

**SAKHAROV PRIZE COMMUNITY  
NEWSLETTER  
No. 3/2020**

### **Covid-19 affects Sakharov Community activities**

In line with the precautionary measures enacted across the EU, the European Parliament decided to reduce its activities and to focus on the Covid-19 outbreak. As a result, events involving the Sakharov Community are postponed. This includes:

- The **Sakharov Fellowship** that was planned for 23 March-4 April in Brussels and Venice.
- The [One World International Human Rights Film Festival](#), foreseen on 21-29 April in Brussels.
- The [European Youth Event](#) scheduled for 29-30 May, which would have seen another representation of 2017 Sakharov Prize laureate Lorent Saleh's performance *White torture – underground poetry*.

EP plenary sessions are now held virtually and in a shortened format. Under these circumstances, the adoption of urgency resolutions on human rights is suspended for the time being. However, the EP continues to monitor closely and speak up against human rights violations around the world.

### **Deep concern over Badawi while Saudi Arabia releases prisoners amid coronavirus crisis**

29-03-2020: Ensaf Haidar, wife of **2015 Sakharov Prize laureate Raif Badawi**, requested on Twitter her husband's release in the context of the high risks of infection with the coronavirus in the overcrowded prisons in Saudi Arabia. Due to the current crisis, Saudi authorities have released hundreds of prisoners with criminal charges, but keep in prison the prisoners of conscience. **2005 Sakharov Prize laureate Reporters without borders** organised a virtual vigil on Twitter on 28 March in Germany and Austria, requesting the release of Raif Badawi and 33 other journalists in Saudi Arabia. Raif's family fears that he has disappeared. They last heard he was in hospital around 25 January 2020. He was taken there following his prolonged hunger strike and time in solitary confinement. Raif faces a life-threatening situation in the context of the coronavirus crisis. Besides his poor condition following the hunger strike, he requires routine medical treatment for hypertension.

### **Daughter of Sakharov Prize laureate Ilham Tohti speaks up for the rights of Uyghurs**

04-03-2020: The US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations and the European Parliament Office in Washington co-hosted an event that drew attention the persecution of the Uyghurs in China and called on the Chinese authorities to release **2019 Sakharov Prize laureate Ilham Tohti**. Detained in 2014, Tohti was convicted to life in prison. In the discussion, his daughter Jewher Ilham asked for increased transatlantic support to defend human rights in Xinjiang, China. In a press release, the Chair of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Senator Bob Menendez noted praised Ilham Tohti as a profoundly courageous and brilliant scholar.

[USSC Foreign Relations](#) and [EPLO Washington](#)

### **Jailed Iranian human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh on hunger strike calling for the release of political prisoners**

16-03-2020: **2012 Sakharov Prize laureate Nasrin Sotoudeh** began a hunger strike to demand the release of political prisoners, expressing concerns for their health at a time when Iran is facing an unprecedented sanitary crisis. She ended the strike at the end of March. "The same military and intelligence agencies that compromise the safety of this nation with their antagonistic policies are insisting on keeping the political prisoners in prisons until the horrors of this health crisis spread to their lives and impact their families as well," Sotoudeh wrote in a 16 March statement from Evin Prison. Nasrin Sotoudeh had previously written an opinion piece for International Women's Day, calling the government "to end their animosity with the world, to look at the world through the eyes of peace and to trust life and human beings".

[Hunger strike](#) and [International Women's Day plea](#)

### **Dr Mukwege to spearhead efforts against COVID-19 in South Kivu**

30-03-2020: **2014 Sakharov Prize laureate Dr Denis Mukwege** was appointed as head of the Health Branch of the Coronavirus Committee for South Kivu, along with local health minister Mr Cosmos Kusimwa Bishisha. Panzi Hospital, which Dr Mukwege founded in 1999 to treat survivors of sexual violence, will receive patients showing severe symptoms. In his latest press release, Dr Mukwege called on the population to follow preventive measures, such as social distancing and put forward the idea of selective confinement.

[Press release \(in French\)](#)

10-04-2020: In an exchange of views with **EP Vice-President Heidi Hautala**, **Dr Mukwege** shared his analysis of the COVID-19 situation in DRC. In particular, he pointed out the stress that a full lockdown would put on an already economically vulnerable population, and highlighted the importance of establishing a strong collaboration between African countries and the EU. **Read a summary in annex of this newsletter.**

### **The film SEMA on survivors of sexual violence, premieres on International Women's Day**

08-03-2020: Produced by the **Dr Denis Mukwege foundation with the financial support of the European Parliament**, written and acted by survivors of sexual violence, the film Sema (which means "speak out" in Swahili) saw its first international screening at the DC Independent Film Festival on International Women's Day. SEMA follows the trajectories of two women from different backgrounds whose lives are changed forever by rape, and who must find the strength to survive and make a difference for themselves and their children.

[Mukwege Foundation](#) and [DC Independent Film Festival](#)

### **Belarusian Association of Journalists successfully calls for the release of Siarhei Satsuk**

04-04-2020: Siarhei Satsuk, editor-in-chief of the online publication "Ejednevnik" (EJ.BY), was detained by the Financial Investigation Department of the State Control Committee for an alleged bribe. Siarhei Satsuk conducted journalistic investigations, including a series of articles in EJ.BY about corruption in the health care system of Belarus. The **Belarusian Association of Journalists**, Sakharov Prize laureate 2004, called on the Belarussian authorities to immediately release the journalist and drop all criminal charges against him. Ten days after Satsuk's arrest, the Prosecutor General of Belarus revoked the decision to take EJ.BY chief editor into custody. However, Mr Satsuk remains a suspect in the case.

