the Sakharov Prize. In particular, he thanked Jean-Marie CAVADA (ALDE, FR). "64 journalists have been killed in Iraq, twice as many that were killed in the Vietnam war". He also highlighted the case of the latest car bomb killing of anti-Syria MP and journalist Gibran Tueni and stated that the international community needed to stand up for democracy in Lebanon. He also criticised the international community for not showing as much interest and passion in the plight of some journalists that are still held illegally as the interest shown and raised for Florence Aubenas. The European Union and the European Parliament needed to respect and stand up for the resolutions it had adopted citing in particular the case of Tunisia. "What is good about human right is that they are ongoing, they serve to improve people's lives on a daily basis".
The Sakharov Prize: championing human rights

"Ladies in white" ("Damas de Blanco") of Cuba: This group of women have been protesting peacefully every Sunday since 2004 against the continued detention of their husbands and sons who are political dissidents in Cuba. They wear white as a symbol of peace and the innocence of those imprisoned.

Hauwa Ibrahim: Of humble birth, she has risen to be a leading Nigerian human rights lawyer. She represents women who face being stoned to death for adultery and young people facing amputation for theft under Islamic Sharia law.

"Reporters without Frontiers": This international organisation campaigns for press freedom throughout the world. It also champions the protection of journalists and other media professionals from censorship or harassment.

The Sakharov prize is not the only way in which Parliament upholds respect for human rights and democracy. To learn more, please see the background note on human rights and the European Parliament in the press section of the website.
Sakharov Prize: Frequently Asked Questions

1. Who was Andrei Sakharov?

The prize is named after Andrei Sakharov (1921-1989), who achieved world renown as one of the inventors of the Soviet hydrogen bomb. Realizing the dangers of its potential abuse, he spent a lot of time raising awareness of the nuclear arms race. In the Soviet Union he was seen as a dissident and was jailed for his beliefs. He also founded a committee to defend human rights and the victims of political trials in 1970. Five years later his efforts for international peace won him the Nobel Prize.

2. So, who picks the winner?

Every year MEPs and Political Groups in the Parliament nominate candidates - from this list the Committee on Foreign Affairs select three "finalists". The chairpersons of the political groups (the "Conference of Presidents") then select a winner. The prize is formally awarded by the President of the Parliament during the December Plenary session. The winner receives a certificate and a cheque for 50,000 euros.

3. What is the purpose of the award?

By rewarding outstanding achievements in the fight to protect freedom of thought and expression against intolerance, fanaticism and hatred, the Parliament seeks to raise awareness about human rights. This reflects its conviction that fundamental freedoms include not only the right to life and physical integrity, but also freedom of expression and of the press, two of the most effective means of fighting oppression and key yardsticks by which to judge whether a society is democratic and open.

4. Who won last year?

The 2004 Sakharov prize went to the Belarusian Association of Journalists for their work in promoting press freedom in Belarus. The first award was in 1988 and was awarded jointly to Nelson Mandela and Anatoli Marchenko.
Sakharov nominee: Cuban women who protest against unjust imprisonment

The arrest of political dissidents in 2003 continues to cast a shadow over Cuba. Most of the 75 men detained are still in jail - imprisoned for criticising the lack of political freedom in the country. However, the attempt to silence them has failed as their wives and daughters have brought international attention to the issue by their peaceful protests every Sunday.

They call themselves the "Ladies in White" ("Damas de blanco") and were formed in early 2004. By wearing white to symbolise innocence and purity they echo Argentine women in the 1970's who used a similar tactic to demand information about their missing children during the military dictatorship.

The European Union's relations with Cuba have been severely strained by the arrest of the dissidents. In April 2004 the European Parliament passed a resolution in support of the imprisoned men. It called for the men to be released and said their arrest "constituted a breach of the most elementary human rights, especially as regards freedom of expression and political association". It went on to demand that the Cuban government "make significant changes with a view to moving towards full respect for fundamental freedoms". EU government ministers also issued a statement declaring that Cuba's actions were "deplorable".

A series of sanctions were introduced which effectively cut government ties between Cuba and the EU. Since January this year however, sanctions have been suspended and contacts resumed as the Europe tries to use its "soft power" of economic and political persuasion to alleviate the situation in Cuba - a country heavily dependent on tourism and where 20% of the population live in poverty.

The ladies in white continue to campaign despite attempts to silence them. The most serious attack on them was March 20 2004 - Palm Sunday - when they were assaulted and insulted by members of the official Cuban Woman's Federation.

International support for their cause has been extensive. Their nomination for the European Parliament's Sakharov prize for freedom of thought recognises their courage and commitment to the cause of human rights in Cuba. The group have also been backed by the International Committee for Democracy in Cuba (ICDC), whose founder, former Czech President Vaclav Havel, recently delivered a letter to the Ibero-American summit calling on them to hold Cuba to earlier declarations on human rights.
Sakharov Nominee: Hauwa Ibrahim - Law versus fundamentalism

Nigerian lawyer Hauwa Ibrahim has built up what can only be described as an extraordinary practice: defending women condemned to death by stoning. In those Nigerian states which apply Islamic law, adultery carries the death penalty. A Muslim herself, Hauwa Ibrahim works tirelessly - voluntarily and despite intimidation - to fight religious fundamentalism. Will the provisions of her own country’s Constitution and international support be enough to win the battle? She believes so.

