SECURITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS MONITOR

Conferring Human Rights Awards and Prizes: Feeding the PR Machine or a Launching Pad for Change?

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The Google search engine is a wonderful tool. If you Google prize for, or international prize or even human rights prize you will find dozens if not hundreds of prizes and awards being granted each year, rewarding excellence, bravery, success or on the themes of writing, history, economics, science or human rights,

The whole process takes up an inordinate amount of time and costs a huge amount of money but what does it actually achieve? Does the presentation of an elegant trophy, with its accompanying fifteen minutes of fame, really help the recipient achieve their goals in the longer term?

Is the purpose of an award to confer a meaningful and tangible benefit on the recipient or to prove the credentials of the organisation making the award?

In the same way that human tragedy is sometimes seen as simply feeding the fundraising machine that is the direct mail industry, can it not also be argued that the 'Award Industry' is really part of the brand management process for new and aspiring organisations anxious to carve out a niche for themselves in an increasingly competitive sector?

On the other hand, is it not a simple fact that the conferring of awards and prizes creates an opportunity for activists and human rights defenders to address a much wider audience than the one to which they would normally have access. It also enables us as a society to send out a signal about the kind of values that we want to uphold. When the OSCE chooses to confer a major award for Journalism and Democracy it says that, as a society, we value freedom of expression and also sends a message to journalists under threat that they are not alone. In addition by introducing organisations and issues to the rich and powerful we give them the oxygen needed to grow and develop and acquire the legitimacy that may be under attack at home.

The conferring of awards, linked into aspects of our celebrity driven culture, can give prominence to issues that would never see the light of day, never mind acquire an international profile. How many people would actually have heard of the Yanomani Indians without headlines like 'Sting's Amazon tribe in peril as miners return'.[1] The key question of course is where does the balance lie?

The issue then is to discover how both parties can benefit on the basis of their respective needs in a way that is based on trust and mutual respect and which is transparent and accountable in terms of the use of valuable resources. This article proposes to look at some of the issues raised by the conferring of international human rights awards and prizes and to identify some of the key questions that need to be addressed — even if it does not come up with definitive answers to those questions.

Where it all began

The Nobel was the first series of prizes to acquire international prestige and recognition based in part on its long history, the prestige of the recipients and partly on the cash value of the awards. It now appears however, that the awarding of human rights prizes or awards has turned into one of the newest international growth industries.

'The Nobel Prize, Pulitzer Prize, and the many other awards conferred by an increasing number of

1 http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/us_and_americas/article2652834.ece October 14 2007.

organisations are testimony to the powerful place that awards programmes hold in the non-profit sector. There are more than 30,000 monetary prizes offered around the world, with more being added all the time. Why? Prizes provide philanthropists with a new way to reward, publicise, and strengthen the individuals, institutions, and ideas they already support'.[2]

Human Rights and the reflection of a culture of Human Rights

Since the second world war, Europe has struggled to overcome the economic and social devastation of the war by creating a sense of social harmony and 'justice based on the full acceptance of human dignity.'

'The most obvious value of human rights to the post-Holocaust world has been to set a limit on government power and shine a light on its abuses. The limit comes from the revolutionary idea, conceived in the immediate aftermath of World War II, that all governments are constrained in their actions by the inherent dignity and inalienable rights of their people. The light comes from the people themselves, who have since risen up the world over to defend the fundamental principle that national sovereignty can never be a defense for barbarity […].'[3]

One of the pluses from the practice of conferring human rights awards and prizes is that governments and international organisations can send a signal about the kind of society they want to create, the values they want to uphold and set a series of benchmarks against which our progress can be measured. Both the OSCE and the Council of Europe have established major human rights prizes as a way of promoting that model of society.[4]

The Max van der Stoel Award which is presented every year by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the person or organisation which has made the greatest contribution to protecting the rights of national minorities sends out a clear message on social values in Europe confronting a rise in xenophobia and anti-Semitism.

