

*The speech of Maria Modig, Swedish PEN in Stockholm Seminar that was held at Stockholm University on August 22 2008, on 20th anniversary of the 1988 massacre of Iranian political prisoners*

## PEN and human rights, what can we do?

*'In time of division between countries, International PEN is one of the rare institutions to keep a bridge constantly open'* Mario Vargas Llosa

I am proud and grateful to be invited to represent Swedish PEN and Writers in Prison Committee to this event and Memorial Day. It is 20 years since an awful event happened in Iran in the summer of 1988 during which thousands of political prisoners were killed. We in the Swedish PEN show respect for the victims and honour them. We also want to remember and honour the Iranian intellectuals and writers who were assassinated during the era of the so called "serial murders" in autumn 1998.

International PEN was originally founded in 1921 to promote literature. PEN (Poets, Essayists and Novelists) has today 145 Centres in 104 countries across the globe. It recognises that literature is essential to understanding and engaging with other worlds: if you can't hear the voice of another culture how can you understand it?

Poets, essayists, novelists, writers, editors, translators support their colleagues who are suppressed or imprisoned in countries around the world. PEN's political neutrality is also important to remember. We are working, not as a party with special interests or hidden agenda, but simply as a representative group of the world's writers working to improve the lot of our fellows.

Writers in Prison Committee in Swedish PEN is part of the worldwide network of WIPIC International PEN. We work very pragmatic sometimes in silence, sometimes open all depending of the security of the writer. In PEN and its Writers in Prison Committees all over the world our primary goal is to engage with, and empower societies and communities across cultures and languages, through reading and writing. We believe that writers can play a crucial role in changing and developing civil society. We do this through the promotion of literature, international campaigning on issues such as translation and freedom of expression and improving access to literature at international, regional and national levels.

Today in August 2008 when focusing on Iran here at the University of Stockholm we are especially worried about Shirin Ebadi and the harassments against her. We know about it and send her all our support. We also think about Parvin Ardalan today, to whom we send all our best regards and support as well. Not to forget the long list of individual courageous writers and intellectuals who now are imprisoned or harassed in many ways. Here are the names that I have promised the organizers of this seminar to mention today to make us remember that they need our support:

- 1- Death sentences threatens 2 teachers in Kurdistan: Anvar Hassan panhai, Arsalan Oliyaei
- 2- Death sentences threaten 2 Kurdish journalists: Hiva Butimar, Hassan Adnanpour
- 3- Death sentence threatens Farzad Kamanger from Kamiaran.
- 4- The Baluchi journalist Yaghub Mirnahad was recently executed in the city of Zahedan.
- 5- Death sentences for 2 Kurdish activists: Farhad Vakili, Ali Heydarian

The Writers in Prison Committee of International PEN was set up in 1960 as a result of mounting concern about attempts to silence critical voices around the world and an office of volunteers was set up at the PEN head office in London to gather information and to alert the PEN membership to take action. The WiPC is now staffed by a team of experts who monitor around 1,000 attacks on writers, journalists, editors, poets, publishers and others in any given year. These include long prison terms, harassment, threats, and even murder.

The WiPC team alerts the PEN membership of urgent cases keeps it abreast of developments on individual cases of attacks as well as global trends affecting free expression and gives advice on actions and campaigns. These include protest letters, lobbying governments, and public awareness raising. Through writing to families, and, where possible, directly to prisoners, PEN members provide encouragement and hope.

Today there are Writers in Prison Committees in 64 PEN Centres worldwide.

*"An innocent person suffers in prison feelings of isolation, loneliness, and loss. The knowledge that you defended me against unjust accusations against me brought me joy and strengthened my will to come to terms with the harsh conditions of my imprisonment."* Czech writer, Eva Kanturkova 1982

The imprisoned or harassed writers we work for become our honorary members. One Iranian writer, Faraj Sarkouhi, Swedish PEN also awarded with a prize, Tucholskyprize. In his testimonial to PEN he writes:

*"I am honoured by the Honorary Membership of PEN... It is a beautiful and promising manifestation of solidarity by those who value freedom of expression, thought, cultural creativity and human dignity...I definitely owe my life and my release from prison to the efforts of many individuals and organisations, and specially the different branches of PEN."*

Faraj Sarkouhi was released from prison in Iran, 1998.

