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SUBHEADLINE: A sea of prize-winning writers meets the public before the presentation of the 2000 SEA Write Awards

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For the 22nd year in a row, Thailand embarked once again on the process of selecting the award winners for the SEA Write contest, created to honour writers from the Asean region.

While the names of the 10 awardees were announced in early August, the faces behind the names, and their outstanding writings, were still to be discovered.

That discovery was made at a press conference held at the Oriental Hotel prior to the SEA Write Awards presentation tomorrow at 7 pm at the Oriental's Royal Ballroom, to be graciously presided over by HRH Princess Bhajrakitiyabha.

In a lively jumble of languages mingling with each other, the SEA Write Award winners took turns in front of the microphone introducing themselves, with Khun Savitri Suwanasathit, inspector general of the Ministry of Education, acting as the event moderator.

Kong Bun Chhoen, the Cambodian awardee, was the first to present himself, speaking in French, with the Laotian awardee giving the Thai translation.

Born in 1939 in Battambang province of Cambodia, Chhoen received his education from Preah Monivong High School in Battambang and later served as an adviser at Battambang province school. Chairman of the Khmer Composers Association since 1997, Chhoeun also held the position of deputy director of cinematography direction from 1981 to 1991 and deputy director of book and reading direction from 1991 to 1997.

Besides being a renowned novelist in Cambodia, he has taken part in various international conferences and symposiums, such as the Asia-Africa Writer Forum and the Cinematography Festival in Tashkent. A specialist in poems, song-writing and romances (he has produced over 120 works), Chhoen considers himself both a realist and romantic writer. ``Our country is still very poor, having suffered for so many years at the hands of Pol Pot. The situation is difficult for us writers, especially in that we lack readers, but we are amongst those who try to help the country recover" he commented.

The Indonesian awardee, Wisran Hadi, was born in Padang in 1945. After graduating from the Indonesian Academy of Visual Arts Yogyakarta, he began to pursue his interest in writing, stimulated by the numerous folk tales he was introduced to as a child. He spent time abroad, in the United States and Japan, to attend the International Writing Program and observe modern theatre.

Hadi is currently a lecturer on the customs and culture of the Minangkabau people at the University of Andalas in Padang. He has various published works and is presently a stage director, managing the Padang Theatre World.

``There are actually two kinds of family systems; the patriarchal which revolves around the role of the father, and the matriarchal, in which the women play the most important role. I personally come from this last family system, which is not widely accepted and understood. I want to study the role of women in society more and support this matriarchal scheme,"

commented Hadi, who has gained widespread recognition at home for adapting Minangkabau tales for the general public.

Souvanthone Bouphanouvong, the Laotian awardee, was born in 1925 in Sepon District, Savannakhet province. He studied there as a child and later moved to the capital Vientiane to pursue his studies. After working with the News Agency and Radio Broadcasting Station operated by the Neutral Armed Forces in Kangkai, he moved on to study arts and literature in Hanoi, to improve his professional skills and theoretical knowledge of arts and literature.

He was later appointed editor for the Pasason newspaper in Vientiane before becoming deputy director general of the Department of Publishing, at the Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism in 1976.

After retiring in 1986, he continued to show an active interest in writing and literature by working to prepare the Lao Writers' Assembly. In 1990, he organised the Founding Assembly of the Lao Writers' Association. Bouphanouvong is the author of an extensive array of literary works.

Lim Swee Tin, the Malaysian awardee, was born in 1952 to a Thai mother (an exponent of the traditional Manura dance) and a Malaysian father in Bachok, Kelantan. His interest in writing began at an early age, when he was still in primary school, writing simple traditional forms of Malay poetry, inspired by folk art and the natural beauty of the small Kuala Krai district. Entering secondary school, he began to study Malay literature.

His interest led him to be appointed to the editorial board of a journal published by the Malay Language Association, and to write poems for a weekly newspaper, marking the starting point of a long series of published works. Now an established writer of short stories and literary essays, Lim is most famous for his work in poetry, for which he has won over 20 literary prizes. He has also written 10 collections of poems, which have been included in some 60 anthologies and entered in many international symposiums and contests. "One of the functions of literature is to enhance people's quality of life. Hopefully, our hands can help soothe some pain and burden," Lim said.

