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CORRUPTION: Transparency Awards Make A Wake Up Call

By Sanjay Suri

LONDON, Jul 21 (IPS) - Manik Chandra Saha , a journalist and social activist in Bangladesh, was killed in January this year after a long campaign exposing corruption. But his campaign could have made a difference.

The Bangladesh government is now considering a new law to protect whistleblowers - the name for individuals who set out to expose corruption.

And it helps that Saha has been shortlisted posthumously for an award to be presented in Kenya in October this year by Transparency International(TI), an independent organisation campaigning to expose corruption and to support others who expose it.

"The awards are encouraging investigation and research into corruption," Sarah Tyler from the TI office in Berlin told IPS Wednesday. "And they are helping raise awareness. We receive hundreds of emails from people raising questions, saying that without such awareness many of these people will continue to live in a hidden world."

The TI awards seek "to reward activists that bring significant improvement to checking corruption, not simply to those who have passed away, or who make a lot of noise." But of the eight shortlisted for the award this year, three have been shortlisted posthumously.

Among these is Hasan Balikçi, a Turkish electrical engineer for the state-owned company, Turkey Electric Distribution A.S. (TEDAS), who was murdered in September 2001. Balikçi was responsible for rooting out people responsible for stealing billions of dollars from the company. His death prompted the strengthening of laws regulating corrupt activities in this sector.

People in the local TI chapter had said that shortlisting him would help pressure the government to take anti-corruption demands into consideration, Tyler said.

Dr Milica Bisic from Bosnia and Herzegovina, professor of economics at the University of Belgrade and former head of the tax administration in Republika Srpska (the Serb part of Bosnia-Herzegovina) has been shortlisted for taking on corruption in the taxation system. TI was told that shortlisting Dr Bisic last year could have helped push through reforms, Tyler said.

The TI integrity awards committee selected the eight shortlisted individuals out of a total of 30 candidates, nominated from every continent. The committee is made up of 11 prominent anti-corruption campaigners from around the world, and includes former TI integrity award winner and investigating magistrate in the Elf-Aquitaine oil corruption case in France, Eva Joly.

"Corruption blights poor and rich countries alike and too often we forget the efforts made by individuals on the ground to root out the corrupt," TI chairman Peter Eigen said in a statement announcing the shortlisted candidates. "The tide is changing and today we increasingly see that intolerance towards thieving public officials is growing worldwide."

TI board member and chair of the awards committee Inese Voika said "it is our duty to recognise and give voice to these remarkable people. It is our obligation to show that corruption is surmountable, and to tell their stories."

A final announcement of the winners is due Sep. 12. The winners will then be recognised at an awards ceremony in October 2004 in Nairobi.

The other shortlisted candidates are:

Satyendra Kumar Dubey , former deputy general manager of the National Highway Authority in India, who was overseeing a road project worth billions of dollars when he died at the age of 31. He was killed after his name was leaked in connection with a complaint about corruption he had sent to the prime minister's office and the road network authority.

Lothar Hermes, the German lawyer who uncovered a vast network of kickbacks and underhand dealings in the field of waste disposal and sewage treatment in local government.

Grigoris Lazos from Greece, a sociologist and criminologist, who has made the fight against human trafficking, and the corruption that breeds it, his vocation.

David Munyakei and Constable Naftali Lang'at declined to subvert rules and abet corruption relating to the Goldenberg scandal that defrauded Kenyan taxpayers through alleged exports of gold and diamonds between 1990 and 1993.

+Transparency International (www.transparency.org)

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