



Artist Alert January 2010

Art, in any form, constitutes a key medium through which information and ideas are imparted and received. Artist Alert, launched by ARTICLE 19 in 2008, highlights cases of artists around the world whose right to freedom of expression has been curtailed and abused, and seeks to more effectively promote and defend freedom to create.

Uzbekistan: Photographer Charged with Defamation

Uzbek photographer Umida Ahmedova was charged with defamation in Uzbekistan on 16 December 2009, related to the 2007 publication of a book of photographs and a documentary film commissioned by the Swiss Embassy in Tashkent. The book, *Customs of Men and Women*, contains more than 100 images of local people and customs. The Tashkent Prosecutor's Office has charged Ahmedova on the basis that this work constitutes "an insult and slander of the Uzbek people" and portrays local people as backward.

The Uzbek Government stipulates that any publications or media materials produced by NGOs or international organisations must be approved by state officials, including the Cabinet of Ministers. Specific topics such as poverty, gender equality, feminism, domestic violence and human rights may now be construed as "hostile" to national culture and tradition.

Criminal defamation in Uzbekistan carries a sentence of six months in prison or three years of hard labour, and Ahmedova is unable to leave the country before her trial.

Burma: Documentary Videographers Jailed

Another two videographers working for Democratic Voice of Burma, a Norway-based television channel, have been sentenced to long prison terms in Burma. The videographers became famous internationally for the film *Burma VJ* which documented the 2007 Saffron Revolution when Buddhist monks led widespread protests against the military regime. The film has been shortlisted for the 2010 Academy Awards and has already won an award at the Sundance Film Festival.

According to the Burma Media Association, videographer Ngwe Soe Lin was handed a 13-year prison sentence by a secret court held inside Rangoon's Insein prison on 27 January 2010. He was convicted under the Burmese Electronics Act and the Immigration Emergency Provisions Act.

On 30 December 2009, the Democratic Voice of Burma reported that another videographer, Hla Hla Win, had been sentenced to 27 years in prison. She was also convicted under the Electronics Act. The channel estimates that 14 of its reporters and videographers are now in prison.

Denmark: Controversial Cartoonist Attacked at Home

Kurt Westergaard, the cartoonist whose images of the prophet Muhammed with a bomb in his turban created an international outcry in 2006, was attacked in his Aarhus home on 1 January 2010. According to Danish newspaper *Aften Posten*, a 28-year-old Somali man, who was already under surveillance by security services, smashed his way into the 75-year-old cartoonist's house, brandishing an axe and a knife. Westergaard, who was with his five-year-old granddaughter, locked himself in his specially fortified bathroom and called the police.

The attacker left the house after failing to smash down the door and was arrested at the scene. He appeared in court on 2 January 2010, charged with the attempted murders of Westergaard and a policeman.

Westergaard lives under close police protection and only emerged from hiding last year, after his cartoons sparked protests at Danish embassies worldwide and threats against his life.

Westergaard's cartoons have also been rejected from an auction being held to raise relief funds for Haiti. According to the *Copenhagen Post*, television programme *Go'morgen Danmark* organised the auction and asked celebrities to donate personal items. However, following the attack on Westergaard, the auctioneers Lauritz.com refused to accept his work, stating reasons of security.

Tibet: Filmmaker Imprisoned for Praise of Dalai Lama

A Tibetan filmmaker, Dhondup Wangchen, has reportedly been sentenced at the end of 2009 to six years' imprisonment in China for his film *Leaving Fear Behind*. The film was shot in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympics and showed interviews with over 100 Tibetans discussing the upcoming games and their views of the Chinese government. The film also contained footage of Tibetans praising the Dalai Lama.

Wangchen was arrested in March 2008, shortly after they finished shooting and had smuggled the footage out of the country. He was reportedly tortured in prison and is now suffering from hepatitis B.

According to the film's website, Wangchen had no legal representation during his trial held in Xining, and his family were only informed of his sentence after he had already begun serving it. There is also no clarity about what charges were used to convict Wangchen.

Ukraine: Public Morality Commission Censors Artists

A group of artists, writers and human rights activists joined together in Ukraine on 15 January to protest the continued censorship of art by the National Expert Commission for the Protection of Public Morality. According to the Kharkiv Human Rights

Protection Group, the artists and writers are planning to launch new projects that aim to tackle the Commission's stranglehold over what can be classed as art. The artist Oleksandr Roitburd states: "*I lived for 30 years in a country called the Soviet Union, and now I feel that this commission is bringing it with them. I really would like to laugh at them, but in fact it's not funny. It's foul and frightening.*"

Sri Lanka: Cartoonist Abducted in Election Run-Up

A cartoonist and journalist, Prageeth Eknaligoda, was reportedly kidnapped days before the Sri Lankan presidential elections on 26 January 2010 and has not been seen since. This disappearance was just one of several incidents targeting independent or critical media workers in the run-up to the elections. According to the Cartoonists Rights Network, Eknaligoda had created work that was sympathetic to the opposition candidate's position.

Reporters Without Borders states that Eknaligoda had noticed he was being followed for the three days preceding his disappearance. He had previously been kidnapped in August 2009.

Egypt: Graphic Artist Fined for Violating Public Morality

The author and publisher of the first graphic novel in Arabic for adults were fined 5,000 Egyptian pounds each on 21 November 2009, after a court ruled that the book violated public morality.

Metro, by Magdy el-Shafee, features a protagonist who works as a computer engineer and robs a bank in Cairo, and also touches on social and political themes. Censors found it to contain insults, violence and modest sexual imagery.

In April last year, police raided the premises of publishing house *Dar-el Malamaeh*, and confiscated copies of the book. Booksellers were prevented from stocking the book too. The charges against el-Shafee and publisher Mohammed Al-Sharqawi were brought by well-known Egyptian lawyer Derbashy al-Saleh, who is allegedly renowned for bringing cases against journalists and writers.

Indonesia: Historical Books and Films Banned

The *Malaysian Insider* has reported that the government of Indonesia is continuing to ban works portraying Indonesia's recent history. In December 2009, Attorney-General Hendarman Supandji announced that an Australian film about the 1975 invasion of East Timor would be banned. He also banned a book on the aborted 1965 communist coup. In January, a book on the current presidential incumbent Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was also banned. Supandji stated that the books would: "*erode public confidence in the government, cause moral decadence or disturb the national ideology, economy, culture and security*". Book stores are also refusing to sell sociologist George Junus' *Membongkar Gurita Cikeas: Di Balik Skandal Bank Century*, which makes allegations about the country's President, for fear of getting into trouble.

Austria: Artworks Removed, Folded and Posted Back

The Mayor of an Austrian town, Bruck an der Leitha, caused controversy in January 2010 by unilaterally ordering the removal of works by local artist Kurt Schloegl. Schloegl had produced a series of public artworks, some of which were critical of supposed political interference in art. Mayor Richard Hemmer had cancelled one art project, entitled “Witches, Whores and Queens”, declaring it morally unsuitable in a Catholic country. According to the newspaper *NÖN*, Schloegl lodged a complaint with the police, only to be told that the Mayor had ordered the local fire chief to remove the artworks. The artist has now also alleged that the Mayor vandalised his work after public paintings were torn up, folded into an envelope and posted to him.

NOTES TO EDITORS:

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- ARTICLE 19 is an independent human rights organisation that works around the world to protect and promote the right to freedom of expression. It takes its name from Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees free speech.