

Asia: Three women rights defenders receive prestigious international award for documentary

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(Hong Kong, April 11, 2011) Three Asian women rights defenders have received a prestigious international award for a documentary made about their respective struggles, which was shown as part of a major film festival in the Netherlands during March.

The jury at the Movies that Matter Festival, which was held in The Hague from March 24 to 31, awarded Suciwati Munir, Angkhana Neelaphaijit and Padma Perera, a Special Jury Award for Josefina Bergsten's film 'UNJUST'.

The film documents the struggles of the three wives, mothers and activists to challenge impunity and get justice for their husbands, all of who lost their lives in 2004 due to the murderous intentions of state agents.

Basil Fernando, director of policy and programme development at the Asian Human Rights Commission, said that UNJUST was rightly deserving of international recognition.

"UNJUST is a documentary film that highlights the human rights problems in countries that do not have an adequately developed rule of law system to protect human rights," Fernando said.

"Through this film, three women who have seen the worst aspects of their countries' justice systems have helped the world to understand what it means to be living in these sorts of conditions," he said.

"It is a unique documentary and Josefina Bergsten has demonstrated her capacity to understand and to show through film the difficult experience of struggling for justice in countries with highly defective or collapsed justice systems," the AHRC policy director added.

The Hong Kong-based regional rights group in July 2010 gave its Asian Human Rights Award for Creative Media to Bergsten for the film.

"It was a great privilege to work with Suciwati, Angkhana and Padma while making this film," Bergsten said on receipt of the latest award in The Hague.

"They are the most courageous people I know and their ongoing struggle has inspired and benefited many people in Asia and beyond," she added.

Suciwati's husband, human rights lawyer Munir, was poisoned on a Garuda Airlines flight in 2004 while travelling from Indonesia to study abroad. A former pilot and former head of the airline were implicated in the murder, and the pilot given a 20-year

jail sentence.

However, the trail of connections to his killing has led back to the Indonesian secret services, and the masterminds have never been identified.

Suciwati was among the activists who were guests at the film festival in the Netherlands, along with the film's maker. A five-minute video profile of her is available on the festival website:

http://www.moviesthatmatterfestival.nl/english_index/nieuws_en/news/169

Thai police abducted Angkhana's husband, Somchai, from his car on a street in Bangkok. Although five police went on trial, only one was convicted of a minor offence. He has himself disappeared, and an appeal court recently overturned his conviction. All the police are still serving.

Somchai's body has never been recovered, even though the former prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, and other senior officials, admitted to having inside knowledge of the case.

Angkhana has since set up an organization to work for the victims of enforced disappearances in Thailand, and is now among the country's best known human rights defenders. In 2006 she was a joint recipient of the Gwangju Prize for Human Rights.

Padma's husband Gerard was a victim of police torture in Sri Lanka who became an outspoken and fearless advocate of human rights. Gunmen connected to the police shot him as he travelled on a public bus, shortly before he was going to depose in court against the officers who were accused of torturing him.

The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka has honoured Padma with an award for the struggle that she has undertaken since to get justice for her husband and to promote human rights in her country.

The Movies that Matter Festival, which is held annually in the Netherlands, this year screened ten documentaries in its main programme. The international jury consisted of activist Bianca Jagger (jury chairwoman), filmmaker Mohamed Al-Daradji, Frans Huijnen (managing director of the Equal Treatment Commission), filmmaker Pamela Yates and film journalist Belinda van de Graaf.

The first prize, the Golden Butterfly award, went to Palestinian activist Ayed Morrar, for uniting Fatah members, Hamas members and Israelis in their peaceful efforts to oppose the destruction of his village by the Israeli separation wall.

UNJUST has also been nominated for the 15th Human Rights Press Award.

The winner of this award and awards ceremony will be held on April 16 at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Hong Kong.

Persons wishing to obtain copies of "UNJUST" may contact the filmmaker, Josefina Bergsten, at josefina.bergsten@gmail.com.