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Hu Jia wins European rights prize

One of China's most prominent human rights activists, Hu Jia, has won the European Parliament's prestigious Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.



Hu Jia is serving a jail sentence for subverting state power

Mr Hu, a democracy, environment and Aids activist, is serving a jail term for inciting subversion of state power.

The parliament's president said Mr Hu was "one of the real defenders of human rights" in China, and that the award would support Chinese activists.

Beijing has criticised the award as an interference in its internal affairs.

European Parliament President Hans-Gert Poettering said that by awarding the prize to Mr Hu, the parliament "firmly and resolutely acknowledges the daily struggle for freedom of all Chinese human rights defenders".

"The European Parliament is sending out a signal of clear support to all those who support human rights in China," he said.

Mr Hu is credited with chronicling instances of abuse and alerting both fellow Chinese human rights activists and foreign news organisations.

He was convicted last April of inciting subversion, and is now serving a three-and-a-half-year jail sentence. His wife, Zeng Jinyan, is under effective house arrest.

Ms Zeng said she thought her husband would be happy with the award and the validation of his work.

"I have always felt that support for Hu Jia will be helpful to him in the long term," she told AFP.

'Criminal'

Green party leaders Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Monica Frassoni said the awarding of the prize to Hu Jia was "a reflection of this very spirit of this prize, which supports free thought and honours human rights defenders fighting repression".

Mr Cohn-Bendit and Ms Frassoni also criticised Beijing for failing to respect commitments it made to improve their human rights record prior to the Olympic Games in August.

China, which views Mr Hu as a criminal, reacted angrily to news of the prize, saying it was "a gross interference in China's domestic affairs".



Ms Zeng said the prize would help her husband in the long term

"We express strong dissatisfaction at the decision by the European Parliament to issue such an award to a jailed criminal in China, in

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disregard of our repeated representations," said foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao.

In a letter sent to the president of EU assembly earlier this week, China's ambassador to the EU, Song Zhe, said giving the award to Mr Hu would "inevitably hurt the Chinese people once again and bring serious damage to China-EU relations".

"Not recognising China's progress on human rights and insisting on confrontation will only deepen the misunderstanding between the two sides and is not conducive to the promotion of the cause of world human rights," he said.

Mr Hu was also tipped as a possible winner of the Nobel Peace Prize this year, prompting Beijing to issue a veiled warning that the prize should go to the "right person".

The prize was eventually given to Finnish ex-President Martti Ahtisaari.

The Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought has been awarded annually since 1988 to "individuals or organisations who have made an important contribution to the fight for human rights or democracy".

The prize, which comes with 50,000 euros (\$64,000; £39,500), will be awarded in Strasbourg on 17 December.

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