

Lantos Foundation to Honor Enes Kanter Freedom with 2022 Lantos Human Rights Prize

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WASHINGTON, DC, UNITED STATES, September 6, 2022 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The Lantos

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Enes Kanter Freedom, former NBA player turned human rights activist

Foundation for Human Rights & Justice today announced that it will award the 2022 Lantos Human Rights Prize, its highest human rights honor, to professional basketball player turned activist Enes Kanter Freedom. He will receive the award at a ceremony taking place on December 7, 2022, in Washington, DC.

Mr. Kanter Freedom will join the distinguished ranks of Lantos Prize laureates, including human rights luminaries such as His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the late Professor Elie Wiesel, as well as real-life "Hotel Rwanda" hero Paul Rusesabagina and Hong Kong democracy activist Joshua Wong – both currently held as political prisoners – and several other notable human rights figures.

“I am honored and humbled to receive this award in recognition of my human rights advocacy and to be in the company of so many great champions for human rights,” said Mr. Kanter Freedom. “Receiving the Lantos Human Rights Prize, awarded in memory of one of America’s great human rights leaders, motivates me to continue this advocacy, even if it comes with a personal cost. I feel grateful to have the opportunity to speak on behalf of those who are speechless and censored. I cannot – and will not – remain silent so long as I have a voice to raise in defense of those who suffer under brutal dictators or against those who are complicit in human rights violations.”

Mr. Kanter Freedom was born in Switzerland in 1992 to Turkish parents. A talented basketball player, he has played for five NBA teams, including the Boston Celtics and the New York Knicks, and he represented Turkey as a member of its national team from 2008 to 2015. But since 2016,

he has earned the greatest recognition – including praise from the human rights community and loathing from authoritarian regimes – due to his outspoken advocacy in defense of fundamental human rights and his pointed criticism of dictators.

Mr. Kanter Freedom, who added the surname “Freedom” upon becoming an American citizen in 2021, has paid a high price for his activism. Turkey revoked his citizenship in 2017, and the Turkish government has targeted his friends and family – forcing them to disown Mr. Kanter Freedom and sever all ties with him. China retaliated against his outspoken advocacy by censoring the games of his then-NBA team, the Celtics. His professional basketball career has hit repeated roadblocks, as the NBA has shown itself more willing to bend to China’s will and spending power than to stand by an athlete who calls out the human rights abuses happening in that country.



Enes Kanter Freedom will receive the 2022 Lantos Human Rights Prize. Credit: IRF Summit

“You can know the character of a man by his enemies, and Enes Kanter Freedom has some of the ‘best’ enemies a human rights champion could amass: Xi Jinping, Erdoğan and many other despots and dictators,” said Dr. Katrina Lantos Swett, President of the Lantos Foundation. “In an era where professional athletes live in fear of saying the wrong thing and losing coveted sponsor contracts or their spot on the roster, Mr. Kanter Freedom is the rare athlete who has used his platform and influence to stand up – and stand tall – for the causes he cares about, even when it puts him in the crosshairs of brutal regimes and cowardly sports franchises.

He may only be at the beginning of his journey as a human rights champion, but he has already shown a degree of courage and conviction that few people possess. The Lantos Foundation is thrilled to honor him with the Lantos Prize, and we know he will continue to forge a path for human rights activists in the years to come.”

Mr. Kanter Freedom has spoken out on a range of human rights issues, including: the Uyghur genocide in China; the persecution of Tibetan Buddhists; violations of the rule of law in Turkey, Russia and elsewhere; the need to actively combat antisemitism, Islamophobia and all forms of religious intolerance; the complicity of global corporations in labor rights and human rights abuses; the NBA’s shameful obeisance to the Chinese Communist Party; and more.

In one of his most memorable and prominent acts of defiance and advocacy, he commissioned artists to design custom-made basketball shoes with human rights messages like “Free Tibet”, “Free Uyghur”, and “No Beijing 2022”. He wore these shoes proudly during NBA games, prompting the Chinese government to censor them.

The 2022 Lantos Prize will be conferred at an invitation only ceremony in Washington, DC, which will also honor political prisoners for whom the Lantos Foundation advocates. More details about the ceremony will be forthcoming for members of the media. The Lantos Human Rights Prize has been awarded annually since 2009 (see a full [list of laureates here](#)). It is given to a human rights champion or champions each year to help draw attention to human rights violations around the world and to encourage governments to make human rights a priority on equal footing with other policy decisions. The Lantos Prize is named for the late Congressman Tom Lantos, who co-founded the Congressional Human Rights Caucus – which was reconstituted as the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission following his passing.

About the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights & Justice: The Lantos Foundation was established in 2008 to carry forward the legacy of Congressman Tom Lantos, the only Holocaust survivor ever elected to the U.S. Congress and a leading human rights champion. The Foundation works with a range of partners and often in cooperation with the U.S. Government on issues that span the globe. The Foundation’s key areas of focus include human rights issues related to religious freedom, rule of law, internet freedom and activist art. The Foundation also administers the Lantos Congressional Fellows Program, supports human rights advocates, activists and artists through its Front Line Fund grant program, and awards the annual Lantos Human Rights Prize to honor and bring attention to heroes of the human rights movement.

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