

CHINA: Imprisoned Uighur scholar given top human rights award

Democracy Digest (11.10.2016) – <http://bit.ly/2dKA7l8> – A prominent Uighur scholar jailed in China after speaking out against repression in his native Xinjiang was named on Tuesday as the winner of a prestigious international human rights award for his efforts to promote understanding and dialogue, The New York Times reports:

The scholar, Ilham Tohti, 46, an economics professor at a Beijing university at the time of his arrest in 2014, was selected by the Swiss-based Martin Ennals Foundation for its annual award, known as the Nobel of human rights prizes, in recognition of two decades of trying to foster better ties between Uighurs and Han Chinese.

“He has rejected separatism and violence, and sought reconciliation based on a respect for Uighur culture,” the foundation said in its announcement of the award, which flatly contradicts the Chinese government’s depiction of Mr. Tohti as a dangerous separatist propagating hatred and extremism.

Many pointed out that Tohti was a voice for moderation and understanding at a time of intense friction between Islam, the West and China, notes The South China Morning Post.

“The real shame of this situation is that by eliminating the

moderate voice of Ilham Tohti, the Chinese government is in fact laying the groundwork for the very extremism it says it wants to prevent," said Dick Oosting, chairman of the foundation that presents the award, named after a former secretary general of Amnesty International.

An exiled human rights lawyer and friend of the jailed scholar, welcomed the award, The Guardian adds.

"It is definitely good news," he said. "It won't necessarily lead to an early release or have direct consequences but at least this kind of prize will make the international community more aware of Ilham Tohti. Every award is helpful to Chinese political prisoners and human rights defenders."

Teng said his friend had attempted to address the causes of the bloodshed [of the 2014 people's war on terror"] by serving as a "bridge to connect Uighurs and Han Chinese".

"He was never a radical. He never resorted to violence or extreme ideas."

Two other finalists received consolation Martin Ennals Prizes, notes Human Rights Watch:

Razan has dedicated her life to defending political prisoners, documenting violations, and helping others free themselves from oppression. She founded the Violations Documentation Center (VDC), which documents the death toll and ill-treatment

in Syria's prisons. She had started to cover all sides in the conflict when she was kidnapped, alongside with her husband and two colleagues, on 9 December 2013. Her whereabouts remain unknown.

Kality prison in Ethiopia, has 8 zones and holds many journalists and political prisoners. 9 young activists called themselves 'Zone 9' as a symbol for Ethiopia as a whole. They document human rights abuses and shed light on the situation of political prisoners in Ethiopia. Six of its members were arrested and charged with terrorism. Although they have now been released, three are in exile while four of the six remaining in in Ethiopia are still facing charges and are banned from travel.