Therefore, in an ideal world, the single criteria against which human rights awards should be evaluated is the extent to which they work individually and collectively to strengthen those social values and make a direct and measurable contribution to the work of those who uphold them.

Who wins?

So what exactly is the benefit to be achieved via this rapid proliferation of international awards? It appears in some cases that the creation of the award is driven more by the needs of the organisation than by the needs of the recipient. It is interesting to look at the film footage of recent award ceremonies. In the recent Women of Courage Award in the United States the recipients remained silently on stage for approx 15 minutes while we heard at length from Secretary of State Clinton and First Lady Michelle Obama. It seemed as though the focus was on the USA giving the recipient an award rather than the recipient having deserved this award through her courage and conviction. What was the agenda here? Was it a sincere recognition of a movement for social change or the need of the Democratic Presidency to distance itself from the policies of the previous

2 John J. Miller. Philanthropy 17, no. 3 (May/June 2003).

3 Warren St John wrote in The New York Times on May 25 2002.

4 OSCE Prize for Journalism and Democracy and the PACE Human Rights Prize of the Council of Europe.

administration? Nevertheless, we must also recognise that for the Government of the United States to place such a high profile focus on the work of human rights defenders sends a very powerful signal around the world.

Prizes awarded by Human Rights organisations

Human rights organisations themselves set a high standard against which they will in turn be measured. According to Front Line, the International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders, the Front Line Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk was established 'to highlight the work of outstanding individuals who on a daily basis put their security and lives at risk defending the lives of others. It is intended that the Front Line Award and the profile gained by the nominees and the winners will contribute to their security and protection. It is also an opportunity to highlight the important and courageous work of human rights defenders around the world.'

The web site of the Martin Ennals Award says that the purpose of the award is to 'encourage human rights defenders who are at risk and therefore in need of immediate protection'. This main objective of protection is mostly achieved through media attention, particularly in the country or region of origin of the laureate.

The Nobel Prizes began a little over a century ago, established by the last will and testament of Alfred Nobel 'to recognise those individuals who... shall have conferred the greatest benefits on mankind'

'The Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award was established in 1984 to honor courageous and innovative human rights defenders throughout the world.'

The Amnesty International Award for Human Rights Journalism Under Threat recognises 'excellence in journalism that has made a significant contribution to the UK public's greater awareness and understanding of human rights issues.'

'The French Government's Human Rights Prize rewards human rights defenders around the world for their action on the ground.'

The Human Rights Defenders' Tulip was established by the Dutch Government to 'emphasise the importance of the work of human rights defenders and to provide moral support'.

Each of the awards mentioned above emerged in response to the needs of a particular time and place and the dangers being faced by a particular group of people and while each on its own terms is entirely valid there is a danger that the general public and the media may feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of different awards.

However, what all these awards seem to have as a collective goal is to lend their support to the work of the recipient human rights defenders and their organisations, to highlight their issues, to promote the work of the organisations, to help them to raise money and develop contacts, and hopefully, to offer a greater degree of protection to those in danger. The awards also hope to reinforce legitimacy and give international recognition to the organisation selected.

To what extent do prizes deliver on this ambitious agenda?

Does the real benefit accrue to the group presenting the award or prize or to the recipient? Does the granting of international awards by governments and NGOs help protect human rights defenders and is the benefit short or long-term? Or is it simply a public relations tango in which both the giver and the receiver play the international public relations game to ensure that their respective financial and advocacy agendas benefit?

The problem of course is that only those who understand the rules of the game can really benefit. One human rights defender in Honduras who has been profiled in a number of campaigns by international organisations said that he was tired of being the 'chico bonito' (poster boy) for other organisations who used the experience and testimony of human rights defenders on the ground to make a lot of money and gain profile for their organisation while his own organisation was struggling to survive on a shoestring.

So if we apply the cost benefit analysis to the issue of human rights awards and prizes, who really benefits the most? Are the stated hopes of NGOs and governments a real reflection of a commitment to human rights or a convenient gloss on the harsh fact that money and power take greater priority and that international NGOs need the credibility and validation that comes from a close relationship with activists and human rights defenders on the ground to justify their own existence?