Hauwa Ibrahim is the only lawyer in her country opposed to Sharia (Islamic law) law. As a woman, however, she does not have the right to appear before the Islamic courts. Her colleagues have to speak in her place. As a Muslim she has been accused of betraying her religion. But who, other than her, can defend people (mainly women) condemned under Sharia law to horrifying punishments (lashing, stoning and amputation) for “deviant behaviour”? In a country where half the population is Muslim, and where deep divisions remain between the two communities, her Christian colleagues have little inclination to become involved in matters to do with Islam. Muslim lawyers, who are in the minority, are not particular keen to experience the fate that has befallen her: harassment, threatening phone calls, being insulted in leaflets and a formal charge of libelling the judiciary.

But she won’t be silenced. Revolt has given way to a determination to show that those sentenced to unjust punishments, or who are incapable of defending themselves, can be defended in a legal and peaceful manner. There is no state religion in Nigeria - its 36 states are secular. The Constitution says that every citizen has the right to be defended before a court. Hauwa Ibrahim wants it to be applied, and she dares to question the Nigerian authorities directly about the constitutionality of applying Sharia law.

The activities of this lawyer who refuses to buckle down are a source of huge embarrassment to the authorities. It is especially thanks to her that cases of women condemned to inhuman treatment are known throughout the world. It was her ability to arouse international public opinion that made it possible to save the life of Amina Lawal, who was condemned to be stoned to death for having given birth outside of marriage. Death sentences continue to be handed down but they are not carried out - for the moment anyhow. However, the situation needs to be kept under close watch.

Hauwa Ibrahim is 37 and a mother of two. She was born in a village with a population of 2000, which had neither running water nor electricity. A career as a lawyer was not supposed to figure in her destiny. Her marriage was arranged when she was 12 and her studies ought to have ended at primary school. She financed her studies herself and she is acutely aware of the importance of education as the best defence for those facing the greatest deprivation. Poverty and illiteracy go hand in hand - and fundamentalism feeds on ignorance.
Sakharov Nominee: Reporters who defend freedom of the press

"Reporters Without Borders" - a group that campaigns for press freedom around the world - is the third and final nominee for Parliament’s Sakharov prize for freedom of thought. The group, celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, defends and supports journalists and others working in the media from persecution and censorship.

This is particularly important as according to the group, a third of all countries in the world still do not have a free media. There is also the grim death toll of journalists and others who are killed while carrying out their work. According to the International News Safety Institute (INSI), as of 10 October this year 62 journalists had been killed while covering news stories.

A universal right: Reporters without Borders draws its inspiration from Article 19 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that everyone has "the right to freedom of opinion and expression" and also the right to "seek, receive and impart" information and ideas. This has been restated by several charters and declarations around the world covering Africa and the Americas. In Europe this right is included in the 1950 European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

"Try not to believe threats of execution": As well as the moral argument it makes against persecution of the press, the group also offers practical and legal assistance to journalists who work in war zones. In their guidelines the group offers advice to journalists on what to do if they are taken hostage: "Try to get them to use your name, as that can lead them to consider you as a person and reduce tension". It also advises hostages that they should "try not to believe threats of execution or promises of release".

The guidelines go on to offer advice on everything from avoiding snipers to recognising roadside bombs. As a further security precaution the group also offers freelance journalists the use of bullet-proof jackets marked "PRESS" when working in a war zone.

Reporters without Borders also offers support grants to assist the families of imprisoned journalists. These grants may also cover medical or legal fees.

Earlier this year, Reporters was in the headlines when it campaigned vigorously for the release of two French journalists - Christian Chesnot (RFI, Radio France) and Georges Malbrunot (Le Figaro, RTL) - who were being held hostage by Islamic militants in Iraq. Thankfully, both men were reunited with their families after 124 days in captivity.
Sakharov Prize - previous winners

The world was a very different place when the first Sakharov prize was awarded to Nelson Mandela in 1988. The Berlin wall was still intact and the Iron Curtain still divided capitalist Western Europe from the Soviet-dominated east. In South Africa, the Apartheid regime was still in place - and it was for resistance to this racial segregation that the award was given to the still-imprisoned Mr Mandela.

Also honoured that year was Soviet dissident Anatoli Marchenko, to whom the prize was awarded posthumously. He had spent 20 years in jail and finally died in 1986 following a hunger strike.

In 1990 the Sakharov jury decided to honour another dissident - Burmese human rights activist Aung San Suu Kyi. The political party she led won elections in May that year with 82% of the vote. However, this victory was ignored by the ruling military regime - the "State Law and Order Restoration Council" (SLORC) - which went on to place the leaders of the winning party under arrest. Aung San Suu Kyiv has spent most of the last 16 years under house arrest and has become an international heroine.

The Cuban pro-democracy campaigner Oswaldo Payá was honoured with the prize in 2002. As head of the Christian Liberation Movement he has strongly advocated peaceful democratic change in Cuba. Upon the receipt of the prize in Strasbourg he told MEPs that "they had awarded the Sakharov prize to the people of Cuba."

It is not just individuals who have received the prize. In 2003 the United Nations staff and Secretary General Kofi Annan were honoured in what was a turbulent year for the organisation with controversial debates over Iraq. Last year, the lack of democratic freedoms in Belarus was recognised with the awarding of the prize to the Belarus Association of journalists who were resisting repression of the media by the regime of President Aleksander Lukashenko.

It is worth noting that in its 17 year history the Sakharov prize has been awarded twice to people who subsequently went on to win the Nobel Peace prize: Aung San Suu Kyi (1991 Nobel winner) and Nelson Mandela (1993). The Nobel award to the UN and Kofi Annan (2001) predated their Sakharov prize by two years. Andrei Sakharov himself won the Nobel prize in 1975.