PEN INTERNATIONAL - DAY OF THE IMPRISONED WRITER 2014
REPORT ON PEN CENTRE ACTIVITIES

Introduction

The 15 November 2014 marked the 33rd anniversary of the Day of the Imprisoned Writer.

PEN launched the first Day of the Imprisoned Writer in 1981, with the aim of focusing much-needed global attention on imprisoned, murdered or otherwise harassed writers. Since then, the Day of the Imprisoned Writer has become a key campaigning event in PEN’s calendar, with PEN centres from across the globe taking part in high-profile activities highlighting the plight of our fellow writers who have been targeted solely because of their work.

Every year, in the lead up to the 15 November, the Writers in Prison Committee of PEN International carefully selects five cases (one from each of the regions on which we work) which are of particular concern to us, and which are often emblematic in some way of a broader, worrying trend within the region, such as impunity or the abuse of ill-defined anti-terrorism legislation. This year our highlighted cases were:

- **Nelson AGUILERA** (Paraguay), writer, teacher and member of PEN Paraguay, sentenced to 30 months in prison on 4 November 2014 for allegedly plagiarising a novel. Independent experts and writers have found that the similarities between his work and the allegedly plagiarised work cannot be described as plagiarism. PEN is calling for his conviction to be overturned.
• **Azimjon ASKAROV** (Kyrgyzstan), journalist and member of Kyrgyzstan’s Uzbek minority who has spent his career exposing corruption. He was sentenced to life imprisonment following his conviction on charges of organising mass disorder and complicity in the murder of a police officer. The UN’s Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination and other independent observers have declared that Askarov did not receive a fair trial. PEN believes his charges and conviction were politically motivated and that he should be released immediately and unconditionally.

• **Dieudonné Enoh MEYOMESSE** (Cameroon), poet, serving a seven-year prison sentence for alleged complicity in the theft and illegal sale of gold. PEN believes that the charges against Meyomesse and his conviction are politically motivated and that he should be released immediately and unconditionally. He is in poor health.

• **Mahvash SABET** (Iran), teacher and poet, is currently serving a 20-year prison sentence in Evin prison, Tehran. She is one of a group of seven Baha’i leaders known as the “Yaran-i-Iran” – “Friends of Iran” – who have been detained since 2008 for their faith and activities related to running the affairs of the Bahá’í community in Iran. Mahvash Sabet began writing poetry in prison. PEN is calling for her immediate and unconditional release.

• **Gao YU** (China), journalist and member of the Independent Chinese PEN Centre, is awaiting sentence after a trial for ‘leaking state secrets abroad’. She faces a lengthy prison sentence if convicted. PEN is calling for her acquittal and immediate release.

This year, PEN Centres across the world came together and stood in solidarity with our persecuted friends and colleagues. Centres organised protests, awards ceremonies, public readings and literary events in order to direct public attention not only towards the above five cases, but towards all writers who suffer persecution in whatever form, purely for exercising their right to freedom of expression.

This year also saw a new initiative in PEN’s Day of the Imprisoned Writer activities – a series of public letters written by five world renowned authors, each of whom addressed their letter to one of the five highlighted cases. To read these letters, please click on the name of the writer: Yann Martel, Luisa Valenzuela, Elif Shafak, Alberto Manquel, Alain Mabanckou.

We received considerable media coverage – Yann Martel spoke to the BBC World Service’s Newshour about the day and his letter to Azimjon Askarov. Azimkjon Askarov’s case was featured in a Voice of Freedom article. Ann Harrison, Director of the WiPC spoke to the Irish Radio station NewsTalk’s The Green Room about the campaign, as well as to the Irish Times about Mahvash Sabet, who was also the focus of an interview with Asia researcher/Campaigner Cathy McCann with IranWire.

What follows is an overview of PEN centre activities as they occurred around the world. It is not exhaustive, and we regret that we have not been able to include all activities in this report.
PEN Centre Activities

Basque PEN published articles promoting the Day of the Imprisoned Writer in three newspapers: GARA, BERRIA and DEIA.

PEN Canada held a public conversation with Ensaf Haidar, the wife of the imprisoned Saudi editor and blogger Raif Badawi, at the Toronto International Book Fair. Badawi, who founded the Free Saudi Liberals website, is currently serving a 10-year prison sentence for “insulting Islam”. The conversation was followed by Ensaf reading extracts from her husband’s work, with live translation throughout by the Kurdish journalist and editor-in-chief of Rudaw English, Ayub Nuri.

Catalan PEN commemorated the Day of the Imprisoned Writer by organising a number of events in collaboration with the Balearic Cultural Association and the Lloseta City Council. A programme of activities entitled ‘The Word Burns the Fire’ was carried out on the Balearic Islands and in Catalonia with the aim of raising public awareness about violations of the right to freedom of expression around the world. During these events, Catalan PEN awarded its fifth International Free Voice Prize to the persecuted writer and founder of Eritrean PEN, Dessale Berekhet. Other highlights included ‘Breaking Down the Bars’, a celebration of poetry by persecuted writers, at which Dessale and the Palestinian writer Basem Al-Nabriss took part, and also a roundtable discussion - moderated by the president of Catalan PEN, Carme Arenas - about the presence of literature in the media.