The many and varied awards ceremonies around the world should provide a platform for the voices of human rights defenders at risk to be heard loudly and clearly. Yet it is largely those who can adapt their message to the needs of the international organisations and who have the language and media skills to get their message out who are best placed to take advantage of that opportunity.

Playing the media game

The Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research[5] in its annual report at the end of 2008 reported on 349 conflicts around the world. Yet if you look at the international media on any given day you will see that even those newspapers with a reputation for covering international issues will rarely cover more than a dozen of those situations and they are all mainly covering the same stories.

How do a few Third World conflicts become international causes célèbres, while most remain isolated and unknown? Why, for instance, has there been so much recent attention to the Darfur crisis but so little to the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, despite vastly more casualties in the latter than in the former. Conflicts and the insurgent groups involved in them face a Darwinian struggle for scarce media attention, NGO activism, and international concern. In this competition, the lion's share of resources go to the savviest, not the neediest.[6] Do the organisations and issues celebrated in the circuit of international awards reflect the reality of those who most deserve or need support? The Borok People's Human Rights Organisation[7] works in Tripura in North East India to uphold the rights of the indigenous Borok people who have become a minority in their own country due to massive immigration from Bangladesh and other parts of India. The systemic discrimination against them has been so extreme that their future as a people is in doubt.

5 The Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research 2008.

6 Merchants of Morality Clifford Bob 2002.

7 The Borok Peoples Human Rights Organisation protects the rights of the Borok indigenous people of Tripura.

The leaders of their organisation face harassment and intimidation through the courts, their office has been bombed and there has been a campaign of defamation against them in the local media. Yet at an international level their issue is invisible and their story will appear nowhere on the radar of the international media. The drama is not extreme enough and the body count is not high enough. Interestingly, a month after Front Line visited the area there was a bomb attack, in fact a series of 5 bombs, in which two people were killed and thirty five people were injured and as a result of which there was a brief but short lived flurry of international media interest. The human story of a people's struggle for survival is apparently not sufficiently newsworthy on its own merits. Having a photogenic and charismatic leader who speaks English may determine which issue gets international coverage rather than the importance of the issue itself.

Human Rights 'superstars'

One of the criticisms of human rights awards is that they help to create a generation of human rights 'superstars' or media celebrities who do not always reflect the views of their communities or who, because of their new status, may become isolated from the community they originally sought to represent.

Some people think that the conferring of awards creates a feel good factor for the general public who will be reassured that there is possibly a solution to the many and complex problems facing the international community. It is clear that an organisation will have to have already reached a certain stage of organisational development before it can really take advantage of the opportunities offered by winning a major international prize.

Reflecting the status quo

In choosing the recipients of human rights awards there is a concern that we simply choose those who reflect our own interests and prejudices, those who do not challenge our own status quo — those in fact who hold up a mirror image of the world as we would like to see it, not as it really is.

International agencies like organisations with neat business-like structures, a strategic vision and a five year plan with clearly defined goals, objectives and measurable outcomes. They do not like unstructured, organic grass-roots organisations which work in a more fluid way, constantly adapting to meet the needs of their communities. These organisations tend not to have strategies and five year plans and their structures may be loose, so even though they may be doing absolutely essential work on the ground they are unlikely to be the recipients of international awards and the corresponding media attention for their issue.

Sometimes organisations simply lose out in the interests of a greater political agenda. This is the case in Serbia where some international donors have decided that the time has come to mainstream human rights, to develop integrated strategies, to find a way of working with the government and of looking to the future. As a result 'those organisations who have campaigned for justice and human rights since the beginning of the war are increasingly marginalised because of their refusal to compromise with those within the structures of the state who were complicit in war crimes or who continue to orchestrate violence against those who demand accountability.'[8] As a result, those organisations whose credibility is based on many years of resistance are less likely to receive funding or to be on platforms receiving international prizes than those who are prepared to

8 Biljana Kovacevic-Vuco Director, YUCOM, Lawyers Committee for Human Rights Serbia.

compromise with the intergovernmental realpolitik.

