

The Natali Prize 2003: another African triumphs

For the second consecutive year, an African journalist has been awarded the Natali Prize Gold Medal for journalism on human rights, democracy and development. Kenyan Ken Opala was chosen from the five regional winners (Africa; the Arab World, Iran and Israel; Asia and the Pacific; Europe; Latin America and the Caribbean) out of 320 entries from 80 countries. Each regional winner takes home a prize of €10,000 and the accolades of their peers that their stories, often the fruit of difficult and dangerous investigations, deserve this recognition of excellence.

Maria Laura Franciosi

“It was very difficult to choose the overall winner,” recalls the 2003 Natali Prize Jury Chairman David Thomas. “In many cases all the finalists seemed to deserve a prize”. He suggests that in future the prize-money might be distributed among the three finalists. As for the recognition to yet another African journalist – last year the winner was a Ghanaian, Raymond Archer – Thomas believes that “in Africa we are now witnessing the golden age of journalism”, and suggests that journalists and media should capitalize on this. “Journalists from the developed world should learn a lot from these colleagues”.

What tipped the balance in favour of Opala’s article was its subject; the desperate plight of thousands in Kenyan prisons condemned to live for many years on “death row” awaiting eventual execution. After the then head of state Jomo Kenyatta’s house was burgled (a car was stolen but nobody was hurt) Kenyatta asked the judges to hand down the maximum sentence, the death penalty, on the culprits. Although the judges were not keen to hang people for simple robbery, they complied and since then all robbers are sent to the gallows, at least on paper. Opala highlighted how the prisoners’ plight has been exacerbated by the subhuman prison conditions, to the extent that many demand to be executed to end their misery.

“I have followed prison stories for seven years,” says Opala who writes for the Daily Nation. “But it was impossible for journalists to gain access to prisons.” He had to pretend he was a relative, in order to establish the facts from the prisoners themselves. He believes that 80 per cent of those who are now languishing in prison are even innocent. The article he wrote earned him national recognition and prisons became accessible to journalists. Since last year he has been working freelance for the same paper which has given him one page to devote to human rights stories. A clear sign, he says, that the present government of Mwai Kibaki who replaced Daniel Arap Moi wants to change the political climate of the country. “Last year I wanted a change. I left my newspaper and created a news agency, the “Africa Investigative News Service” promoting investigative journalism. Then my newspaper offered me this weekly collaboration. It was on this page that the articles on death row were published”.

He would like to invest the prize-money (substantial for Africa, he says) in his news agency. “Journalists should abandon spoon feeding by the politicians and swim alone. The money could be used also to create training workshops for African journalists and to promote exchanges with colleagues of other countries”. After his article was published, he says with pride, over sixty prisoners were released from death row, and the conditions inside were drastically improved, with inmates given mattresses and even access to radio.

Regional winners

The conditions of those who fight for human rights in Colombia could be improved by the winner of the Latin American section, José Fernando Hoyos Estrada, who in his weekly magazine *Semana* highlighted the merits of the “enterprise philanthropy” movement to solve the crisis that afflicts Colombia. Donating money to resolve underdevelopment is insufficient. Real change, he says, can be obtained only with the personal involvement of people who donate their time to help educate poor children or run canteens. He is harsh on *narcotraficantes* (drug traffickers) but also on their customers. “The drug trade exists because there is a market and the state is weak”. Journalists need to be better trained and his prize-money may be used, he says, to create a training foundation.

Walid Batrawi, the Palestinian journalist who won the prize for the Middle East region, wants better exchanges between journalists. He praises the courage of some Israeli colleagues who still try to provide impartial information. His article, published on-line, exposes the plight of the Palestinian media under the rule of both the Palestinian Authority and the Israelis who control the borders. “My press card has to be renewed by the Israelis. When I showed it to a young Israeli soldier he laughed, teasing, “I didn’t know that there were intellectuals in Palestine!”. Since 2001, Israel has stopped renewing press cards, though even previously they were valid for only two weeks. Batrawi has not been harassed so far but he points out that it was his informant who was harassed and that he fears, “next time it could be me”.

Ken Opala from Kenya, who won the overall prize in the 2003 Natali Prize. He also won the regional prize for Africa.

The prize-money is going to help him rebuild his house in Ramallah. But he might also make a donation to an organisation involved in the safety of journalists. “I can’t afford a flak jacket and being able to use one might change my life”.