The Independent Chinese PEN Centre marked the Day by awarding the Liu Xiaobo Courage to Write Award to the imprisoned writer Chen Shuqing, and by adopting 17 writers as honorary members. For a complete list see: http://www.penchina.org/english/icpc-statement-on-pen-international-day-of-imprisoned-writer
Croatian PEN commemorated the Day by placing large posters (see left) in bookstores and library windows in Zagreb; this centre also organised a roundtable discussion with young scholars on the theme of ‘Digital Freedom and Author’s Rights.’

Danish PEN continued its traditional Day of the Imprisoned Writer activities at the Copenhagen Book Fair, Bogforum. The centre set up a stand where they highlighted the plights of their honorary members, including Mahvash Sabet, and collected signatures to protest the judicial harassment of writers in Turkey. In addition to this, as part of Danish PEN’s Free Word programme, writers took to the stage every hour to speak for 10 minutes on whatever subject they thought important. Twenty five writers took part.
English PEN marked the Day of the Imprisoned Writer by launching *Time to Read*, a new e-book collection of work by writers at risk and former PEN cases from all over the globe. Pussy Riot member Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Belarusian journalist Iryna Khalip and British theatre producer David Cecil are among the contributors to an anthology on the necessity of reading in prison. As former prisoners, they wrote these pieces in support of English PEN’s campaign with the Howard League for Penal Reform against restrictions on sending books to prisoners in the UK. You can download the book here: [http://www.englishpen.org/campaigns/time-to-read/](http://www.englishpen.org/campaigns/time-to-read/)

Finnish PEN published information about Azmijon Askarov, Mahvash Sabet, Gao Yu, and imprisoned Ethiopian/Swedish journalist Dawit Isaak on their website. The public in Helsinki were also invited to sign appeals for the four at a pop-up book store in the city.

PEN Flanders commemorated the day in a series of readings by writers who, under threat, have had to flee their home countries. These included Tade Ipadeola from Nigeria, Fatena Al-Ghorra from Gaza, Alhadi Adam Agabeldour from Sudan, Kaptue Fotso Blaise from Cameroon, Bridget Tapuwa and Nozizwe Dube from Zimbabwe. They all spoke about the dangers of their work as authors in their own countries and read extracts from their own work. The readings took place one of Antwerp’s best-known bookshops, De groene Waterman, and in the Malpertuis theatre. Some of these fascinating events have been recorded and uploaded onto Youtube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iypUU5jIF1I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iypUU5jIF1I)  [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jat-GRoWvno](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jat-GRoWvno)

German Writers Abroad PEN members commemorated the Day of the Imprisoned Writer as part of 2014 International Education Week at North Carolina Central University in the United States. The event, which was organised by Dr. Claudia Becker, began with a candle-lighting ceremony. Dr. Becker and her colleague, Dr. Horacio Xaubet, spoke about the importance of freedom of expression in the written context and of the ever-present danger of censorship. The names of imprisoned writers were read aloud and the governments that violate the right to freedom of expression were highlighted. A series of poems were read, in Spanish, German and English. Dr. Becker shared a poem in German that argued for introspection and reflection during turbulent times.
Irish PEN On 15 November in Dublin, in a late Georgian church built on the site of one of Ireland’s first theatres, Irish PEN and Front Line Defenders took part in the Dublin Book Festival to mark the Day of the Imprisoned Writer. Iryna Khalip, Belarusian opposition journalist and PEN’s Writer of Courage in 2013, joined acclaimed authors Anne Enright and Martina Devlin for a special event at the Old Boy’s School in Smock Alley Theatre, Temple Bar. The sold-out event was hosted and recorded by RTÉ radio’s arts show, Arena. Anne Enright and Martina Devlin read from the works of two murdered campaigners (Pavlos Fyssas, a musician and PEN case from Greece, and María del Rosario Fuentes Rubio from Mexico), as well as from pieces written by two imprisoned lawyers who campaigned against their governments (Mahienour Al Masry from Egypt, Thulani Maseko, from Swaziland). Iryna gave a heart rending account of her incarceration, and the work done by her mother to maintain guardianship of her very young son in the face of pressure from the Belarusian authorities.

Macedonian PEN commemorated the Day by publishing a statement in a number of newspapers and news portals. This centre continued calling for the release of the imprisoned Macedonian journalist and PEN case, Tomislav Kezarovski. Vice president of PEN International, Katica Kulavkova, organised a literary evening with young Macedonian writers.

