

Iranian women's rights activists win courage award

Kylie MacLellan, Reuters, Tuesday 6th October 2009

A group of women who are risking imprisonment to collect one million signatures on a petition demanding greater women's rights in Iran were presented on Tuesday with the Anna Politkovskaya award for courage.

The annual prize, presented in memory of the campaigning Russian journalist who was murdered three years ago in Moscow, is awarded by Reach All Women (RAW) in War, a human rights group which focuses on stopping violence against women in conflict situations.

"We gave them the award because they are an extremely brave and courageous group of women and they are really changing the society in Iran, which is extremely difficult," RAW in War founder Mariana Katzarova told Reuters.

"They live a life of courage in the face of grave danger, just as Anna did," added Katzarova, a Bulgarian who created the award after spending 15 years working in Bosnia, Kosovo and Chechnya.

The One Million Signatures campaign, launched in 2006, aims to petition the Iranian parliament asking for the revision and reform of current laws which discriminate against women in Iran.

RAW in War says some campaign members have been imprisoned for acting against national security in Iran and disrupting public order, while others have been given suspended prison sentences.

Activists say women in Iran, while able to vote, drive cars and hold most jobs, are subject to discrimination that makes them second-class citizens in divorce, inheritance, child custody, legal matters and other areas of life.

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Leila Alikarami, an Iranian lawyer and human rights activist who has defended many cases involving campaign members, was accepting the award in London on Tuesday on behalf of the group.

"Iranian women have demanded equality for more than 100 years," she said. "This prize will support those Iranians who are striving for equality of rights between men and women."

Women's rights became an issue during campaigning in Iran's presidential election earlier this year. Two pro-reform candidates said they would seek to enhance the role of women in the Islamic state, but were beaten by incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in a contest they denounced as rigged.

Natalia Estemirova, the award's first recipient and a close friend of Politkovskaya, was abducted in Chechnya and killed in July this year.

On the eve of the third anniversary of Politkovskaya's murder, her family on Tuesday voiced doubts about the guilt of two men facing a retrial and about the Kremlin's will to catch the main suspects.