**BAJ's [statement](#)** and [Siarhei Satsuk released](#)

### **NGOs saving lives in the Mediterranean blame Italian 'Unsafe harbour' decree**

08-04-2020: *Sea-Watch*, *Médecins sans frontières* and *Open Arms* - which were among the **NGOs saving lives in the Mediterranean Sea** nominated as 2018 Sakharov Prize finalists - along with the *Mediterranea* platform, issued conjoined statement expressing their concerns over the Italian government's decision to close its harbours to people rescued at sea by foreign-flagged ships. The decision, they argue, "instrumentalises the COVID-19 health emergency to carry on a plan to obstruct search rescue activities at sea". Although none of these NGOs is currently at sea, one foreign-flagged ship - the *Alan Kurdi*, operated by 2018 Sakharov Prize finalist *Sea-Eye* - is sailing with 150 migrants on board. Italian authorities have delivered food to the ship and are considering moving its passengers on another vessel.

[Joint statement](#) and [The Alan Kurdi ship](#)

### **Sakharov Fellows mobilise to tackle increased domestic violence during Covid19 crisis**

27-04-2020: Alarmed by reports of dramatic increase of domestic violence in many countries, **2019 Sakharov Fellows** have mobilised to try to tackle the issue in their countries. Fellows have exchanged ideas, best practices and useful resources. Using telephone hotlines and on-line support groups were among the tools suggested. Domestic violence, like other human rights issues, is exacerbated in the current crisis, an unintended effect of the lockdown measures adopted across the world.

\*\*\*

### **"PREVENTION, PREVENTION, PREVENTION" - an exchange with Dr Denis Mukwege on Covid-19 crisis in Africa by Heidi Hautala, Vice-President of the European Parliament**



support them.

One of my tasks and privileges as Vice President of the European Parliament is to stay in touch with our Sakharov Prize laureates. They are personalities who are awarded due to their outstanding work to defend human rights and freedom of expression. When one of them faces persecution or other challenges, we try to

One of these fantastic people is Dr. Denis Mukwege, the surgeon who has been widely applauded for his important work to help victims of rape in the cruel conflict in the Eastern parts of the Democratic Republic Congo. He has become one of the leading voices in condemning rape as a systematic weapon of war.

This exchange took place on Long Friday. (I think my late grandmother would have accepted it though she had taught her children that it was not appropriate even to lift a needle from the floor on Long Friday.) It was particularly topical, as Dr. Mukwege has been called to be the Advisor of the Governor of South Kivu, one of the 26 provinces of the country, on the Covid-19 crisis.

His views and suggestions bear relevance to the whole of Africa. When 80 % of the people live with less than two dollars a day, confinement is simply not the solution when people need

to go out every day for food: "The choice is between a slow death of hunger and going out to be contaminated and to contaminate others."

That is why Denis Mukwege emphasizes prevention. "Prevention, prevention, prevention", learning from the experiences of European countries and the United States.

Prevention is particularly crucial, as there is a real scarcity of health facilities and human resources. African countries can draw experience from the ebola crisis. It proved important to identify all positive cases and confirm all contacts they had had.

In South Kivu, big towns are closed. People moving in and out of them are controlled for temperature and kept for 30 minutes for seeing if they cough etc. Around the capital city of Bukavu there are 94 checkpoints. (In our closed Finnish province of Uusimaa around the capital region temperature is not measured and cough controlled, so far.)

Washing hands, keeping away from crowds, keeping facemasks are key. When asked if people are aware of these vital measures and follow them, Dr. Mukwege says, not really, and awareness raising campaigns are necessary.

As access to clean water is a serious issue, the authorities should now provide communities with tanks with chlorinated water. Mukwege is an advocate of compulsory wearing of facemasks when moving outside. People will be advised on making personal protection masks from local tissue.

Of the population, 96 % are younger than 60 years old. Thus, it is possible to have the 4 %, the older people, to stay at home and their needs to be cared by the younger ones.

Dr. Mukwege is aware of the polemic around the use of the anti-malarial drugs chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine and their serious side effects (e.g. by EMA, European Medical Agency). He however is a proponent of them due to the experience of 40 years in Africa. "We cannot go on arguing while people are dying. We need to do some random trials and comparative studies to make sure of the hydroxychloroquine efficiency to justify its broader use."

When asked what messages he would like to convey to the EU Commissioner on International Partnerships, my compatriot Jutta Urpilainen, he emphasizes access to tests. Mukwege is confident that tests now being developed in Europe and South Korea, would provide a solution showing the result in 30 minutes. Then those with the virus could be isolated.

Concerning the profound experience of Dr. Mukwege with rape victims, he is very knowledgeable on the special vulnerability of women in amidst the Covid-19 crisis. His teams are sensitive to the increase of sexual violence and are ready to help victims. He has also called for shelters for women.

After this exchange it is increasingly clear that we in the European Union must not only focus on controlling the virus and protecting people in our own countries. It is not acceptable to leave the Africans on their own, with their extremely limited capacities and resources. We can do a lot to help the well thought strategy of prevention of the pandemic throughout Africa succeed. Just there is no time to waste.