

Members of the Executive Board of UNESCO
UNESCO Headquarters
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Cc: Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director-General, and Members of the African Union Commission

October 11, 2010

RE: The UNESCO-Obiang Nguema Mbasogo International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences

Dear Members of the Executive Board:

We, the undersigned Equatoguinean citizens, jointly with the undersigned laureates, scholars, scientists, cultural figures, human rights defenders, and other concerned individuals and organizations from across the African continent, are writing to urge you to cancel the UNESCO-Obiang Nguema Mbasogo International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences.

The June 15 decision by the Executive Board to delay awarding this highly controversial prize was a commendable step, but action is needed to permanently abolish the UNESCO-Obiang prize at the forthcoming meeting of the Executive Board in October.

The continued existence of this prize is inimical to UNESCO's mission and an affront to Africans everywhere who work for the betterment of our countries. UNESCO describes its mandate and activities in support of education, science and culture as centered on promoting the "observance of human rights, mutual respect and the alleviation of poverty." Yet the record of President Obiang—the namesake and financier of the UNESCO-Obiang prize—contradicts each of those worthy goals.

We also wish to voice our concern over media reports that UNESCO is now considering transferring this prize to the auspices of the African Union. Giving this prize legitimacy--whether through UNESCO, the African Union or any other entity--would be equally harmful to the cause of advancing human rights in Africa.

As Sub-Saharan Africa's fourth largest oil-producing nation, and with the continent's highest GDP per capita, the government of Equatorial Guinea is particularly well-placed to make life better for its people, including meeting United Nations and African Union goals for development and reducing maternal and infant mortality.

However, according to Equatorial Guinea's own figures, over 75 percent of its people live in poverty. Basic education and health care remain unattainable for the vast majority of the country's citizens. The country has the highest rate of child mortality in the world, while UN Development Program

statistics show that Equatorial Guinea's spending on education from 2000-2007, relative to overall government spending, was one of the lowest in the world. Furthermore, gender inequality in access to education remains a significant problem, as several African nations emphasized at the UN Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review of Equatorial Guinea held in Geneva in December. Finally, while the UNESCO-Obiang prize was established to fund research into the life sciences leading to improving the quality of human life, there are no research centers in Equatorial Guinea that would allow one of its own citizens to qualify for this award.

Clearly, Equatorial Guinea is not spending its oil wealth on raising its own people out of poverty and despair. The concept of this prize ignores the appalling record of disregard for basic economic and social rights in Equatorial Guinea, and the fact that fundamental liberties—including freedom of expression and association, the prohibition on torture and arbitrary detention, and the right to a fair trial—are routinely flouted with impunity. The UN Working Group on the use of mercenaries, for example, strongly condemned the August 21, 2010, execution in Equatorial Guinea of four Equatoguinean men, noting that it followed “a summary [military] trial that severely lacked due process” and that “the sentence was carried out the same day, denying the defendants all possibility of appeal.” According to Amnesty International, the four men had been abducted in Benin, where they were living as refugees, and subjected to torture during months of secret detention prior to the trial. This ongoing pattern of abuses raises serious concern and calls into question President Obiang's pledges of reform.

We believe that the leadership to resolve problems in Africa should come from Africans themselves, to be realized in partnership with other citizens around the world. African leaders have the primary responsibility to improve human dignity for the millions of people on the continent. Many positive and innovative initiatives are being undertaken in Africa today in the fields of science, education and the arts. However, the diversion of wealth that should benefit Equatoguineans to finance a prize honoring President Obiang runs counter to the objective of improving human dignity that underpins the missions of UNESCO and the African Union.

We therefore respectfully ask you, on behalf of the people of Equatorial Guinea and all Africans who support human rights, to cancel the UNESCO-Obiang prize. We also ask that you use every mechanism at your disposal to ensure that the funds are invested in developing education and health systems in Equatorial Guinea. This kind of investment may help Equatorial Guinea to one day become a true beacon for scientific and educational advancement.

Thank you in advance for your consideration. We invite you to remain in contact with all of the undersigned via Tutu Alicante (tutu@egjustice.org).

Sincerely,

Desmond M. Tutu
Archbishop Emeritus of Cape Town, Nobel
Peace Prize Laureate (South Africa)

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