



The Right Livelihood Award

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

Mordechai Vanunu (Israel)

(1987)



...for his courage and self-sacrifice in revealing the extent of Israel's nuclear weapons programme.

Mordechai Vanunu

Mordechai Vanunu was born in Morocco and moved with his family to Israel in 1963. He did three years' military service from 1971 to '74, when he was given an 'honourable discharge' having served as a First Sergeant in a unit of sappers. He became a technician at the Dimona nuclear plant in 1976 and underwent special training. In October 1979 he began studies at Ben Gurion University, Be'er-Sheva, in philosophy and geography, graduating in 1984/5.

At university Vanunu became increasingly politically active, calling for equal rights for Palestinians in Israel and for the inclusion of Palestinians in negotiations for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Becoming more and more disillusioned with Israel's military posture, he opposed the country's 1982 invasion of Lebanon.

In November 1985 he was made redundant in a mass lay-off of workers at Dimona. Ten months later he talked to a London newspaper, the Sunday Times, about the Dimona plant, revealing that Israel's nuclear capability was far greater than suspected. He told the newspaper that Israel probably had a stockpile of 100-200 nuclear weapons, was able to make thermonuclear devices more powerful than atomic bombs and had collaborated routinely with South Africa on nuclear matters.

Soon after the resulting article appeared, Vanunu went missing. It later transpired that he had been lured from London to Rome by Israel's Secret Service, kidnapped there and returned to Israel by clandestine means for trial on charges of espionage and treason. The trial opened in August 1987 under a blanket of secrecy and the following March he was sentenced to 19 years' imprisonment. By the end of 1996, just after his 42nd birthday, Vanunu had spent 10 years - almost one-quarter of his life - in solitary confinement, his cell measuring just 3 metres by 2 metres. The Israeli government continued to ignore many international protests at this inhuman punishment and many appeals for clemency.

Vanunu's revelations were exhaustively checked by the Sunday Times before publication and they have not been seriously challenged. By the mid-1990s a worldwide Campaign to Free Vanunu was in operation. The Campaign has organised numerous delegations to Israel to publicise his case and in October 1996 an international conference was held in Tel Aviv, chaired by the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Joseph Torblat and attended by a number of renowned scientists, journalists, lawyers and human rights campaigners.

Vanunu took the occasion of the conference to make clear that he stands by his original action. He sent the delegates a message saying, "I thank you all. I am happy for revealing what I have revealed." The Campaign later reported that the conference had made a significant impact and that Vanunu's case was no longer a taboo subject in Israel.

In 2004, Vanunu was released from prison, but his life continues to be severely restricted: He is neither allowed to travel nor to talk to foreign journalists. Vanunu has been briefly arrested several times for violations of those restrictions. As the restrictions effectively continue to punish him, though he has already served his sentence, Vanunu's treatment is being regarded as unfair even by those who had not supported his whistleblowing.

Quotation

"The passive acceptance of and complacency with regard to the existence of nuclear weapons anywhere on earth is the disease of society today. Never in human history has there been such a threat to the very existence of mankind and to all forms of life on earth. It is not we who are opposed to nuclear arms who break the law but the governments which have chosen to create this greatest threat to humanity. The struggle against these weapons is not only a legitimate one, it is a moral, inescapable struggle."

Mordechai Vanunu

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