



PRESS RELEASE
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For interviews with PEN International's President JOHN RALSTON SAUL,
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WORLD'S LEADING ADVOCATE FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION CONDEMNS IRAN, TAKES FORMAL ACTION AT CHINESE EMBASSY IN TOKYO, ELECTS FIRST ASIAN INTERNATIONAL SECRETARY

More than 250 writers from several dozen countries, gathered in Tokyo for the 76th annual Congress of PEN International, expressed profound outrage at the sentencing yesterday of 35-year-old Iranian-Canadian blogger Hossein Derakhshan to 19.5 years in prison on charges that include 'propagating against the regime', 'insulting religion', spreading 'anti-revolutionary' propaganda and obscenity.

'This outrageous sentence of a writer for the expression and transmission of his ideas is grossly unjust,' said John Ralston Saul, President of PEN International. 'This is the new totalitarianism. Instead of banning books, they are attempting to control the Internet; what became a mechanism for freedom in its early days is now under attack around the world.'

News of the sentence came as delegates from 86 PEN Centres around the world concluded their weeklong meeting, during which they considered both the relentless, escalating threats to freedom of expression in many forms and the essential role that the literatures and languages of the world play in sustaining our common humanity.

At the Foreign Correspondents' Club in Tokyo, PEN International announced the delivery of a strongly worded statement to the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Japanese capital. The statement expresses 'alarm', 'concern' and 'shock' over China's status as one of the world's most prolific jailers of writers and journalists, and decries the 'arbitrary' arrests they face; the use of 'administrative detention, including the infamous "Re-education Through Labour" system to jail dissident writers for up to 3 years without due process'; escalating censorship; and the increasing persecution of Independent Chinese PEN Centre (ICPC) members Shi Tao and, most recently, Liu Xiaobo.

Liu's case in particular was much discussed during the Congress. Currently serving a sentence of 11 years, he has come to symbolise China's systemic repression of its people's deep yearning for democratic freedoms to match the country's economic liberalism. He is one of more than 40 writers serving sentences in China (including the Tibet, Xinjiang–Uighur and Inner Mongolia autonomous regions).

Mexico was also a topic of much concern. A state of undeclared war has festered there since 2006, in which more than 20,000 people – many of them journalists – have died as a result of the unchecked powers of drug cartels. 'In Mexico, words such as "kidnapping", "torture" and "summary execution" have become commonplace, heard daily,' said Saul, 'and all these crimes go unpunished.'

In Iran, more than 40 writers, journalists and bloggers in addition to Derakhshan have been detained or face charges. 'The extreme sentence handed to Derakhshan, in part for insults to Islam, is symptomatic of another great concern to PEN International,' said Marian Botsford Fraser, Chair of PEN's Writers in Prison Committee. 'The right to criticise religion is a right equal to the right to practise one's religion. When governments attempt to limit the rights of citizens, they are not seeking to protect faith or belief. They are seeking increased power over the citizenry.'

PEN International holds that legal restrictions on defamation would not only do little to foster mutual understanding and respect, but can also be used to stifle creative freedom as well as suppress minority views and religions.

Congress delegates also elected a new International Secretary, Takeaki Hori of Japan. Hori has sat on PEN International's Board since 2004, and is the first person from Asia to take up this critical post within in the NGO.

'This is a historic moment,' said Saul. 'and a statement of how *international* PEN International is. The vast majority of Centres are outside the West, which is a complete reversal from when the organisation was founded, and in its early years ... We're probably the oldest real NGO, but we're constantly re-inventing ourselves.'

Hori concurred. 'We have reached a stage where every Centre in every region now has a continuous connection to the mission of PEN International, not just in terms of new technology, but philosophically. PEN International is in the hands of our entire family. This is a symbolic transition to a truly globalised organisation.'

Appropriately, the Congress was held in Tokyo on the 75th anniversary of the Japan PEN Centre's founding. Hori, a member of Japan PEN for over 25 years, claims a remarkably diverse background. Known as a writer on environmental issues, he is also a professor of social anthropology, journalist, founder of an offshore fishery and former vice president of the US–Japan Foundation, among many other roles.

In other developments within PEN International, members Philo Ikonya of Kenya, Lee Gil-won of South Korea and Tarik Günersel of Turkey were newly elected to the Board, and Haroon Siddiqui of Canada was re-elected for another three-year term.

PEN International celebrates literature and promotes freedom of expression. Founded in 1921, its global community of writers now spans more than 100 countries. PEN programmes, campaigns, events and publications connect writers and readers wherever they are in the world.