

PEN CANADA

for FREEDOM *of* EXPRESSION

PEN Canada launches *Freedom to Write in the Americas*

May 1, 2009—Toronto: Paul Auster, Yann Martel, Junot Diaz and Derek Walcott are among more than 50 eminent authors who have signed a declaration supporting International PEN's Freedom to Write in the Americas campaign. Launched on World Press Freedom Day, May 3, the campaign will highlight the violence and impunity which overshadows the working lives of writers and journalists throughout the region.

Freedom to Write in the Americas will focus on Mexico, Cuba and Venezuela, but also monitor developments in Peru, Colombia and Nicaragua. It will promote free expression in each country and provide direct support to writers whose work is carried out under the threat of repression and censorship. The campaign is a joint undertaking of 29 regional PEN Centres and will be coordinated by International PEN.

In recent years the Americas have become some of the most dangerous territory in the world for working journalists. Between January 2004 and December 2008, 37 writers and print journalists were murdered and four others forcibly disappeared. In 2008, according to International PEN's Writers in Prison Committee (WIPC) information, there were at least 191 attacks against writers and journalists in the Americas, all but seven of them occurring within Latin America. In Mexico alone there were seven killings and one forced disappearance; across the region there were 30 imprisonments (25 in Cuba), 44 physical attacks, 35 death threats and 35 other types of threat or harassment.

In many cases it is clear that these writers were targeted for their work. Throughout the Americas there is evidence that reporters who are critical of the authorities or criminal gangs are frequently threatened and occasionally attacked and murdered for what they publish. All too often their attackers escape justice and official investigations of their cases lapse into silence and impunity

Although this situation may appear daunting, the WIPC draws hope from the fact that for decades it has successfully campaigned on behalf of Latin American writers such as Maria Elena Cruz Varela (Cuba), Myrna Mack Chang (Guatemala), Brigadier General José Gallardo Rodríguez (Mexico), Yehude Simon Munaro (Peru) and Lydia Cacho (Mexico).

PEN provided direct support to Yehude Simon Munaro, a writer and politician who was imprisoned between 1992 and 2000 on false terrorism charges. After his release Munaro wrote to PEN: "*The life of a prisoner is hard and desperate, even more so when the victim is innocent. I do not know what I would have done without your oceanic solidarity.*" In October 2008 Munaro became Prime Minister of Peru.

In this same spirit of solidarity, PEN Canada launches ***Freedom to write in the Americas***.

Freedom to write in the Americas will be primarily web- and email based, and will offer suggestions for actions and other materials in both Spanish and English at <http://www.internationalpen.org.uk/go/freedom-of-expression/campaigns>. The website will be regularly updated with new information and campaigning tools.

Background

PEN Canada is the Canadian centre of International PEN, the association of writers with over 15,000 members in 102 countries. PEN promotes friendship and intellectual co-operation among writers and campaigns for freedom of expression everywhere.

Summary of concerns in key campaign countries:

- **Cuba:** As of early 2009, there are at least 25 writers, independent journalists and librarians in prison in Cuba. All are serving lengthy prison sentences - up to 27 years - on anti-state or 'social dangerousness' charges in relation to their work. Most are in poor health but have limited access to adequate medical treatment.
- **Colombia:** In 2008, the WiPC recorded 14 attacks against writers in Colombia, most of them print journalists. Death threats were common. Three writers were on trial for criminal defamation, two of them for reports linking powerful individuals with drugs trafficking.
- **Mexico** is one of the most dangerous countries in the world to work as a print journalist. From 2004 to 2008, 20 writers - 19 journalists and one author - were murdered and four more disappeared. 2008 saw an alarming escalation in attacks, including seven killings and two imprisonments.
- **Nicaragua:** Although the press is still free in Nicaragua, there are concerns that President Ortega's second administration is becoming increasingly authoritarian and repressive of dissent. In particular, Ortega is accused of persecuting revolutionary figures turned critics.
- **Peru:** Writers in Peru, particularly print journalists, frequently come under threat, with 25 attacks recorded in 2008. Death threats were particularly common. Five journalists were on trial for criminal defamation and one young poet for affiliation with a terrorist group.
- **Venezuela:** Practising journalism in Venezuela has become increasingly hazardous in recent years, with attacks on print journalists rising by 50 per cent, from 13 incidents recorded in 2007 to 19 in 2008. Physical assaults in particular rose. Another serious concern is that the Venezuelan government is reportedly imposing controls on the importation of foreign books in the name of protecting national industry.

For more information: Brendan de Caires, bdecaires@pencanada, tel. 416 703 8448 x 21