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PRESS RELEASE

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CCBE Human Rights Award granted jointly to a Chinese lawyer, Li Heping, and to the group of Spanish lawyers who intervened in the 11/3 Madrid bombing trial

The Council of Bars and Law Societies of Europe (CCBE), representing over 700,000 lawyers from the European Union and European Economic Area through their member Bars and Law Societies, has granted its 2008 Human Rights Award to Li Heping, a well-known Chinese lawyer, and to the group of Spanish lawyers who represented defendants and victims in the trial following the 11 March 2004 Madrid train bombings.

The prize was created in 2007 by the CCBE in order to highlight the work of a lawyer or lawyers' organisation that has brought honour to the legal profession by demonstrating outstanding commitment and sacrifice in upholding fundamental values.

Li Heping was prevented by police from leaving Beijing at the airport on Thursday 27 November, and so is unable to receive his award in person.

CCBE President, Péter Köves, said today: *"The CCBE is proud to honour lawyers who undertake such important work in different circumstances and on different continents. The stories behind the lawyers who have won the award this year highlight the vital role of the lawyer in upholding justice and the rule of law. We salute the winners, who have made us all proud to be members of the same profession. We very much regret that Li Heping was not permitted to leave China to receive the award at the CCBE Plenary Session."*

In a statement sent to the CCBE, Li Heping said: *"This award is not only an honour and encouragement to me alone, but to all human rights defenders, including human rights lawyers, in China who have strived to uphold the values of human rights in a challenging environment. I am encouraged by the award and will work even harder and with greater passion towards fulfilling the universal values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in China and beyond."*

Endika Zulueta San Sebastian, the representative of the group of Spanish lawyers which received the award, said: *"Despite the shortage of material and economic means that we endured as legal aid lawyers, we used all our legal knowledge and our dialectics to defend the rights of persons charged with the cruellest terrorist attack suffered on European soil, in the centre of a media and political pressure without precedent."*

He added: "We would like to honour the victims of that fatal attack of the Madrid bombings of 11/3/2004 and especially those who were present during the five-months of the oral phase of the trial. Despite having to face the people accused of causing such painful suffering, they withstood the process with admirable fortitude and serenity, allowing the State to respect not only the basic guarantee of a legal defence, but also the best possible defence for any person regardless of the seriousness of the alleged crimes."

Background

Li Heping is a lawyer who has been active in human rights for over 10 years. He acted as an advisor of the Falong Gong, trying to ensure the respect of freedom of religion, as well as acting on behalf of his well known colleagues Chen Guancheng and Gao Zisheng. He has acted as a lawyer for many villagers in China whose property has been expropriated and also defends political dissidents prosecuted in China. In carrying out these functions and in his fight to protect and stand up for the basic human rights of Chinese citizens, Li Heping has always suffered and is persistently the victim of various intimidation methods. Yet, he courageously continues his fight for values which are common to all: rule of law and the respect of human dignity.

The group of Spanish lawyers worked on trial following the 11 March 2004 Madrid train bombings. The Madrid Bar appointed through its legal aid scheme 23 lawyers for the defence and 3 for the prosecution. The lawyers involved in the trial of the 11/3 bombing had to overcome immense obstacles to duly exercise their task that their own professional careers and private lives were affected. The pressure was particularly strong for those lawyers in charge of representing the suspects. It had to be added to the very tight deadlines, to the insignificant remuneration, and to the costs of withstanding such a burden in their personal and professional life, which included in some cases the closing of some of the law firms for over one year losing income and clients.

The 2007 Award was granted to the organisation Avocats Sans Frontières.

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