**UNESCO's strongman prize for life sciences**

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The U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has come under fire this week from human rights groups and anti-corruption advocates for proceeding with plans to award the UNESCO-Obiang Nguema Mbasogo International Prize for Research in the Life Sciences, a $300,000 scientific grant to be funded and awarded to up to three scientists each year in the name of Equatorial Guinea's allegedly corrupt and repressive ruler.

President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo has committed $3 million to the Paris-based U.N. agency to administer the prize over the next five years. Half of the money, $1.5 million, will go to awardees while the other half will be used to cover the costs of selecting winners. The funds will be deposited through the Obiang Nguema Mbasogo Foundation for the Preservation of Life.

Critics maintain that Obiang's 30-year rule has been marked by corruption and contempt for human rights, and that UNESCO's action will taint its reputation at a time when it is seeking to repair its long-troubled relationship with the United States, which withdrew from the organization in 1984. U.S. President George W. Bush announced a decision to return to UNESCO in 2002.

"If there's any way for UNESCO to shoot itself in the foot it's by renting its credibility to President Obiang, whose record of corruption and abuse seems to go against everything the organization supposedly stands for," said Kenneth Hurwitz, a lawyer who specializes in anticorruption with theOpen Society Justice Initiative, one of 25 organizations that called on UNESCO in January to cancel the prize. "UNESCO should have pulled this prize long ago. Instead, it acts as a public relations firm for Obiang's brutal and kleptocratic regime."

In March, dozens of exiled Equatoguineans, international scholars, and other professionals wroteto UNESCO to voice concerns over the prize. The group -- organized by the exile organization EG Justice -- urged UNESCO's director general, Irina Bokova of Bulgaria, who was elected last October on a reform platform, to abolish the prize because the Equatorial Guinean government has devoted so little of its oil revenues to improving the lives of its citizens at home. They recommended the money be used to buy books, school benches, and other rudimentary supplies for Equatorial Guinea's poorly financed primary school system.

Equatorial Guinea is Africa's fourth largest oil producer, with per capita income topping $36,000 in 2009, higher than Israel, Italy, or Saudi Arabia, according to the CIA World Factbook. But most health and quality-of-life indicators rank the country near the bottom, with life expectancy hovering around 50 years old. The country's educational system has only worsened since the country discovered massive oil deposits off its coast in the mid-1990s. Primary school enrollment has fallen from more than 90 percent in 2001 to nearly 70 percent in 2007, according to U.N. figures.

One of the "sick ironies" is that "$3 million could go a long way to improve the quality of life in Equatorial Guinea," said Lisa Misol, a researcher at Human Rights Watch, which has joined scores of other private groups in calling for UNESCO to abandon the prize.

In a letter last month to Bokova, the rights group accused Equatorial Guinea's leader of imposing needless poverty on his citizens through "extensive corruption and mismanagement" and overseeing a system marked by "deeply entrenched repression."

"We hope you agree that a political leader with this record is not worthy of the positive endorsement of UNESCO," Human Rights Watch wrote.

Obiang offered to fund the competition in October 2007 during an address at UNESCO's annual meeting of governments. UNESCO's executive board, which is comprised of representatives of 58 states, approved a plan to set up the fund in 2008.

The prize "is intended to reward the scientific research projects and activities of an individual, individuals, institution, other entity or non-governmental organization in the life sciences, which lead to improving the quality of human life," Koïchiro Matsuura, the former director general of UNESCO, wrote last year in a letter inviting governments to submit nominees for the competition. "The prize consists of a medal, a diploma, and a cheque for the amount of U.S. $300,000."

The United States, the European Union, and Norway expressed reservations about the prize back in 2008 but they have not halted the program. "We deplore this situation," the European Union stated in an October 2008 statement on the prize. "It is not good for our organization, meaning that it is good neither for its reputation nor it's functioning."

UNESCO's Bokova, a former Bulgarian politician and diplomat, has repeatedly placed the process on hold twice because of concerns about the controversy over the prize and the low numbers of applicants. Bokova's office also pledged to conduct an overall review of the way the organization distributes prizes before making a final decision on the UNESCO-Obiang prize, according to rights groups. Rights groups say they have not been informed that the review has been completed.

But Bokova sent an April 22 letter to governments saying that UNESCO would press ahead with the prize, and that the deadline for nominations would be extended until Friday. Bokova, acting on the recommendation of an international jury, will select the winners in May, and the prize will be awarded in late June.

The controversy over the UNESCO prize comes as Equatorial Guinea's ruling family is facing increased scrutiny of its use of public funds. The U.S. Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations has alleged that large portions of the country's oil revenues have been transferred to banks in the United States, Spain, and Luxembourg, or squandered on mansions, private jets, and a fleet of Bentleys, Ferraris, Rolls Royces, and Lamborghinis.

Hurwitz said that the Open Society Justice Initiative, along with two other human rights groups, EG Justice and the Spain-based Asociación Pro Derechos Humanos de Espana, is conducting a wide-ranging investigation into alleged corruption by Equatorial Guinea's rulers.

A representative of Qorvis Communications, a Washington, D.C.-based public relations firm that represents the government of Equatorial Guinea, said he was unable to locate an official on Thursday. UNESCO's press office also did not respond to a request for comment.