Human Rights prizes and the role of governments

Governments have a central role to play in protecting and promoting human rights and the conferring of human rights awards can be a valuable tool in delivering on that commitment. At the same time governments need to make sure that their award is not seen as just another element of official diplomacy. If a government award exists in isolation from government policy and if its rationale is seen to be at odds with official government practice then it will have no credibility.

If, on the other hand, the government has a clear and meaningful commitment to human rights which is articulated in policy and reflected in action then the conferring of a human rights award can give governments an effective way of emphasising those policies and commitments to a far wider audience.

Human Rights and the business community

Corporate Social Responsibility is one of the buzz words of the moment and companies are increasingly aware that the reputation of their companies, the value of their brands and ultimately the value of their shares may be improved if they are perceived to be good global citizens. As a result, business is also more and more active in this area and the conferring of an environmental or human rights prize may be seen as a convenient way of scoring points on the index of ethical initiatives.

The involvement of multinational corporations in the area of giving human rights awards sharpens the debate considerably. While governments may get the benefit of the doubt, depending on their individual track record, companies may be seen by the cynics as trying, for purely financial reasons, to capitalise on a growing interest, especially among young people, in human rights and environmental issues.

'The Reebok Human Rights Award recognizes young activists who have made significant contributions to human rights causes through nonviolent means. The award aims to generate positive international attention for the recipients and to support their efforts. Since 1988, more than 84 recipients from over 38 countries have received the award.'[9]

In 2002, Dita Sari[10] rejected the opportunity to receive one of the Reebok awards. 'I have taken this award into a very deep consideration. We finally decide not to accept this […]. In Indonesia there are five Reebok companies; 80% of the workers are women. All companies are subcontracted, often by South Korean companies […]. Since the workers can only get around $1.50 a day, they then have to live in a slum area, surrounded by poor and unhealthy conditions, especially for their children. At the same time, Reebok collected millions of dollars of profit every year, directly contributed by these workers. The low pay and exploitation of the workers of Indonesia, Mexico and Vietnam are the main reasons why we will not accept this award.'

It would be easy to take the cynical view that the conferring of prestigious awards is about generating

9 http://www.reebok.com/Static/global/initiatives/rights/text-only/awards/.

10 Dita Sari is an organizer with the National Front for Workers Struggle in Jakarta, Indonesia.

sympathetic media coverage and good public relations for the organisation giving the award as well as impressing their donors who will be able to see how dynamic they are.

Nevertheless there is a community of interest between government, business and civil society which, if balanced on the basis of integrity and real respect for human rights, can make a meaningful contribution to advancing the human rights project.

NGOs and the struggle for survival

But NGOs are also pragmatists who live in a highly competitive world where they have to raise money, build their support base and secure funding on the basis of a reputation for delivering results. So the publicity machine has a double function to highlight the issue and the work of the person or organisation on the ground and at the same time the constructive role being played by the organisation making the award. It can be very difficult to adequately balance these competing interests. The recipient of the Award needs to have thought out their own strategy for taking maximum advantage of the opportunity offered.

However, that publicity can be the vital first step towards breaking the veil of secrecy and exposing what is really happening. Repressive governments and other agents of oppression seek to reinforce stigma and stereotype — all Roma — all black people — all Jews — all gays. In that way, they can deny the humanity of these 'others' who are 'not like us.' In that way, when 'these others' are killed or tortured or raped, it doesn't really matter because they are 'not quite like us.'

The isolation and constant pressure of hostility can be one of the hardest things for human rights defenders to bear. Many years ago, Veronica de Negri[11], a prisoner of conscience in Chile who had been raped and tortured while incarcerated, spoke of the harshness of her conditions. But the hardest thing of all to bear, she said, was when one of the guards said, 'Nobody knows you are here, nobody cares and if you die nobody will ever know.'

The winning of a prestigious international award can be a very effective tool to break through that wall of silence.

How can winning a Human Rights award benefit?

