

A prize that aims to protect

Tuesday evening in Geneva, I'm attending the Martin Ennals Award Ceremony. My decision to nominate Alejandra Ancheita for this Award came as a result of discussions I had with her, with my colleagues at ECCHR – Alejandra is a member of ECCHR's Advisory Board – and within the "Bertha Be Just Initiative" about what we as her international colleagues could do to support her work and also to protect her. The Bertha Be Just Initiative, a global network of legal human rights organizations supported by the Bertha Foundation (London), endorsed the nomination.

The self-proclaimed City of Human Rights has gone to great lengths to mark today's prize giving ceremony. The serving UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, a former Swiss president, the rector of Geneva's distinguished university and a senior City representative have all gathered to highlight the importance of the work of human rights defenders in general and in particular those nominated for the Martin Ennals Award. The organizers extend a warm and friendly welcome to nominees Adilur Rahman Khan from Bangladesh and Alejandra Ancheita, who is named as the prize winner later in the evening. Of course, these kinds of events do tend to have a self-congratulatory element to them, which can sometimes leave a bitter aftertaste. How can the organizers and prizewinners celebrate, while elsewhere in the world their colleagues are facing imprisonment, abuse and persecution?

But this is precisely the focus of this evening's event. The award aims to at the very least raise the profile of a small number of courageous human rights defenders. The quite justified idea behind it is that this increased awareness will provide a certain amount of protection to the nominees. For Chinese lawyer Cao Shunli, however, these efforts came too late. In March 2014, just a few days after the announcement of her nomination for the prize, Cao Shunli died from complications resulting from her detention. She had been imprisoned for criticizing China in front of the United Nations.

We are shown video footage of lawyer Adilur Rahman Khan, surrounded by police officers and being led into a courtroom. He spent two months in jail in part for his criticism of the unlawful elections in Bangladesh.

Mexico, home to this evening's prizewinner, has once again made headlines around the world this week after the massacre of at least 28 students in Iguala in Guerrero State. In Mexico, the extent and intensity of the violence can sometimes distract from its underlying causes. The violence is by no means limited to the context of drug wars. It is often rooted in struggles over land ownership, natural resources and their exploitation. It was these problems that lawyer Ancheita decided to take on in her work. Together with her organization ProDESC, she supports indigenous communities, workers and migrants in their battles with the Mexican state and national and multinational corporations.

A film screened at the ceremony shows Ancheita at work, conveying her message to a group of villagers in traditional dress who are fighting to secure their landholding rights: That land is your entitlement, not a gift. You have every right to it and that's what we must fight for. This is precisely the kind of work that has brought Ancheita to the attention of corporations and their state accomplices. Her office in Mexico City was ransacked last year and she has been on the receiving end of numerous threats to her person. She was offered police protection, but being accompanied by police officers at every turn – a move which is purportedly for protection but of course also serves to provide information on her movements and work – was so dismal a prospect that Ancheita, like many of her colleagues, has turned down the offer.

For international organizations and for those of us here in Europe, our duty is to lend support to human rights activists who are under threat. The real test for Europeans, however, will be seeing how sincere the professed dedication to human rights proves to be when the complaints are directed not against China but against major corporations based here in Europe.