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Guatemalan Human Rights Group Wins International Prize for Activists at Risk

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For the first time in its 13 year history, the Front Line Defenders Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk awarded to activists from five countries.

The Guatemalan human rights movement *La Resistencia Pacífica de la Microregión de Ixquisis* has been named one of five global recipients of the 2018 Front Line Defenders Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk, in recognition of their dangerous struggle for land rights and environmental justice. Nurcan Baysal (Turkey), the LUCHA movement (Democratic Republic of Congo), Soni Sori (India) and Hassan Bouras (Algeria) were also announced as 2018 award winners.

“The human rights defenders we’re honouring today work in some of the most dangerous areas of the world, sacrificing their own security to peacefully demand justice and human rights for their communities,” said Andrew Anderson, Executive Director of Front Line Defenders, as he announced the winners.

Since 2005, the Front Line Defenders Award for Human Rights Defenders at Risk has been presented annually to human rights defenders who – at great personal risk – have made an exceptional contribution to protecting and promoting the rights of their communities. Historically awarded to one defender or movement each year, 2018 marks the first time Front Line Defenders has recognised defenders from five different countries as Regional Winners. The 2018 finalists and their families have faced attacks, defamation campaigns, legal harassment, death threats, prison sentences, and intimidation.

La Resistencia Pacífica de la Microregión de Ixquisis formed in response to grave rights violations committed in the name of economic advancement in Guatemala. The government has authorised destructive mining and hydroelectric mega-projects in the region despite the widespread opposition from the 59 villages and 7 communities in the municipality. HRDs in the Peaceful Resistance risk their lives to defend the territory. In 2016 alone, there were more than 75 reported attacks against HRDs in the Peaceful Resistance including killings, shootings, harassment, and defamation campaigns.

“As governments and corporations work to delegitimise and defame human rights defenders’ peaceful work, activists around the world tell us that international visibility and recognition is a critical protection tool,” said Andrew Anderson. “The Award demonstrates that these defenders have the support of the international community, that their sacrifices have not gone unnoticed, and that we stand in solidarity with their unrelenting bravery.”

Additional award recipients:

Nurcan Baysal, Turkey

Regional Winner for Europe & Central Asia

Nurcan is a Kurdish journalist and human rights defender based in Diyarbakir. When the government launched a military offensive in the south-east in 2016, Nurcan spent months visiting Kurdish villages under bombardment, documenting human rights violations, and stopping to help families who'd lost everything in the conflict. Her writings are known for their critical focus on voice women living under the bombardment. When the authorities launched a military operation in Afrin, Nurcan took to social media to demand peace and condemn the violent assault. She was detained for speaking against the violence, and although later released she now faces up to 10 years in jail in a separate case related to her writing. Nurcan, according to authorities' absurd claims, had "spread propaganda for armed terrorist organizations ... and a call for provocative actions." In addition to her reporting, Nurcan has also co-founded several NGOs, set up a camp to help Yazidi women fleeing the Islamic State, and been a key voice in countless reconciliation programs in the region.

Soni Sori, India

Regional Winner for Asia

Soni Sori is an indigenous and women's rights defender in the militarised Bastar region of Chattisgarh, India, where state-backed paramilitary forces are waging a violent campaign against local Adivasi tribes in the name of combating an armed Maoist insurgency. Soni documents and advocates against violence perpetrated by the paramilitary and police forces, which includes razing villages, burning homes, raping local women, and torturing and sexually assaulting tribes people detained without cause. Soni has also defended a number of educational centres from destruction by Maoist groups. In retaliation for her work, security forces detained and tortured Soni, pushing stones inside of her body and assaulting her for hours. Years later, men attacked her with acid and threatened to do the same to her daughter if she did not cease her advocacy on behalf of tribeswomen raped by the security forces. She has refused to stop her work, and continues to travel into the Maoist regions to speak with survivors of the ongoing conflict.

LUCHA, DRC

Regional Winner for Africa

LUCHA is a non-partisan youth movement formed in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo that struggles against chronic corruption and impunity in the DRC. Initially focused on local issues like access to drinking water, electricity, and youth unemployment, in just 6 years the movement has developed into an extensive national-level network of powerful social organisers. Peaceful protests and demonstrations led by LUCHA are routinely attacked by authorities. In October 2017, 5 young protesters were killed during a LUCHA-organised demonstration, and many of their members and leaders having been arrested and detained during peaceful assemblies. The Congolese national intelligence agency has detained several members, who have endured physical and psychological abuse in detention.

Hassan Bouras

Regional Winner for the Middle East & North Africa

Hassan Bouras is a journalist, blogger, leading member of the Algerian League of Human Rights, and founding member of the Rejection Front, a coalition against fracking to extract

shale gas in Algeria. His reporting on both corruption and torture in Algeria spans more than two decades and because of this work he has been repeatedly targeted by Algerian authorities. He has continued his writing and advocacy despite years of judicial harassment, arbitrary detentions, violent raids on his home, and imprisonment.

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