The Burmese awardee, Daw Yin Yin, (aka Saw Mon Nyin) who introduced herself at once as the eldest of all, is 79. She was born in Momeik Township, Northern Shan State. Her ascent into the literary world started when still a teenager, with her lyric poems, and continued with further poems, articles and short stories on various subjects.

Yin was a first prize winner and gold medallist in the All Burma Poem Contest and has twice won, among other prizes, the National Literary Awards, Burma's highest literary award. Over a period of 40 years, Daw Yin Yin has written over 1,000 short stories, research papers, poems and articles. She is also known as a vocalist, a stage director, dramatist and social worker, in addition to having translated Vietnamese and Japanese literature extensively. The National Literary Awards Selection Committee, who selected her works for the SEA Write Award contest, stated that "as the culture and literature are the life blood of a people, the writer conveys the true traditional culture of Myanmar people and true characteristics of typical Myanmar women," calling her compilation "a valuable record beneficial to posterity".

Opening with his impressions on his arrival in Thailand, Antonio Enriquez, the Philippine awardee, commented, "What I noticed straight away coming out from the airport, was that the driver's wheel is on the right side and that motorists don't sound their horn so much, not like Manila, where it becomes like a madhouse! And I have seen so many flowers everywhere, but the most beautiful flowers I find are the smiles on Thai people's faces."

Born in 1936, Enriquez studied at Silliman University, and received a Bachelor of Arts in creative writing. He has a diverse and varied collection of published works, ranging from novels, short stories and anthologies, to feature articles, essays, and reviews, published in

Philippine magazines and newspapers. He has received numerous awards in communication and literature, as well as many writing grants and fellowships. Presently a consultant and writer-in-residence for Western Mindanao State University, Enriquez has held many positions, including literature instructor, radio host and chairman of the Home Reading Committee. He was awarded this year's SEA Write for the body of his published works, in particular his most recently published novel, *Subanons*.

Teoh Hee La is the Singaporean awardee and a correspondent with the Singapore Chinese newspaper *Lianhe Zaobao*. Her fondness for writing from her early childhood has won her more than 12 prizes in short-story-writing contests. In 1990 and 1994, she won the acclaimed Book Award granted by the National Book Development Council of Singapore, and was also awarded the Golden Lion Award in 1985, 1987, 1989 and 1991.

“I am not a doctor who cures society's illness. Nor am I a revolutionary or a politician who is keen to turn the tide of time. I let the story and the characters speak about the changes in our society. I base my writing on my faith in society and in myself.”

Wimon Sainimnuan, the Thai awardee and a native of Nakhon Pathom province, followed his fellow writers' lead and introduced himself _ to a Thai public who already knew him. “It is a great honour to be here and to get to meet Sir V.S. Naipaul in person. My aim, as ambitious as it might be, is to search for the truth and reflect it for the audience,” explained Wimon, who is a graduate from Srinakharinwirot University and a former primary school teacher. Weaving Buddhist teachings into his creative works, Wimon was awarded for his most recent novel *Amata*.

Finally, Nyugen Khai from Vietnam expressed his joy to have the very rare and precious chance to meet fellow writers from the region. We are representatives of countries with different social conditions, all of us facing at some stage, hardship and difficulties, but keeping on progressing. Hopefully we will be able to narrow the gap between us more and more,” he said.

Born in Hanoi in 1939, Nyugen Khai was an army medic and a journalist during the wars in Vietnam. These positions helped him gain deep knowledge and understanding of Vietnam's countryside, village life and peasantry. After working for a long time with *Van Nghe Quan Doi* magazine, Nyugen Khai moved to the Vietnam Writer's Association, and became its deputy general secretary and executive committee member. Nyugen Khai was awarded the National Prize by the Vietnam Writers' Association for the novel *Year End Meeting* in 1982. His anthology of short stories published in 1999 was the work for which he received the 2000 SEA Write Award.

One chair was left unoccupied in the presentation, as Pehin Dato Abdul Aziz bin Juned, the Brunei awardee, was held back for some work in New York. A graduate of Malaysia's Islamic College and Egypt's University of Al-Azhar, the prominent writer has produced a wide range of works and was awarded for his personal anthology of poems entitled *Senandung Anak Watan*.

Hopefully, Pehin Dato will make it for the SEA Write Awards Presentation to be held tomorrow night, with Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul as guest speaker.