The prize winner for Asia was Massoud Ansari, writing for the magazine *Newsline* in Pakistan. In his article, “The Great Repatriation Scam”, which led senior UN

officials to resign, he exposed corruption and malpractices, including sexual harassment, inside the UN High Commission for Refugees in a repatriation scheme for Afghans. But he wouldn’t mind, he says, a job with UNHCR. “They appreciated what I wrote” he quips. Two women who had been harassed by UNHCR officials had approached him. “They were terrified and did not want to give me their names,” recalls Ansari. “Then I started an investigation and found that there was not only female harassment but also massive corruption”. He has written widely on human rights, has visited Afghanistan frequently and would like to write a book. He is now looking for a publisher to finance the project.

Another journalist from Asia, Sergei Duvanov of Kazakhstan, one of the two runner-ups, appeared at the ceremony only on a poster showing target circles superimposed on his face, held aloft by a colleague, Taukina Rozlana, president of the “Fund for Journalists in Danger”. Duvanov wasn’t present because he has been in prison for over a year and has two more years to serve of his sentence for raping a minor. Rozlana declares that the charge was manifestly fabricated. “The constitution is regularly violated in our country where the president Nursultan Nazarbayev and his family own 85 per cent of the national media”. In his article, Duvanov exposed the story of alleged money-laundering of funds by Nazarbayev in Switzerland while most of his country is kept in silence. Rozlana herself cannot work or has to use pseudonyms and write for media outside Kazakhstan.

Several of the entries dealt with gender issues. The prize for Europe went to a young journalist from Portugal, Sofia Branco, from *Publico*, who described the horrendous practice of genital mutilation still performed illegally by the Guinea Bissau immigrants in Portugal. She tries however to be dispassionate and presents also

the views of those who consider it a cultural experience. Although only 26, she has been a journalist for four years and has already won three prizes in Portugal. She wants to use her prize-money to travel in order to highlight other harsh realities.

The jury of the Natali Prize 2003 gave special mention not only to the two runner-ups for each section but also to a good number of other journalists who were not selected but whose work was highly commended.

In presenting the awards, the vice president of the European Commission, Neil Kinnock, praised the acquisition of the freedom of expression, by now well-established in Europe, although, he pointed out, “even in the midst of our democracies, terrorists, criminals and thugs have tried to silence journalists using intimidation and murder”. To extend liberty, he added, we must

assure freedom of the press everywhere, although more than a third of the world’s population lives in countries where there is no press freedom.

“This is why I invite everyone to celebrate with me just one of the many examples of the irrepressibility of those who struggle to sustain press freedom,” he concluded. “Last month the Daily News was closed in Zimbabwe. Within days another newspaper called Friends of the Daily News went on line”.

The prizegiving ceremony was preceded by a discussion on “Human rights and Globalisation” moderated by Aidan White, the general secretary of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), which manages the Natali Prize on behalf of the European Commission. ■

“Journalists are like unnoticed stones” The meaning of the “Natali Prize for journalism: excellence in reporting human rights, democracy and development”

An intense debate over the ethics of journalism prizes took place among some journalists who participated in the 2002 Natali Prize for human rights reporting. It is an important debate which might make media workers reflect on situations in which one risks not only one’s career but also one’s life reporting on human rights.

Maria Laura Franciosi

One of the winners of the 2002 prize, the Brazilian Mauri Konig, says that he was almost “garroted”, hit with over 100 blows and left for dead after being attacked by three men from the National Police of Paraguay. An inquest was opened but nobody was sent to prison. Mauri, 36, a journalist for O Estado do Parana, had conducted for over five months a vast enquiry into the kidnapping of children in the poor frontier area between Paraguay and Brazil to be used in Paraguayan barracks to beef up the numbers of the military and work as slaves, for sex or other purposes. Many had died.

Another journalist, the young Ghanaian Raymond Archer, was forced to relocate as the police pursued him after he had exposed the activities (including torture) of an illegal unit of the police. In the end, his interviews with the victims were widely publicised and the police had to change their tactics. Archer, 26, who won the prize for Africa and the overall Natali Prize gold medal in 2002 for a series of articles on a scandal surrounding the deportation of immigrants from Sweden to Ghana, decided to use the prize-money to set up the Ghana Centre for Public Integrity (GCPI)¹. Recently, he has won an award as the best investigative journalist from the Ghana Journalist Association (GJA) and has become

the youngest news editor in Ghana and perhaps in the whole of Africa. A similar thing happened with the winner of the Asia section of the 2002 Natali prize, Asha Krishankumar, an Indian journalist who described the desperate plight of Indian weavers. She devoted her prize