

**Presentation of the “2009 IPA Freedom to Publish Prize” to Sihem Bensedrine, Neziha Rjiba and Mohamed Talbi, three founders of OLPEC, the Observatory for the Freedom of the Press, Publishing and Creation in Tunisia**

**Thursday, 4 June 2009**

**Global Forum on Freedom of Expression - Kaholmen Island, Oslo, 20:00**

*Speech by Herman P. Spruijt, President of the International Publishers Association (IPA)*

The Board of the International Publishers Association (IPA) meeting in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina on 24<sup>th</sup> of April 2009, selected Sihem Bensedrine, Neziha Rjiba and Mohamed Talbi, founders of the Tunis-based Observatory for the Freedom of the Press, Publishing and Creation in Tunisia (OLPEC), as Prize-winners from among many highly commendable candidates.

The IPA Freedom to Publish Prize honours each year a person or an organisation that has made an important contribution to the defence and promotion of freedom to publish anywhere in the world.

Oslo is host to the Global Forum on Freedom of Expression this year, and IPA is a proud partner of this great international endeavour. To us, it is no surprise that this important event in the field of freedom of expression takes place in Norway, a key global player in the defence and promotion of freedom of expression, as we learned again yesterday listening to the eloquent opening speech of Norway’s Foreign Minister.

In publishing, Norwegian publishers are at the forefront of the battle for freedom to publish worldwide. It is therefore only natural to formally present the 2009 IPA Freedom to Publish Prize here in Norway.

I would like to take this opportunity to particularly thank the Chair of IPA’s Freedom to Publish Committee, your fellow country man publisher Bjorn Smith-Simonsen (Pax Forlag), and IPA’s Director Freedom to Publish Alexis Krikorian, for all they have done to ensure this event meets success. My gratitude also goes to another renowned Norwegian, tonight’s keynote speaker, Eugene Schoulgin, International Secretary of International PEN.

I would like to underline his outstanding courage in defending freedom of expression anywhere in the world. His presence also stresses the value of the writer – publisher alliance for more freedom to write and more freedom to publish worldwide: These two fundamental subsets of the freedom of expression.

International PEN and IPA have been cooperating for years to defend the publishers’ and the writers’ right to freedom of expression. We have been working together to promote freedom of expression in international fora like the World Summit on the

Information Society (WSIS), or the newly-born United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva, where we will try to ensure permanent representation for the freedom of expression lobby. As the President of the International Publishers Association, I would like to assure my counterpart of International PEN that we sincerely would like this cooperation to grow even stronger.

I would also like to thank the Norwegian Publishing community, in particular our Norwegian member, the Norwegian Publishers Association (DnF), which generously sponsors the Prize this year, making this event possible.

My thanks also go to the team of the Global Forum on Freedom of Expression, in particular PEN Norway and the Fritt Ord Foundation. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to State Secretary Vidar Harsick and to the Norwegian cartoonists' organisation for sharing the evening with us.

I am both proud and happy that publishers like Shahla Lahiji and Ragıp Zarkolu, past recipients of the IPA Freedom to Publish Prize, and Trasvin Jittidecharak of Thailand, Ana Maria Cabanellas of Argentina, or Müge Sökmen of Turkey have been able to contribute the publisher perspectives to the Global Forum on Freedom of Expression. In our round table "Publishing across Borders" organised earlier today at the House of Literature, it was quite clear that publishers are at the core of the free flow of knowledge worldwide. Because publishers believe in and promote the free flow of books, IPA therefore supports the ratification of the 1950 UNESCO Florence agreement and its additional Nairobi Protocol (1976), which aims at facilitating the free flow of ideas by fostering the free circulation of educational, scientific and cultural materials through the dismantling of custom barriers and other trade obstacles.

Tunisia is a country IPA knows particularly well, for it has taken part in four fact-finding missions of the IFEX Tunisia Monitoring Group (TMG) between 2005 and 2007. It is one country with a poor freedom of expression record. Three individuals, Sihem Bensedrine, Neziha Rjiba (also known as Om Zied) and Mohamed Talbi, founders of the Observatory for the Freedom of the Press, Publishing and Creation (OLPEC) in 2001, are remarkably instrumental in promoting freedom of expression and freedom to publish.

OLPEC's principal goal is to serve as a monitoring body for all forms of media and literary censorship in Tunisia, and to make these issues public. Despite repeatedly refusing them the right to legal recognition, OLPEC and its members continue fearlessly to highlight censorship in publishing and defend freedom of expression in the face of threats of jail and physical attack.

This year the Tunisian Government officially contested the decision of IPA's Board to award its 2009 Prize to the three founders of OLPEC. The Tunisian Ambassador to Switzerland, where the IPA Secretariat is located, officially protested the 2009 IPA Freedom to Publish Prize by referring to OLPEC as the "so-called OLPEC, an organisation which does not exist in Tunisia". Such a statement is highly ironic. The fact that OLPEC is denied legal recognition in Tunisia is precisely at the heart of the problem. In Tunisia, freedom of expression violations go hand in hand with freedom of

association violations. The Interior Ministry turned down OLPEC's request for official NGO status in August 2001, citing the organisation's "unlawful designation". OLPEC filed a complaint for abuse of power but the administrative tribunal has yet to rule on the case.

Sihem Bensedrine, Neziha Rjiba and Mohamed Talbi have consistently stood up for the right to freedom of expression and have suffered greatly as a result. Sihem Bensedrine for instance was the victim of an extensive defamation campaign in 2005 and this year designed to shed doubt on her credibility as a human rights activist. The founders of OLPEC are under constant police surveillance. Their guests are harassed. Their mail is intercepted. Their e-mails are bugged, and their access to the internet is blocked. Sihem Bensedrine is routinely prevented from travelling and has been assaulted at Tunis airport as recently as August 2008. Neziha Rjiba received threats over the phone just a few days ago for travelling to Oslo to receive this Prize. Those who behave like this should be ashamed of themselves.

In a way, OLPEC emerged from the ashes of a publishing house, Aloes, established by Sihem Bensedrine. In December 1999, the offices of Aloes were burgled twice and its employees threatened by members of the security forces. Police intimidation and threats and break-ins finally led to the closure of this small publishing house, and the emergence in 2001 of a new group, OLPEC, aimed at defending freedom of expression, including the right to publish.

OLPEC issues alerts on freedom of expression violations, including an annual list of censored books at the Tunis Book Fair. This remarkable work is incredibly useful to us as publishers, and deserves to be honoured. We hope that the IPA Freedom to Publish Prize will encourage the three founders of OLPEC and OLPEC itself to continue their important work highlighting the frequent freedom of expression and freedom to publish violations in Tunisia.

We sincerely hope that the three founders of OLPEC will not be punished for receiving an international prize without prior authorisation as Tunisian legislation mandates. This Prize should remind the Tunisian authorities that Tunisian legislation must be amended<sup>1</sup> or repealed to meet international standards, and that Tunisian practice must be changed for freedom of expression to flourish again in Tunisia.

In giving the three founders of OLPEC the 2009 IPA Freedom to Publish Prize, we rise to honour the exemplary integrity, the humanity, the determination, and the courage that they so marvellously demonstrate.

Takk

Merci

Choukrane

Thank you, Sihem Bensedrine, Neziha Rjiba, and Mohamed Talbi.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g.: Article 8 of the Press Code which forces the printer to deposit copies of a printed book with the local prosecutor's office, the Ministry of the Interior and the chamber of deputies.