



Artist Alert March 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.

Iran: Jafar Panahi and family arrested

Multi award-winning film director Jafar Panahi was detained along with his wife, daughter and 15 guests by Iranian security on 1 March. His wife, daughter and guests have since been released, but AFP reports that no visitors have since been allowed to meet with Panahi, who is inside the infamous Evin prison.

The detention is part of an ongoing crackdown on supporters of the opposition Green Movement and follows a travel ban placed on Panahi after he wore green clothes to the Montreal film festival. His arrest is apparently due to Panahi making a film, inside his home, on the Green Movement demonstrations that followed the contested re-election of President Ahmadinejad in 2009.

Iranian news sources state that groups of Iranian and international filmmakers and artists have written to the Iranian government in protest.

Bangladesh: photo exhibition banned, photographer receives death threats

An exhibition of photographs by Shahidul Alam about extrajudicial executions in Bangladesh was prevented from opening on 22 March at Drik Picture Library. Police surrounded and blocked entry to the exhibition entitled 'Crossfire' shortly before it was due to open. The photos document the alleged extrajudicial executions by the Rapid Action Battalion, part of Bangladesh's national army, who have killed more than 500 people since being established in 2004, according to Human Rights Watch. The police defended their actions by arguing that the exhibit would: "*create anarchy*".

The government of Bangladesh withdrew the police on 31 March shortly after the High Court convened to hear Alam's request for help. Alam told Reporters Without Borders: "*This is a victory on several fronts, for the Bangladeshi people's right to know, for the right of the media and artists to speak out, and for the rights of citizens to protest against injustice.*" Alam however has since received anonymous death threats.

Zimbabwe: artist and curator arrested for ‘incitement’

The artist Owen Maseko and the National Gallery in Bulawayo’s Acting Director Voti Thebe were arrested on 26 March following the unveiling of an exhibition of paintings depicting the Matabeleland massacres of the early 1980s. Whilst Thebe was released later that day, according to *Zimbo Jam*, Maseko has remained in prison and has been charged for incitement under the Public Order and Security Act.

The subject of Maseko’s art was the post-independence killing of thousands of villagers in Matabeleland by the Zimbabwean military working under President Robert Mugabe. The Public Order and Security Act is widely used in Zimbabwe to silence dissent, and was also used recently to confiscate and close down an exhibition at Gallery Delta in Harare on 24 March.

Sri Lanka: author held under emergency laws

Bahrain resident Sarah Malanie Perera was arrested in Colombo on 20 March for ‘anti-state activities’ after writing two books on Islam which were judged to be offensive to Buddhism. Born in Sri Lanka, Perera converted to Islam 10 years ago and wrote the books, titled *From Darkness to Light* and *Questions and Answers*, in Sinhala. According to the *Hindustan Times*, Perera was detained prior to her return to Bahrain following a three-month holiday in Sri Lanka and after she had printed the books and tried to get them freighted back to Bahrain.

China: Bob Dylan concert refused

International pop star Bob Dylan will no longer play his first concerts in China after the Chinese government refused to allow him to play gigs in Beijing and Shanghai. According to the *Guardian*, the Ministry of Culture, which scrutinises all concerts by foreigners, was: “wary of Dylan’s past as an icon of the counterculture movement”. The refusal repeats the 2009 ban of an Oasis gig, and follows the embarrassment caused to the Chinese government in 2008 when Björk shouted “*Tibet! Tibet!*” after performing a song titled ‘Declare Independence’ in Shanghai.

Malta: author and publisher charged with injuring public morals

The editor of a student newspaper *Ir-Realtà* and the author of a short story titled *Li Tkisser Sewwi* have been charged with ‘distributing obscene or pornographic material and for injuring public morals or decency’. According to the *Times of Malta*, *Li Tkisser Sewwi* was published in October 2009 and is a first-person narrative examining and ridiculing the mindset of a sexist and aroused man. The University of Malta did not however agree that the story was a parody, banned the newspaper and reported their concerns to the police.

Under the Criminal Code and the Press Act, editor Mark Camilleri and author Alex Vella Gera face fines and prison sentences of up to six months. Vella Gera, who lives outside Malta, was charged whilst visiting Malta to testify in Camilleri’s defence. A collective of leading Maltese artists and authors, ‘Grupp 29’ have written to the government, stating: “*It is our contention, both as authors and as Maltese and*

European citizens, that this constitutes a direct assault on the part of the institutions of the State on our artistic freedom and our freedom of expression.”

Burma: new directive for scrutiny of literary and academic discussions

According to *Mizzima News*, the Burmese military regime issued a new directive around 26 March creating tighter controls over the organisation of literary and academic discussion forums. All future meetings and conferences must now seek permission from the authorities in order to book a hall. The new directive also requires the organiser to submit an application detailing participants. Famous author of self-help books, Pe Myint outlined the chilling effect that the new directive will have on literature: “*writers will lose their freedom under tighter controls. I wish the writers can overcome the current crisis.*”

Denmark: heavy metal music censored globally, says report

Heavy metal music has been described as “long-hair music” and banned in Malaysia and China, and musicians and fans have been arrested and accused of “devil worship” in the Middle East region, says a report by Freemuse. The report explores how heavy metal has grown despite a multitude of restrictions placed upon the genre, and how it consistently provokes censorship and repression by governments and religious authorities around the world. The report is available at: freemuse.synkron.com/graphics/Publications/PDF/Freemuse_heavy-metal-report.pdf

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- For more information: please contact Oliver Spencer, oliver@article19.org, +44 20 7324 2500
- 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.