Dr Mudawi Ibrahim Adam[12] of Darfur in Sudan was the first ever winner of the Front Line Award for Human Rights Defenders at risk. He was prevented by the Sudanese Government from travelling to receive the Award in Dublin so it was presented to his wife and daughter instead by President Mary McAleese of Ireland. Sometime later he wrote about the award to President McAleese: 'In the search for freedom, democracy and equity some of us have to pay sacrifices and that is unfortunate, but if we looked in all human history we see that great changes always come with big sacrifices. Some of us have to sacrifice their lives and some sacrifice their rest and time. But all these sacrifices are complimentary. Without those we see as small, miniature sacrifices, heroic sacrifices do not pay off. It is your encouragement, support and solidarity that pave the road for courage and victory.'

11 Veronica de Negri is a former prisoner of conscience imprisoned for her trade union work.

12 Dr. Mudawi Ibrahim Adam is the founder and Chairperson of the Sudan Social Development Organization (SUDO).

Mutabar Tadjibaeva, from Uzbekistan, was featured frequently in Front Line's urgent action appeals during her enforced detention and brutal treatment in a psychiatric hospital. She is also the winner of this year's Martin Ennals Award. 'My being awarded the international Martin Ennals Award, and also my organisation's — the club 'Ut yuraklar' (Fiery Hearts) — being awarded the Human Rights Award of the French Republic 'Liberty — Equality — Fraternity', proved first of all that the world community will not remain aloof from the human rights situation in Uzbekistan, it showed that the world experiences our pain and problems together with us.'

Several of the organisations mentioned in this article also stated how they hoped that the conferring of their award would act as an additional form of protection. Lydia Yusopova[13], from Russia, was also a winner of the Martin Ennals Award. 'The MEA is a mechanism for protection, recognising and supporting human rights defenders [...] I think my colleagues and I are better protected after receiving the award. Risk is everywhere all the time. You must always be aware that you can be shot or you can be kidnapped by the security service/ authorities at any time'.

Mutabar Tadjibaeva[14] was also very clear in her endorsement of the role of governments in awarding human rights prizes. 'Undoubtedly, the initiative of governments in awarding prizes to HRDs must be welcomed and supported. 'in a state where people's rights and freedoms are violated, and HRDs are considered enemies, the attention of another important state to these people will also facilitate a change, albeit forced, of attitude in the country where they do their work because no country wants to lose its image in front of another state.'

During a recent Front Line Mission to Western Sahara we met Aminatou Haidar.[15] Haidar had spent years in a secret prison where she was kept blindfolded for prolonged periods because of her work in support of the Sahraoui demand for the right to self determination. She is the 2008 recipient of the Robert F Kennedy Human Rights Award. 'For me, as an individual, the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award represents a great honor,' said Aminatou Haidar. 'As a Sahraoui human rights activist, I consider it recognition that the cause of the Sahraoui people is just and legitimate and that our nonviolent resistance is noble and righteous, in spite of the risks and the intimidation of the Moroccan authorities. The Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award will provide constructive support to the struggle of the Sahraoui people for liberty and human dignity.'

Gege Katana works with survivors of sexual violence in eastern DRC and was the winner of the Front Line Award in 2007. 'Personally the fact of having won this prize has helped me a lot to win the confidence of different groups, especially of the political and administrative authorities when it is a question of following up on cases of human rights abuse. The prize has also given more authority to the women in this country and has helped me to develop contacts with both national and international organisations.'

So the feedback from the recipients seems to be that the conferring of these awards, does indeed deliver valuable benefits, particularly access to an international audience, the moral and psychological support that human rights defenders feel in receiving these awards and the vindication of the legitimacy of their position. In addition, even if there is a short term increase in pressure from the authorities, the additional support seems to enable human rights defenders to deal more effectively with them.

13 Lydia Yusupova is a human rights legal specialist working for the Memorial organisation in Russia.

14 Mutabar Tadjibaeva. Director of women's rights Organisation – The Fiery Hearts Club, Uzbekistan.

15 Aminatou Haidar has campaigned for the right to self-determination of the Sahraoui people and has been arrested and intimidated by the Moroccan authorities for her legitimate human rights work.