New Zealand PEN organised an event at which the imprisoned Kazakh poet, Aron Atabek, was represented by an Empty Chair (on which was placed a poem that he had written especially for New Zealand PEN). New Zealand PEN members worked hard to try to raise media interest in Atabek’s case. The centre also wrote letters to imprisoned writers around the world.
PEN Paraguay’s activities focused on Nelson Aguilera, one of 2014’s five highlighted cases and a member of the centre. In Plaza Uruguaya, Asunción, this centre held a ‘reading marathon’, at which several Paraguayan writers read from Aguilera’s works. Aguilera, although sentenced to 30 months in jail on charges of plagiarism, is not currently in prison, and so was able to attend. He said: “I feel great because I’m receiving support from different parts of the world. I feel very well supported. I didn’t commit any crime and the people who understand literature and have read the two works know that no plagiarism has taken place.” Writers who attended in support of Aguilera included Guido Rodríguez Alcalá, Renée Ferrer, Lourdes Talavera, Princesa Aquino, and Alejandro Hernández. The centre also secured valuable press coverage in numerous Paraguayan newspapers, including Ultima Hora and Diaro ABC. Nelson Aguilera’s nephew told PEN afterwards: ‘I’m hugely grateful to you and PEN for your recent campaign that highlights the injustice that he and other writers have been served, and I know that your campaign has sparked increased activism both in Paraguay and internationally over the last week due to people becoming more aware of his case.’

Quebec PEN marked the 15th anniversary of Livres comme l’Air, at the Montreal Book Fair, where there were readings and dedications. The evening was hosted by the author and screenwriter Stéphane Dompierre. A television interview on CBC with the Livres comme l’Air spokesman, Michel Marc Bouchard, can be viewed here: http://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelles/arts_et_spectacles/2014/11/05/003-michel-marc-bouchard.shtml

South Africa promoted the Day on social media and on their Books Live website.

PEN Surrey (the University of Surrey Student PEN centre) co-hosted an open mic night in which the theme was ‘Freedom of Expression.’ The event was very well-attended by students and musicians whose performances and lyrics reflected the topic of the night. Natalie Imani, press officer of Surrey Student PEN, took to the stage alongside fellow Surrey PEN committee members to talk about the importance of human rights and called on all attending to raise awareness of those writers who have been imprisoned or otherwise persecuted because of their work.

PEN Suisse Romande used the occasion of the 15th Francophonie Summit, held in Dakar, Senegal, to highlight threats faced by writers around the world. This centre produced an article – ‘Silenced writers and journalists, let us not forget them!’ – which was published in the French-speaking African media, including the Senegalese news agency APS, the newspapers La Gazette and le Quotidien, the online magazine Seneweb in Dakar,
the Gabon Review in Libreville, Gabon, and the online magazine AfroLivresque. This centre also secured valuable coverage of the Day of the Imprisoned Writer in media in Switzerland, France, Belgium and Germany. One of the highlights of Suisse Romand’s activities was a debate (‘Free Expression: Between Rights and Repression’) featuring guest writer and PEN Eritrea member, Abraham B. Desalle. PEN Suisse Romand also petitioned the relevant authorities on behalf of all of 2014’s highlighted writers, and also on behalf of Turkey’s Pinar Selek, and free expression in the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam.

Sydney PEN held its final 2014 Free Voices lecture at the State Library of NSW on the Day of the Imprisoned Writer. An Empty Chair was placed on stage to represent the Australian Al Jazeera journalist Peter Greste, who remains imprisoned in Egypt. The speaker was the noted Australian academic Dennis Altman, who delivered a thought-provoking lecture entitled ‘Repressive Tolerance and Political Correctness’, in which he examined the ways in which free speech and debate are limited in contemporary liberal societies by the role of the market and by assumptions about the need for ‘balance’.

(Tibetan PEN members stand in solidarity with imprisoned writers around the world.)

Tibetan PEN commemorated the Day jointly in Dharamsala with the Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy. The day was filled with moving and thoughtful events, including a public debate on the subject of imprisoned writers which was attended by more than 100 people, including members of Tibetan Parliament, delegates from the Tibetan administration and NGOs. The debate was presided over by Tibet’s former cabinet minister, Kirti Rinpoche, who spoke about the importance of Tibetan language and literature in reflecting the reality of the situation in Tibet. Special guest, Chang Ping, gave a speech
which echoed Rinpoche’s message. He said: “We write in Chinese, Tibetan and Uighur—the language we once learned in our homeland - in exile. But where’s our home? It’s in our speech. And for those who were thrown into prison because of their writing, they don’t have pen and paper in the cell, they don’t have the slightest freedom of speech at all. But they have spoken.” Centre members also spoke about their work promoting imprisoned or exiled Tibetan writers and linguistic rights. Keeping in spirit with the theme of linguistic rights, press conferences were held in three languages (Tibetan, Chinese and English), about the five imprisoned writers whose case we highlighted this year, as well as imprisoned Tibetan writers.

**Wales PEN Cymru**, one of PEN’s newest centres established in October 2014 at the Bishkek Congress, adopted the imprisoned Kyrgyzstani investigative journalist, Azimjon Azkarov, as their first ever Day of the Imprisoned Writer case. They asked members to write to him and chose him to be their Empty Chair at their first AGM at the Hay Winter Weekend Festival in late November.