Acclaimed Environmental Lawyer Robert Bilott Named as Laureate of 2017 Right Livelihood Award

The American lawyer Robert Bilott is responsible for one of the most significant victories for environmental law and corporate accountability of this century. In light of these remarkable contributions, Bilott receives this year’s honorary Right Livelihood Award, widely known as the ‘Alternative Nobel Prize’.

Robert Bilott is recognised by the Award’s international jury for “exposing a decades-long history of chemical pollution, winning long-sought justice for the victims, and setting a precedent for effective regulation on hazardous substances”.

The announcement was made today at the International Press Centre at the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs by Ole von Uexkull, Executive Director of the Right Livelihood Award Foundation, and Maina Kiai, Jury member and former UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association.

In response to the award, Bilott has commented: “I hope that this honour helps spread awareness and recognition of the urgent need to take further steps to protect our drinking water, and the ability and power of local residents and communities to ensure that such steps are taken.”

In a legal battle lasting 19 years, Bilott represented 70,000 citizens whose drinking water had been contaminated with Perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) by the chemical giant DuPont. Expanding upon the concept of class-action litigation, he set up a seven year toxicological study of the 70,000 victims, which contributed significantly to the scientific understanding of the global health risks associated with Polyfluoroalkyl Substances (PFAS). This class of substances, which do not break down in the environment or the human body, are ubiquitous in our societies today.

At a time when environmental regulation is under serious threat of being watered down in the United States and elsewhere, Bilott won substantial compensation for his clients through a combination of innovative litigation, scientific understanding, and extraordinary perseverance. The verdicts against DuPont during the initial three trials involving cancer survivors saw awards of $1.6m, $5.6m and $12.5m. Following these, DuPont agreed to settle all the existing cases for $671.7m.
Ole von Uexkull, commented: “The environmental scandal Robert Bilott uncovered is but the tip of the iceberg of global pollution caused by fluorocarbons. Thanks to his persistent work, the world now knows that this class of chemicals poses a serious threat to public health across the globe and urgently requires regulation.”

The 2017 cash award of SEK 3 million (EUR 315,000) is shared equally by three Laureates: the investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova (Azerbaijan), the human rights lawyer Colin Gonsalves (India) and activist Yetnebersh Nigussie (Ethiopia) who is promoting the rights of people with disabilities.

Ole von Uexkull said: “This year’s Laureates protect the rights and lives of citizens across three continents. With their courageous work for human rights, public health and good governance, they tackle some of the world’s most pressing challenges at their very core. At a time of alarming setbacks for democracy, their successes show us the way forward towards a just, peaceful and sustainable world for all.”

Contact:
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Further details on the Laureates, alongside high-resolution photographs and videos are available at: www.rightlivelihoodaward.org/2017

About the Award:
Established in 1980, the Right Livelihood Award honours and supports courageous people and organisations offering visionary and exemplary solutions to the root causes of global problems. In total there are now 170 Laureates from 69 countries. In addition to presenting the annual award, the Right Livelihood Award Foundation also supports the work of its Laureates, particularly those whose lives may be in danger due to the nature of their activities.

About the selection process:
Anyone can propose candidates to be considered for a Right Livelihood Award. Through this open nomination process, the Foundation receives a clear indication of what citizens around the world consider to be the most pressing issues of our time, and the individuals
who dedicate themselves to solving them. After careful research by the Foundation’s research team, reports on the current proposals are submitted to the Foundation’s board and international Jury. The Jury meets annually in September to select the Recipients. This year, the jury considered 102 nominations from 51 countries.

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