

Equatorial Guinea: Unesco's Shameful Award
By Human Rights Watch
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UNESCO's decision to issue a controversial prize sponsored by President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea is disappointing and irresponsible, seven civil society groups said today.

A ceremony to award the prize is scheduled for July 17, 2012, in Paris. Obiang, in power for 33 years, leads a government known for corruption and repression.

In a divisive 33-18 vote with 6 abstentions, UNESCO's governing Executive Board approved a renamed prize on March 8 under the name UNESCO-Equatorial Guinea International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences and pressed UNESCO's Director-General, Irina Bokova, to move quickly to award it. That vote disregarded the advice of UNESCO's legal office, which said that the prize could not be implemented, according to the organization's own rules, due to discrepancies surrounding the source of the funding.

"It is shameful and utterly irresponsible for UNESCO to award this prize, given the litany of serious legal and ethical problems surrounding it," said Tutu Alicante, director of the human rights group EG Justice. "Beyond letting itself be used to polish the sullied image of Obiang, UNESCO also risks ruining its own credibility."

Obiang Should Tackle Corruption, Poverty, and Repression in Oil-Rich Equatorial Guinea
Lobby Groups Plan Obiang Meeting U.S. Accuses Obiang Son of Corruption Disappointing Vote By Unesco On Obiang Prize Unesco Urged to Drop Obiang Prize

In a July 12 letter to delegates opposed to the prize, Bokova said that a legal opinion issued following the Board vote concluded that concerns remained but that she is nevertheless required to adhere to the Executive Board's decision and implement the prize. In a July 13 response, the delegates protested that "UNESCO has a legal and fiduciary duty" to fully resolve the funding questions "so that there is no cloud of illegality hanging over the prize."

It remains unclear if Obiang, who has pushed this prize as part of a major effort to improve his global standing, will attend the award ceremony, as foreseen in the program for the event. The prize was first approved in 2008 as the "UNESCO-Obiang prize." His name was dropped from the award in the face of outrage from prominent African and Latin American intellectuals, writers, journalists, Nobel Prize Laureates, scientists, health professionals, and civil society groups who criticized the president's poor human rights record and alleged involvement in money laundering.

Ongoing corruption investigations of members of the Obiang family in France, Spain, and the United States contribute to questions over the source of the prize's funding. On March 5, Association SHERPA and Transparency International France requested that French judges extend France's corruption investigation to include Obiang's \$3 million donation for this prize.

Serious allegations of corruption and money-laundering on a grand scale by the president or his family and close associates are now being examined by multiple judicial bodies internationally. Obiang's eldest son and presumed successor, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, known as Teodorín, is wanted under an international arrest warrant issued by French judges on July 10 in connection with the case in France.

In a move that may have been an attempt to grant Teodorín immunity from prosecution, Obiang appointed his son to be Equatorial Guinea's deputy permanent delegate to UNESCO in October 2011. In May, Obiang also named Teodorín to be Equatorial Guinea's second vice president, a post not foreseen under the country's constitution. Teodorin's lawyer in France contends that the arrest warrant "is null and void because of Mr. Obiang's status" as second vice president.

French authorities have twice raided a lavish residence used by the Obiang family in Paris and seized large quantities of luxury goods valued at tens of millions of Euros belonging to Teodorín.

In a separate investigation, the United States Department of Justice has filed complaints that provide detailed allegations that Teodorín abused his prior government post as Minister of Agriculture and Forestry to extort and launder money to finance more than \$300 million in high-end purchases between 2000 and 2011, including properties in Brazil, France, South Africa, and the United States with a total value of US\$133 million, and \$45 million in art by Renoir and other master painters.

Lawyers for Teodorín in France and the US have disputed the claims against their client.

Teodorín's lifestyle and the prize's stated goal of "contributing to improving the quality of human life" contrast sharply with conditions in oil-rich Equatorial Guinea, where poverty, human rights abuses, and corruption are widespread and social services are inadequate, the civil society groups said.

In contrast to UNESCO's core mandate to protect and promote media freedom and information sharing, free expression and press freedom are routinely curtailed in Equatorial Guinea. The government also fails to publish basic information related to government budgets and spending.

"Ordinary people in Equatorial Guinea have never shared in the country's wealth or their leaders' fancy lifestyles," Alicante said. "If they celebrate anything as they languish in poverty, it won't be the UNESCO prize. It will be Teodorín's arrest warrant."

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