

August 12, 2010

Members of the Executive Board of UNESCO
UNESCO Headquarters
7, Place de Fontenoy
75352 Paris 07 SP
France

Cc: Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director-General

RE: Reconsideration of UNESCO-Obiang International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences

Dear Members of the Executive Board:

We understand that, as a result of a June 15 informational meeting held in Paris, the Executive Board will be addressing the UNESCO-Obiang Nguema Mbasogo International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences at its next session in October. We write to urge you to use that upcoming opportunity to cancel the prize definitively.

We appreciate the action taken on June 15 by UNESCO's leadership, including Director-General Irina Bokova and the members of the Executive Board, to delay the awarding of the UNESCO-Obiang prize and allow for further consultation, in light of concerns and objections raised by scientists, press freedom advocates, scholars, public health professionals, Nobel laureates, UNESCO prize winners, governments, parliamentarians, and global civil society.

A prize in President Obiang's name or supported by money provided by him offends the very standards and goals UNESCO promotes and, in particular, those it sets out for its prizes.

According to a 2005 UNESCO report on prizes, "[e]ach UNESCO Prize carries a moral and symbolic value" and communications about prizes should "help enhance the Organization's profile, prestige and impact." Yet President Obiang's dismal record on human rights, press freedom, and development is well documented by organs of the United Nations and other credible sources.

President Obiang's government has been roundly condemned for its abuse of human rights, including the systematic use of torture in detention documented by the UN special rapporteur on torture. It is equally notorious for its control of the press; official prepublication censorship, as well as self-censorship resulting from ongoing monitoring and pressure on journalists and media outlets, denies people basic information about their government's functioning. The Obiang government's reputation for corruption is supported by findings of several foreign government investigations. Despite Equatorial Guinea's vast wealth from natural resources—which gives it the highest per capita GDP in Sub-Saharan Africa—it has shockingly low health and development indicators, on par with some of the poorest countries in the region and world. Moreover, UNESCO noted in its 2010 "Education for All" report that, while most countries have improved access to education, Equatorial Guinea's net primary school enrollment rates declined, from 89 percent in 1999 to 67 percent in 2007.

It would be indefensible for UNESCO to proceed with a prize that bears President Obiang's name or benefits from money that may be illegitimately derived from the natural resources in the country. Under human rights standards including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the country's wealth should be used to the benefit of its people. Yet President Obiang and his circle of family and close associates enjoy lives of luxury financed with the proceeds of natural resource exploitation while the great majority of Equatorial Guinea's citizens live in dire poverty.

The undersigned therefore call on you to make every effort to abolish the Obiang prize and to decline any alternative proposal that contemplates establishing a different prize associated with President Obiang's name or financed with money from him. We further urge you to help UNESCO ensure that the \$3 million offered by President Obiang is instead used to address the education, health, and other basic rights of the people of Equatorial Guinea. Such spending must be carried out through a clear and transparent mechanism, given high levels of official corruption in the country.

We note Ms. Bokova's June 15 reference to a Working Group established to recommend amending criteria for prizes, on which she will report at the October session of the board. In this regard we strongly encourage you to use this time of consultation to reform the prize establishment process generally, so that any prize inconsistent with UNESCO's mission—including its work to promote human rights—cannot go forward.

Thank you for your consideration and ongoing service to UNESCO and the ideals it aspires to achieve.

You may be in contact with the undersigned via Tutu Alicante, Executive Director of EG Justice, at tutu@egjustice.org.

Yours sincerely,

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