'Human rights Awards, whether for environmental campaigners, aids activists, or LGBTI activists, reaffirm the shared humanity that links all these different and complex issues and challenges the stigmatisation and defamation that violators often use to justify their actions'.[16]

Human rights awards are not just a reward for past service or to mark the end of a long and distinguished career, they also serve to fix the eye on the horizon and set a direction for the future. 'The Nobel Peace Prize rewards past and present achievements, but it also awards the 'what will be.' That is, more than past and present accomplishments, the award encourages us to strive for the real fruition of peace and the real altruistic service for humanity. In this sense, President Kim Daejung's Prize should not mark the completion of his long political career but should serve as a marker for the beginning of all the great events that awaits the Korean peninsula.'[17]

Governments have a particular responsibility in this area. They have the special responsibility for interpreting the vision of documents like the UDHR and the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and shaping them into meaningful policies that will translate verbal commitments into effective action. So if you are a human rights defender in a remote area with a complex issue, limited access to the media and no powerful connections to promote your cause internationally then the winning of an international prize or award, if managed properly, can deliver the kind of political and financial support necessary for you to make a breakthrough. However you may have to edit your message to match the interests of the international audience and your case will be greatly helped if you have a charismatic leader who will attract the interest of the media. Even from this very limited number of responses it is clear that whatever their limitations the conferring of human rights awards is seen by the defenders themselves as having a really positive impact.

Nevertheless, what is also clear is that governments, NGOs and businesses who confer these awards have a responsibility to do so with the same concern for ethical stands as we increasingly demand of the corporate sector. That there should be real transparency in the selection process, that we look at the quality of the work being done on the ground not just at the capacity of the person to deliver an acceptable public relations message and that above all we seek to ensure that the conferring of awards will deliver meaningful support to the people on the ground who are our partners.

The website of The Commons Open Society Sustainability Initiative[18] sets out clear criteria for the awarding of prizes to projects under the World Technology Awards that seem to address many of these issues. 'The final crux of any such prize worth its name must be its contribution to social justice, both in the place where the concept has been successfully demonstrated but also its potential for achieving such impacts in other places where it might be replicated.' In the end there is a symbiotic relationship between those conferring and those receiving awards. The donor wants to celebrate success, find new models of organisation and development and find solutions to the complex problems facing our society. The organisation or activist on the ground wants to highlight their issue and the needs of their community, and to do that needs access to people with power and influence. They also need to develop the communications and advocacy skills necessary to move his/her agenda forward.

16 Brian Orend – Human Rights, Concept and Context. http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/~ bdorend/humanrights.html.

17 Jina Kim is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Asian Languages and Literature at the University of Washington writing in the Harvard Asia Quarterly.

18 http://www.ecoplan.org/

Aloysius Toe[19] is a human rights defender in Liberia working on ESC rights and issues of transitional justice. At the height of the civil war, Front Line organised his emergency evacuation to safety. Since then he has been able to return and continue his work. In 2005, he was the recipient of the Reebok Human Rights Award. He said at the time, 'I dream of one day being able to sleep in peace in my own home, in my own country. And I dream that one day we'll be regarded as a dignified people, as a country with direction, as a country with national spirit.' If the conferring of a human rights award or prize, whether by government or an NGO or a business organisation, can help someone like Aloysius Toe to achieve his/her goals then the conferring of awards does have a real value and warrants the time, energy and money invested in them.

19 Aloysius Toe is a member of the Foundation for Human Rights and Democracy in Liberia and winner of the Reebok Human Rights Award 2005.

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Security and Human Rights (formerly Helsinki Monitor) is a journal devoted to issues inspired by the work and principles of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). It looks at the challenge of building security through cooperation across the northern hemisphere, from Vancouver to Vladivostok, as well as how this experience can be applied to other parts of the world. It aims to stimulate thinking on the question of protecting and promoting human rights in a world faced with serious threats to security.

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