

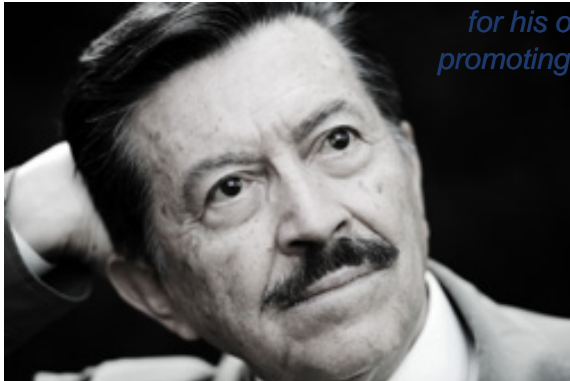


The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

Martín Almada (Paraguay)

(2002)



for his outstanding courage in bringing torturers to justice, and promoting democracy, human rights and sustainable development."

Photo: Wolfgang Schmidt

Martín Almada was born in 1937 to a poor family in the Chaco Region of Paraguay. Although obliged to work from an early age, he completed his education and graduated as an educationalist from the National University in Asunción in 1963.

Together with his first wife, Professor Celestina Perez de Almada, he founded the Instituto 'Juan Baptista Alberdi' in his home town of San Lorenzo. This became an important institution of conscientisation and cooperative development, which was violently suppressed under the dictatorship of General Stroessner in 1974. This was also the year in which Almada finished his doctoral thesis, *Paraguay, Education and Dependency*, for which he was branded an 'intellectual terrorist' by the authorities. He spent three years in a concentration camp, where he was regularly tortured. During this time his wife died (Almada says 'psychologically murdered' by the police). He was released in 1977, following a sustained campaign by Amnesty International and went into exile, with his mother and three children. He wrote his book, *Paraguay: la Carcel Olvidada, el Pais Exiliado*, about his experiences in prison, which was published in 1978, having an enormous impact in international human rights circles. In 1986 he published a book of poems, largely written in prison. He joined UNESCO in Paris, working in the environmental education division where he had responsibility for rural development projects in Africa and Latin America.

During his exile he campaigned relentlessly on human rights issues. After the fall of the Argentinean Junta following the Falklands War, he made several visits to Argentina to speak about human rights and his educational theories. When in 1989 Stroessner was overthrown, he immediately returned to Paraguay and began to play a leading role in the new human rights movement there, and in the transition to democracy. An early focus of his activities was to seek to bring the torturers to justice and get compensation for the victims, and he filed an action in the courts against Stroessner and his accomplices for the murder of his wife, his wrongful imprisonment and the confiscation of his goods.

In 1991 he also published his book *Paraguay: Proyecto Nacional*, as a contribution towards the foundation of a new constitution.

In 1992 he left his job in UNESCO and returned definitively to Paraguay. His major concern at this time was to secure the release into the public domain of the papers of the dictatorship concerning repression and torture, which the police were denying existed. The breakthrough came when the archive was actually discovered by Almada and a judge ordered that it should be made public.

This 'Archives of Terror' has proved the most important collection of documents of state terror ever recovered. It is important not just for Paraguay but for the whole of Latin America and, indeed, for the world. In the Archive Almada found his file, detailing his imprisonment and torture, which the Paraguayan Government had always denied. Within a week he had convened a national commission to protect the Archive. Within a month the government had ratified a convention that had been passed by the Congreso Nacional two years before. Further archives were found (some buried) in police stations.

However, the government continued to drag its feet over the bringing of human rights violators to justice. In 1994 Almada set up the Paraguayan branch of the American Association of Jurists and began to organise a series of Tribunals against the leading criminals, starting with General Ramon Duarte Vera, who had been Stroessner's Chief of Police and who was considered the regime's chief torturer. Duarte was then living comfortably as Paraguay's ambassador to Bolivia. After hearing many witnesses of torture and assassination, the Tribunal convicted him - and though this judgment had no legal force, the evidence was so overwhelming that he was subsequently recalled by the government, put on trial and sentenced to 16 years in prison. In 1996 Almada was the prime mover in the establishment of a Centre for the Rehabilitation of Torture Victims in collaboration with the International Centre in Denmark (which received a Right Livelihood Award in 1988).

This activity in the human rights area was by no means the only application of Almada's formidable energy. Immediately on his return to Paraguay he had set up, with his second wife, Maria Stella Caceres, the Fundación Celestina Perez de Almada, in memory of his first wife. The aim of this foundation was "to struggle against poverty and for the protection of the environment", and its principal programme, UNIBANCOOP, has four areas of work: Economy and Solidarity, Environmentally Appropriate Science and Technology, Alternative Education and Human Rights. The human rights division has occupied most of the foundation's time, but the other dimensions have always been present and are now coming more to the fore.

Almada put at the disposal of his foundation much of his savings from his years working for UNESCO, and used some of his contacts to set up a joint project with a French and African NGO. The education work is carried out through two projects: one on literacy through a national network which was set up by the foundation and a project of Education with Production in Rural Areas. The technology and environment project work is carried out through a project for the use of solar energy for alternative development and has so far focused on the use of parabolic mirrors for solar cooking.

External sources of funds for the foundation's annual budget of about USD 70,000 have so far included UNESCO and foundations in Norway, Canada, Netherlands, Switzerland and Germany.

Almada has received a number of national awards, including 'Man of the Year, 1992' from the National Television, and the Human Rights Prize in 1997 from the French Government, in recognition of his discovery of the Archives of Terror.