



Artist Alert October 2009

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.

Burma: police warn that artists face execution as more are disappeared

ARTICLE 19 regards the censorship of artists in Burma to be amongst the most common and violent in the world. Since its inception the Artist Alert has regularly featured stories of Burmese artists being handed lengthy prison sentences for their courageous work.

The October edition of the Burmese police's Crime News Journal has sunk to new levels with the announcement that artists who spread "public hatred against the government" possible execution. The warning appears to signify a change in law regarding artistic critiques of the government, which was previously limited to long imprisonment and fines under Article 124(A) of the Penal code.

Arrests of artists in Burma are widespread. According to the Burmese organisation Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, in October alone the Special Branch arrested the poet and designer Khant Min Htet, singer Nyi Paing, and songwriter Min Satta. Min Satta was arrested on 16 October whilst staying at Nyi Paing's house who was arrested two days later. Khant Min Htet was arrested on 22 October. All have since been disappeared and the authorities have refused to speak to their families.

In addition to imprisonment and harassment there are consistent reports of artists being tortured by government security agencies. In October the singer Htoo Htoo Chay was released from prison where he had allegedly been tortured following his arrest in September. (Source: Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, amongst others.)

China: artists censored and academics stifled as government celebrates 60 years

As China celebrates 60 years since the communist party gained power, reports of censorship and stifling remain constant.

In September the highly regarded artist Ai Wiewie was beaten by police and blocked from testifying in court. His colleague Tan Zuoren was charged with "inciting

subversion of state power” by protesting over the collapse of school buildings following the massive 2008 earthquake. Ai lives in an artists’ colony in Beijing and writes a well known political blog which is regularly censored by government authorities.

In southeast China professor Feng Chongyi is suing the Tianhe Terminal Customs Office for confiscating seven books which he had bought in Hong Kong. The books, which were all written by authors from mainland China, were confiscated without by the authorities without giving a reason. Feng has stated that the books do not violate Chinese law and is seeking for the government to publish its secret list of banned books. (Source: AFP, amongst others.)

USA: ALA releases top 10 books that are removed from public institutions

The American Library Association released its annual list of the 10 most ‘challenged’ books in the US during its ‘Banned Book Week’. The organisation collates written complaints that are filed in libraries, schools and other public institutions that ask for books to be removed due to ‘inappropriate content’.

According to the organisation there were 513 requests for removal in 2008. The list of the 10 most popular books includes best sellers and award winners such as *His Dark Materials* by Philip Pullman and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. The report identifies homosexuality as the most common theme in the contested books, followed by books that mention religion, drugs or sex. Most contestations took place in schools and public libraries at 68 per cent and 15 per cent respectively. Fifty-six per cent of the requests for removal came from parents and 13 per cent from visitors to libraries.

The top 10 books were: *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell; *His Dark Materials* trilogy, by Philip Pullman; *TTYL*, *TTFN*, *L8R*, *G8R*, by Lauren Myracle; *Scary Stories* by Alvin Schwartz; *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya; *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky; *Gossip Girl* by Cecily von Ziegesar; *Uncle Bobby's Wedding* by Sarah S. Brannen; *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini; and *Flashcards of My Life* by Charise Mericle Harper. (Source: American Library Association, amongst others.)

Iran: Media chief's daughter claims asylum for film

Filmmaker Narges Kalhor has claimed asylum in Germany stating that she has fears for her safety in Iran after making a film about totalitarian regimes. Kalhor claimed asylum whilst her film “Darkshish” or “The Rake” was being shown at the Nuremburg film festival in September. The film is based on Kafka’s short story about torture in prison, “In The Penal Colony”.

What has made this case distinct is that Kalhor’s father, Mehdi Kalhor, is President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s chief advisor on media and the arts. Her father, an ex-filmmaker, is well known in Iran for his anti-media outbursts and criticised the Oscar-winning film *Persepolis* as “Islamophobic”. According to the Iranian media he said that: “her decision showed we have freedom in Iran”. (Source: Telegraph, amongst others.)

Morocco: newspapers confiscated for solidarity with cartoonist under trial

Customs officials in Morocco confiscated two editions of *Le Monde* for reprinting the cartoons of Moroccan cartoonist Khalid Gueddar. Gueddar is currently on trial for his cartoons that lampoon the Moroccan royal family and their political influence.

Le Monde reprinted Gueddar's controversial cartoon on 23 October in solidarity with fellow journalists, and was subsequently confiscated on arrival in Morocco. A week later, copies of Spanish daily newspaper *El Pais* were also blocked at the border after they followed *Le Monde* in printing Gueddar's cartoons. (Source: Pravda, Expatica, amongst others.)

Nigeria: South African film banned for 'xenophobia'

The South African film *District 9* by Neill Blomkamp and Peter Jackson has been banned in Nigeria. Information Minister Dora Akunyili asked Nigerian theatres to pull all screenings of the film saying that: "*we are not happy about [District 9] because it portrays Nigeria in bad light [sic].*"

The main Nigerian gangster in the film, which is about aliens, is named Obesandjo, which Akunyili identified as similar to the name of Nigeria's former president Olusegun Obasanjo. Akunyili has reportedly requested the distributor Sony to apologise and delete all references to Nigeria or Nigerians from the film. (Source: The Guardian.)

Saudi Arabia: television programme staff sentenced to lashings

Five people have been sentenced to lashings and imprisonment in Saudi Arabia for taking part in the production of a television programme in early 2009 that discussed sexual relationships.

A Saudi court sentenced two female production staff to 60 lashings, a cameraman to two months in prison, and four participants to a total of eleven years in prison with 1,900 lashes. The Saudi king later waived the lashings of the female staff members Rozana al-Yami and Iman Rajab.

The television show titled 'Bold Red Line' was broadcast on the Saudi-owned Lebanese network LBC. The show featured salesperson Mazen Abdul Jawad discussing his sexual relationships. Jawad's lawyer has complained that neither the producers of the show nor the owners of the Saudi network have been sentenced. (Source: AFP, amongst others.)

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.