

Iranian film director denounces US immigration policy

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Iranian film director Bahman Ghobadi forwarded a prize bestowed on him by the Chicago International Film Festival to President George W. Bush as a protest against US immigration policies. Ghobadi, the director of the much acclaimed *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000), was refused a visa to enter the US despite taking extensive and time-consuming steps to obtain one.

Ghubadi commented to Agence France-Presse, “US authorities made me wait for three months so that I could take part in the festival, they made me go to Dubai twice assuring me each time I would get the visa. So I decided to send the prize, awarded for the human expression that is covered [in the film], to the US government for the negative views they hold against Iranians.”

Ghubadi is the second Iranian filmmaker in recent months to become the victim of the Bush administration’s new immigration policies. Abbas Kiarostami was denied a visa to enter the US, having applied in response to an invitation from officials at the New York Film Festival in September. After an appearance at the festival screening of his new film *Ten*, Kiarostami had been scheduled to lecture at Harvard and Ohio State universities.

The US State Department is now insisting on a 90-day period in which to check into the background of a prospective visitor. When a reporter from the WSWWS spoke to a State Department representative at the time of the Kiarostami denial, she said that “scrutiny had increased substantially since the September 11 attacks on New York City, Washington and Pennsylvania, particularly with immigrants from countries such as Iran, known to have links to terrorism. The 90-day background check is an estimate, not a specific law, which does not have to be applied to all cases.”

Former Socialist Party minister of culture Jack Lang, in *Le Monde*, called the US treatment of Kiarostami “isolationism and ignorance reduced to disdain for other cultures.” Finnish filmmaker Aki Kaurismaki boycotted the New York film festival in solidarity with the Iranian director.

Ghubadi, who is Kurdish, indicated that the return of the award was also intended as a protest against the treatment meted out to Kiarostami. Ghobadi’s award-winning film, *Marooned in Iraq*, tells the story of an aging singer who crosses into war-devastated northern Iraq in search of his ex-wife, a well-known Kurdish singer.

In a letter to Chicago film festival officials, Ghobadi wrote, “With many thanks to the festival organizers I am handing over my prize to the American government in order to teach them how to respect artists.” He added, “What they did to Kiarostami is terrible, he is a famous film director and does not deserve such behavior.” Ghobadi noted that “a country which rejects the visa application of an artist, better keep the prize of its festival for its own authorities.”

A Time for Drunken Horses, which received the Golden Camera for best film at the Cannes festival in 2000, recounts the lives of a group of Kurdish children trying to survive in the unrelentingly harsh conditions of the border area between Iran and Iraq. Their mother is dead, their father is away. The eldest boy works tirelessly to provide food for the others. One of his sisters goes to school, the other agrees to be married off on condition that her new family pay for an operation for another brother, who is deformed. The entire film is carried off with great dignity and beauty. [See review and interview with Ghobadi.]

Iranian filmmakers are apparently not the only ones being targeted. Cuban pianist Chucho Valdes was

prevented from attending the Latin Grammys in September by visa problems and the Afro-Cuban All-Stars, an offshoot of the renowned Buena Vista Social Club, were forced to cancel a 17-city US tour for the same reason, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

An international campaign against the US government's ignorant and reactionary immigration policies needs to be organized by artists, filmmakers and all those concerned with democratic rights and freedom of artistic expression.



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