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- International

Press Freedom Prize goes to Uzbek journalist and Sri Lankan daily

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Reporters Without Borders, *Le Monde* and *TV5Monde* are pleased and proud to award the 2013 Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Prize to the imprisoned Uzbek journalist **Muhammad Bekjanov** and the Sri Lankan Tamil-language daily *Uthayan*.

The names of the winners were announced during a ceremony this evening in Strasbourg's city hall, where the awards were presented to *Uthayan* editor **Vallipuram Kaanamylnaathan** and owner **Eswarapatham Saravanapavan**, and to Uzbek human rights defender **Nadejda Atayeva** on behalf of Bekjanov, who has been in prison for the past 14 years.

"This year we again salute the exemplary courage of men and women for whom reporting the news is a daily battle," Reporters Without Borders president Alain Le Gougec said. "Their activities embody the universal value of media freedom in a real and concrete way. Thanks to them, information becomes a force capable of enlightening, mobilizing and advancing the cause of freedom."

One of the world's longest held journalists, Bekjanov was the editor of Uzbekistan's main opposition newspaper *Erk* (Freedom), which he used in the early 1990s to start a debate on such taboo subjects as the state the economy, the use of forced labour in the cotton harvest and the Aral Sea environmental disaster. As result, he became one of the leading bugbears of President Islam Karimov, who had quickly established an autocratic and repressive regime.

The regime took advantage of a series of bombings in Tashkent in 1999 to silence its critics. Under torture, Bekjanov was forced to "confess" to being an accomplice to terrorism and was sentenced to 15 years in prison. In January 2012, just a few days before he was due to be released, he was sentenced to another four years and eight months in jail on a charge of disobeying prison officials.

The relatives and colleagues who are very occasionally allowed to visit him say he is in terrible health. No fewer than eight other journalists are currently detained in appalling conditions for defying the ubiquitous censorship in Uzbekistan, which is ranked 164th out of 179 countries in the Reporters Without Borders press freedom index.

A daily newspaper based in Jaffna, in northern Sri Lanka, *Uthayan* is one of the country's few Tamil-language media and the only one to have kept going throughout the 1983-2009 civil war between the Tamil Tiger separatists and the Sri Lankan regular army. It supports the Tamil National Alliance and, with 28 years of experience, is nowadays read by a fifth of the Jaffna Peninsula's inhabitants.

Despite operating in a country that is ranked 162nd in the press freedom index, *Uthayan* has never balked at covering stories that are controversial in a still fragmented society. As a result, it has been the target of repeated violence, leading to the departure of many of its employees over the years. Two were killed in May 2006 and its editor, Gnagnasundaram Kuhanathan, was beaten unconscious in Jaffna in 2011.

In April 2013, armed men forced their way into its distribution office in Kilinochchi, smashing equipment and attacking employees. What with abduction of its journalists, threats, attacks on its offices, forced closure, destruction of equipment and smear campaigns, there is little that *Uthayan* has not endured and it continues to pay a high price for its uncompromising coverage of the country's situation and its frequent revelations about illegal activity by the government and armed forces.

Reporters Without Borders has been awarding an international prize to a journalist and a

news organization every year since 1992. In partnership with *Le Monde* and *TV5Monde*, its aim is to encourage, support and publicize the work of journalists and media that have contributed significantly to the defence or promotion of media freedom.

More than 30 men, women, news organizations and NGOs have received this prize in the past 20 years. Some who were in jail at the time subsequently recovered their freedom. Others who were in danger received a form of protection as a result of this international recognition.

"This year we are honouring one of the best known writers of the struggle for democracy in Uzbekistan, Muhammad Bekjanov, and through him we would like to renew our support for all the journalists who are in prison in that country for courageously doing their job to report the news," Reporters Without Borders director-general Christophe Deloire said.

"The war in Sri Lanka is not yet over for *Uthayan*. If this newspaper were to succumb to the constant harassment to which it is exposed, the abuses by the security forces against the population in the north would continue with complete impunity, without being brought to the attention of Sri Lankans and the international community. The courage and persistence of *Uthayan's* staff in reporting what happens in this embattled country demands our respect and our full solidarity."

TV5Monde news director Pascal Guimier said: "Many prizes are awarded every year but this one has a particular importance for us. It is a prize for freedom of information, one of the conditions necessary for the existence of every form of democratic life. It is therefore logical for us to join Reporters Without Borders and *Le Monde* in this event paying tribute to all those who work with courage and passion, sometimes paying with their lives, because they deeply believe that this helps to bring about freedom for all."

Reporters Without Borders, *Le Monde* and *TV5Monde* would also like to pay tribute to all the other nominees for the 2013 prize:

- In the "journalist" category: **Reyot Alemu** (Ethiopia), **Jorge Carrasco** (Mexico), **Luo Changping** (China), **Ntina Daskapopoulos** (Greece) and **Ismail Saymaz** (Turkey).
- In the "media" category: *Lakome.com* (Morocco), *L'Eléphant Déchaîné* (Côte d'Ivoire) and *Radio Kimche Mapu* (Chile).

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