As you probably know we have followed the case of Nasser Zarafshan as well. He was awarded the Tucholsky Prize 2006. In the autumn of 2007 he could visit Stockholm to receive the prize.

The Writers in Prison Committee International has been chaired by Karin Clark since 2004. Writers in Prison Committee in Swedish PEN has been chaired by Maria Modig up till now. Azar Mahloujian is chairing WIPC in Swedish PEN since May 2008.

The latest edition of the Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC) of International PEN's twice yearly caselist is possible to find in International PEN's web site.

In the past year, the WiPC monitored over 1,000 attacks reported in that period, it is clear that the pattern of arrests, threats and even killings of those who speak out has not abated.

Among them are 55 writers and journalists killed in 2007, a shockingly high figure, almost double the figure for previous years. While it is not always possible to be completely sure that the killings were directly linked to the victims' writings, it is clear that at least 18 were deliberately targeted. Among them was the courageous editor, Hrant Dink, assassinated in Turkey for his commentary on the Armenian genocide and whose death led to mass protests. The most dangerous place of all 2007 was Iraq where 21 journalists were murdered alongside more working in the broadcast media.

International PEN members world wide have stood up to protest these attacks, responding to the 105 Rapid Action Alerts issued on urgent cases in the last year, with letters of protest and public awareness rising. Eighty-four of the cases on PEN's records have been elected as Honorary Members of PEN Centres whose members develop close contact with them and

their families, and to campaign on their behalf. In 2007 a WiPC campaign was staged on Criminal Defamation and Insult Laws that are widely used to quell government critics. The Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC) of International PEN was set up in 1960 as a result of mounting concern about attempts to silence critical voices around the world through the detention of writers.

It works on behalf of all those who are detained or otherwise persecuted for their opinions expressed in writing, and for writers who are under attack for their peaceful political activities or for the practice of their profession, provided that they did not use violence or advocate violence or racial hatred.

The International PEN Writers in Prison Committee (WiPC) gathers its information from a wide variety of sources and compiles it in its biannual Case List. It seeks to confirm its information through two independent sources. Where its information is unconfirmed, it will either not take action, or an appeal will be sent, worded to reflect the fact that the information is as yet incomplete. Sources include press reports, reports from individuals in the region in question, reports from other human rights groups, PEN members themselves, embassy officials, academics, prisoners' families, lawyers and friends, exile groups, and international non-governmental organizations.

Maria Modig

Swedish writer. Member of Swedish PEN Writers in Prison Committee, served as President of this Committee and Vice-President of Swedish PEN for several years.

Svenska PEN

Principer

Litteratur erkänner inga gränser och skall bestå som en gemensam tillgång nationer emellan, oberoende av politiska eller mellanfolkliga konflikter. I alla situationer, och särskilt i krigstid måste verk av konstnärlig höjd, mänsklighetens arv till kommande släktled, stå höjda över nationella eller politiska lidelser. PEN:s medlemmar skall alltid efter bästa förmåga främja mellanfolklig förståelse och aktning; de förbinder sig att göra sitt yttersta för att upphäva motsättningar mellan raser, samhällsklasser och nationer, samt att verka för tanken om en enad mänsklighet i en fredlig värld. PEN stödjer grundtanken om fri spridning av tankar och åsikter inom och mellan alla länder, och medlemmarna förbinder sig att motarbeta varje slag av inskränkning av yttrandefriheten i det land och det samhälle där de verkar. PEN hävdar principen om pressfrihet och motsätter sig censur i fredstid. PEN anser att världens nödvändiga framåtskridande mot en mer utvecklad politisk och ekonomisk ordning ofrånkomligen kräver friheten att kritisera regeringar, förvaltningar och institutioner. Och eftersom frihet förutsätter frivillig återhållsamhet, förbinder sig medlemmarna att motarbeta sådana avarter hos den fria pressen som lögnaktiga offentliggöranden, avsiktlig bedräglighet och faktaförvrängningar i politiskt eller personligt syfte. Medlemskap i PEN kan sökas av alla yrkesmässigt kvalificerade författare, poeter, förläggare och översättare som ställer sig bakom dessa syften och ändamål, utan hänsyn till nationalitet, etnisk ursprung eller religion