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Malala, ex-eastern bloc activists up for Nobel peace prize



Malala Yousafzai, the shot Pakistani schoolgirl-turned-icon of Taliban resistance, and ex-Eastern bloc activists are among those known to be nominated for this year's Nobel Peace Prize, as the deadline expired on Friday. This year's award will be announced in early October, but speculation was already underway as the deadline for nominations ran out on February 1. Fifteen-year-old Malala Yousafzai was shot by a Taliban gunman at point blank range as she travelled on a bus to school on October 9, targeted for promoting girls' education. She has since become an internationally recognized symbol of opposition to the Taliban's drive to deny women education, and against religious extremism in a country where women's rights are often flouted. "A prize to Malala would not only be timely and fitting with a line of awards to champions of human rights and democracy, but also ... would set both children and education on the peace and conflict agenda," said the head of the Peace Research Institute of Oslo, Kristian Berg Harpviken. Others known to have been nominated are human rights activists, whose names have been mentioned in previous years, including Belarussian human rights activist Ales Belyatski - currently behind bars - and Russia's Lyudmila Alexeyeva. Belarus, which former U.S. President George W. Bush's administration had branded as the "the last dictatorship in Europe", is governed by authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko, who has cracked down even further on opponents of late, rights groups charge. In neighbouring Russia, authorities "unleashed the worst political crackdown in Russia's post-Soviet history," according to Human Rights Watch (HRW). Trying to predict who will win the Nobel Peace Prize is a difficult task, complicated by the fact that the list of nominees each year is kept secret for 50 years. But thousands of people are eligible to nominate candidates - including former laureates, members of parliament and government around the world, some university professors, and members of certain international organizations - and they are allowed to reveal the names they have put forward. As a result, it is known that French, Canadian and Norwegian MPs have all separately nominated Malala. Belyatski's and Alexeyeva's names have meanwhile been put forward by two Norwegian lawmakers. "They have both defied authoritarian state structures and the illegal and illegitimate abuse of power," one of the two MPs, Jan Tore Sanner, said. The Norwegian Nobel Committee is quick to point out that a nomination should not be interpreted as any kind of recognition on its behalf. In the past, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Benito Mussolini, and even Michael Jackson have all been nominated. Some names are already being tossed around as possible recipients of this year's prize even though it is not yet known if they have been formally nominated. They include Bill and Hillary Clinton, the Military Religious Freedom Foundation of the U.S., and Nicholas Winton of Britain who saved Jewish children in Prague just before the outbreak of World War II. Other possible candidates are Israeli former nuclear technician and whistle-blower Mordechai Vanunu, who leaked Israeli nuclear secrets to a British newspaper, Coptic Christian Maggie Gobran, dubbed Egypt's "Mother Teresa" for her work to help the poor in Cairo's slums, and Denis Mukwege, a pioneering doctor who founded a clinic for rape victims in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Norwegian Nobel Committee is made up of five members designated by the Norwegian parliament. It has been known to come up with some surprising - and occasionally controversial - choices, as in 2009 when it honored U.S. President Barack Obama just months after he took office, or last year when it gave the nod to the crisis-ravaged European Union. Its choices have caused such a stir that some have accused the committee of violating the last will and testament of the prize founder, Swedish inventor Alfred Nobel (1833-1896), who had a fairly narrow definition of "champions of peace." The Nobel Peace Prize will be announced in early October and will be handed over at a formal ceremony in Oslo on December 10.