

COMMENT

Dr Sen and Rights Award

DEPRIVED OF HIS OWN FREE-dom Dr Binayak Sen wins global rights award.

Jailed pediatrician, humanitarian worker and civil rights activist Dr Binayak Sen has become the first South Asian ever to win the prestigious 2008 Jonathan Mann Award for Global Health and Human Rights.

The Global Health Council (www.globalhealth.org) is the world's largest membership alliance of public health organizations and professionals working to improve health and save lives among the poor. The Council serves and represents public health organizations and professionals working in more than 140 countries on six continents.

Keeping in view Dr Sen's current status as a prisoner of conscience, the Global Health Council, along with other international health organizations has requested Indian authorities to find the means to allow Dr Sen to receive his award in person in Washington, DC on May 29th, 2008, at the 35th Annual International Conference on Global Health.

In a letter to the President of India, the Prime Minister of India, and the Chief Minister of Chhattis-garh, Dr Nils Dulaire, President of the Global Health Council, has written:

“We wish to be clear: it is not our intent to interfere with the judicial process. We simply request that this doctor's good works and highly regarded reputation as a man of science and service, and his international following, serve as guarantee of his obligation to return to India to participate in a just and fair judicial process after the awards ceremony, if his case is not resolved sooner.

The world is watching this case. Some have expressed concern that it might represent a dwindling respect for civil liberties in India”.

Dr Sen was detained under anti-terrorist legislation on May 14, 2007, by the Chattisgarh government and accused of passing notes from a Maoist rebel leader he was treating in jail to someone outside the prison. Dr Sen denies committing any crime and says his activities in jail were supervised by prison authorities.

According to a press statement by the GHC the 58-year-old pediatrician was selected by an international jury of public health professionals for the prestigious Jonathan Mann award because of his years of service to poor and tribal communities in India, his effective leadership in establishing self-sustaining health care services where none existed, and his unwavering commitment to civil liberties and human rights.

Of note, nine of the 2008 nominees are Indian : Dr Swami Hardas of Pune, Mr Surya Makaria of Hyderabad, Mr Deelip Mhaske of Mumbai, Dr Ugrasen Pandey of Firozabad, Dr Prameelamma Peda-mali of Srikalahasti, Dr Kamallesh Sarkar of Kolkata, Dr Mukesh Shukla of Surendranagar, Dr Diwakar Tejaswi of Patna, and Dr Binayak Sen of Raipur.

As the 2008 Mann Award winner, Dr Binayak is the tenth individual and the first South Asian to be thus honoured by the Global Health Council.

It remains to be seen whether the Congress-led Government of India and BJP-run Chattisgarh state government respect world public opinions—and release Dr Sen. □□□

[contributed]