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Kenyans win TI awards

By Standard Team

Two Kenyans were yesterday declared winners of this year's Transparency Integrity Awards.

Constable Naftali Lagat and Mr David Munyakei are among the five beneficiaries of the fifth annual TI Integrity Awards.

The other is Dr Milica Basic from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Munyakei, a former clerk at the Central Bank of Kenya was honoured for giving two MPs documents revealing the illegal transactions CBK had with Goldenberg International Ltd.

Constable Lagat defied orders to release a consignment of smuggled gold he had intercepted to a director of Goldenberg International at Wilson Airport.

"The Goldenberg scandal made Kenya a poorer country, financially, structurally and morally," said Gladwell Otieno, Transparency International executive director (Kenya).

"We owe it to the courage and integrity of a few individuals such as Lagat and Munyakei," she said. Otieno said the struggle against corruption begins with individual bravery and integrity.

Serial number

For Munyakei the events are still vivid in his mind. His heart pounding heavily against his chest, Munyakei scrutinised the serial number of the voucher he was being asked to approve for payment.

Had he not seen that number before?

Quickly, he cross-checked the voucher to establish whether it was legitimate. Sure enough, he discovered the original number had been erased, and another inscribed on it.

He broke into a sweat, but struggled to stay calm. He opened his drawer and pulled out a copy of the original document, known as CD3 form, and compared the numbers.

It was the same one. He checked from an entry he had made earlier only to find out that this was the fourth time the same form was being used to demand payment from the Central Bank of Kenya.

Munyakei thought he had caught a group of smart business crooks, but unknown to him, he had crossed the path of the most powerful people in Kenya at that time.

His findings, which he later presented to two MPs, were to form the genesis of the Goldenberg Inquiry and his path to fame yesterday.

He was among six people awarded the Transparency International Integrity Award for his contribution in fighting corruption in Kenya.

Detained suitcases

Also awarded was constable Naftali Lagat, who once stopped Goldenberg suspect Kamlesh Pattni in his tracks when he allegedly tried to import illegal gold.

Lagat, then based at Wilson Airport, detained several suitcases stashed with gold and refused to release them to Pattni.

And for that, he was arrested, questioned at the CID headquarters, reprimanded and then transferred.

Yesterday, they were awarded for their bravery in risking their lives for the sake of their country.

"We are recognising them because they were small people in a huge dictatorial system keen on crushing those who resisted corruption," TI Kenya's director Gladwell Otieno said.

Indeed, the two are lucky to be alive. Three of those honoured with them yesterday were killed after exposing scandals of similar magnitudes in their countries.

They were recognised at a colourful ceremony attended by among others, TI chairman Peter Eigen.

TI is an international organization renowned for fighting against corruption worldwide.

Munyakei was a clerk at the CBK responsible for raising vouchers for payment to Goldenberg International and others involved in the pre-shipment finance scheme in the 1990s.

He unearthed the loss of nearly Sh24 billion from the bank, and was sacked for it.

"After raising my suspicions with my bosses without any action, I decided to sneak out the documents and seek help elsewhere," he said.

He said he was frustrated because even when he noticed that the forms had been used before, he was told to approve them because other government officials had endorsed them.

"I knew I was risking my life, but I did not understand that I was up against the Government itself."

Contravened Act

He gave the documents to MPs Prof Anyang' Nyong'o and Paul Muite, who then raised the issue in Parliament.

One morning in 1993, two CID officers arrested him for allegedly leaking government information and contravening the Official Secrets Act.

His mother, Elizabeth Sembeiyo, collapsed and died several months later when she saw her son at Kileleshwa Police Station.

"I think being a prison official, she understood how horrible conditions were and feared I would die if jailed," he said.

Soon, he was being followed by police officers, and had to flee to Mombasa to escape their nagging eyes, he said.

Munyakei recalls how he once visited a Cabinet minister to seek help.

"He said I had done so much damage that even talking to me was a crime," he said.

Munyakei said he became suspicious of the transaction because CBK staff were working on Goldenberg vouchers at night.

Commercial banks handling the payments would handover the documents past 5pm, which he found illegal. The banks included Exchange Bank, Trust Bank and Post Bank Credit, among others.

Determined to make a clear break with the past, Munyakei packed his belongings and headed home in Narok to start life afresh.

Munyakei gave his evidence to the Goldenberg Commission last year. He had worked at the CBK for nearly two years before his dismissal. He lost all his benefits.

He now stays at home in Narok with wife Mariam and three children Naima (6) Fatma (4) and Salma, aged two.

Ms Otieno and Munyakei said the Government should reinstate and compensate him for wrongful dismissal.

Lagat said he was extremely happy to be recognized for his efforts that nearly cost him his job.

He said he had heard many times from colleagues that a suspicious plane was offloading its goods at an illegal point at Wilson Airport.

It would offload its goods at the hangar without going through Customs checks, Lagat, 42, recalled.

"One day, I decided to investigate what was going on. I checked, and found that the plane was loaded with suitcases full of diamond," he said.

Evidence

Even as Pattni made frantic calls to senior government officials, Lagat would not bulge.

Giving evidence to the Commission last year, he said the plane had landed from Bunia, Zaire, carrying 32 kilogrammes of gold belonging to Pattni

He said he detained the diamonds and called customs officials from Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, who took them away for safekeeping.

"I didn't know that I was stepping on hot coal. I was arrested the following day and interrogated on why I had detained the gold.

"I thought I would be promoted for doing the Government a favour."

Lagat, who says he was transferred from the airport immediately, is today attached to Moi's Bridge Police Station in Rift Valley Province.

He is married with four children.

The awards carry no monetary value, but the two said they were delighted for being recognised.

Others awarded posthumously are Hasan Balikci, a Turkish electrical engineer murdered in 2002 for questioning theft at a public corporation he worked in.

Satyendra Kumar Dubey, who worked in a road-building firm in India, was also killed when he questioned the disappearance of funds meant for roads.

Also recognized was Manik Chandra Saha, a journalist murdered for exposing corruption in Bangladesh.

[<< Back](#)