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Morocco: Human rights violations in Western Sahara are escalating

The European Union has expressed its regret about the ongoing human rights violations in the Moroccan occupied Western Sahara on July 24, 2007. According to research by our human rights organisation and credible testimonies of victims, at least 775 people were arrested in the Western Sahara for political reasons between January 2006 and October 2007. When country-wide civilian protests against the Moroccan rule were forcibly ended, at least 221 people, (known by name) were injured during the process.

On November 8, 2007, more than 20 Sahrawis were arrested during public rallies in the cities of El Aiun and Smara. The civilians were urging the Moroccan authorities to release political prisoners and respect human rights. Among the arrested was Mrs. Gheina Bouhah, who had earlier handed over documentation of the human rights violations in the occupied Western Sahara, to the human rights organization "Human Rights Watch", who had been visiting the Western Sahara.

Five young Sahrawis were also arrested on October 3, 2007, during a public protest for the liberation of political prisoners in the city of El Aiun. A few days earlier on September 25, nine women and men were injured during a brutal crackdown of a public protest in the city of Smara. Also on September 15, 2007, four young Sahrawis were arrested during a peaceful demonstration in the city of El Aiun. The families of the four arrested Sahrawis declared that their sons had been tortured in jail. These figures are to document the Moroccan security forces daily persecution of Sahrawi activists in the occupied territories of the Western Sahara.

While the topic of extended imprisonment caused a worldwide stir in 2005, Moroccan authorities began to detain critics of the Moroccan occupation for very short periods of time. More than three quarters of the arrested were released again within 48 hours. However, during their imprisonment the majority of prisoners were tortured, threatened, and intimidated during long interrogations. Some prisoners were arrested several times within a few months. These repressions have mainly affected younger Sahrawis.

Considering the high number of politically motivated detentions within the last year, it does not appear as though the pardoning by King Mohamed VI, in April 2006 of 42 politically detained Sahrawis has helped in ameliorating the human rights situation in the Western Sahara. In fact it is quite to the contrary; already more than 23 of the released detainees have been arrested yet again. For example, the former political prisoners Mr. Mohamed Tahlil and Mr. Bachir Yaya were arrested in July 2007 at the Mauretania border for attempting to re-enter the illegally occupied Western Sahara.

Since the beginning of the "Sahrawi Intifada" in May 2005, repression in the cities of El Aqun, Smara, and Bojador is worse than it has ever been. As well, in the cities Rabat und Agadir there have been repeated arrests of Sahrawi students. Repression against Sahrawi students living in Morocco is most alarming. A dozen students have been arrested in recent months for participating in public protests that urged for the ending of massive human rights violations in the Western Sahara. They were then given unfair trials, and fined or sentenced to up to one year of detention. On October 24, 2007, in the town of Goulimine two young students, Brahim Essareh and Ahmed Hsik, were arrested and accused of participating in public protests against the Moroccan occupation. During their interrogation they were tortured.

Amongst the numerous detainees are also human rights defenders such as the president of the local human rights committee in Boujdour, Mr. Mohamed Tahil. The El Aiun court accused Tahil of lighting public buildings on fire, and organizing criminal activities to threaten stability and peace in the Western Sahara. However, Mr. Tahil (a former political prisoner) had been released and deported in March 2006 after being jailed for three years in August 2005. In July 2007 he was apprehended yet again for trying to re-enter the Western Sahara. Consequently, as he was not in the Western Sahara he would not have had the ability to commit these violations of Moroccan law.

Human rights defenders are posed with enormous risks of persecution. In many cases the Moroccan administration has refused to deliver travel documents to ensure that detainees are unable to participate in human rights conferences. In one case, security forces attempted to declare a female human rights activist as mentally ill.

Clan custody and torture as measures of pressure

Another widespread measure of concern is clan custody: Over and over again, family or clan members are detained in order to arrest persons wanted by the police, or they are used as leverage against the family. For instance, many fathers have been repeatedly arrested to prevent their children from participating in demonstrations against Moroccan rule. On July 8, 2007, the police arrested the fathers of the young Sahrawi-activists Nafaai Ould Beidi and Salama Ould Lafdeil in order to bring the young activists into custody. Two days later, security forces were able to take them into custody.

In several cases, children and teenagers are not only charged for crimes, but tortured as well. Torture is known to be very common in all police stations and military caserns. In dozens of incidences short-term detainees were brought to the hospital directly after their release, because they had suffered such serious injuries during their time of arrest. Doctors of, and former detainees have reported broken bones, ribs, concussions, unconsciousness, burnings, bruises, and genital torture, beatings and sleep deprivation.

Due to the growing repression, more and more Shrewish have sought refuge in the Canarian Islands. Their exodus from Morocco will only get worse if better civilian protection cannot be guaranteed. Evidence of the growing repression in the Western Sahara has been made public despite Moroccan authorities' attempts to systematically hinder journalists, international human rights activists, and diplomatic personal from entering the Western Sahara. For example, in October 2006 two Norwegian journalists were expelled from the country, and a delegation from the European Parliament was prevented from visiting the Western Sahara. Furthermore, Internet

cafes are monitored very closely and critical websites concerning Western Sahara are censored.

Morocco attempts to show “normality”

At some points Morocco’s attempts to have everything in the Western Sahara appear “normal” have come across as slightly absurd. For instance, when a delegation from the UNHCHR visited the Western Sahara in May 2006, 26 critics of Moroccan occupation policies were arrested pre-emptively in order to avoid public protests. Additionally, 7,000 plainclothes policemen were positioned along the delegation’s travel route, and Moroccan settlers were given traditional Sahrawi clothes to give the impression that the people were welcoming and receptive to Moroccan rule.

The president of the Consultative Council for the Subjects of the Sahara, Jalihenna Uld Errachid (who was appointed by the Moroccan King), stated in December 2006 that any accusations of human rights violations in Western Sahara would be “nonsense”. However, the alarming civilian number of imprisonments and injuries show that Moroccan rule in large parts of Western Sahara have been rejected by the civilian population. These numbers blatantly insist on the people’s right to self-determination.

The pursuit of continued repression against the civilian population in the Moroccan occupied Western Sahara does not contribute to a favourable climate for direct negotiations between the Government of Morocco and the Polisario Front, which has been highly encouraged by the international community and United Nations. In regard to the plethora of human rights violations, it should be recommended to extend the MINURSO mandate in order to monitor the human rights situation and protect the civilian population.