

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: MDE 29/003/2002 (Public)
News Service No: 148
30 August 2002

Embargo Date: 30 August 2002 00:01 GMT

Morocco/Western Sahara: Day of the "Disappeared" - families still await truth and justice

As the world observes the Day of the "Disappeared" 2002 today, Amnesty International is calling on the Moroccan authorities to finally end the suffering of hundreds of Moroccans and Sahrawis still awaiting news of relatives who "disappeared" at the hands of the Moroccan security services in previous decades.

"If my relative is dead, I want to receive the body or remains for burial and begin the grieving process that would allow me to come to terms with the loss. If my loved one is alive, I want the chance to see him for what little time he may have left." Amnesty International has heard the same message from dozens of families of the "disappeared" in Morocco/ Western Sahara, from Morocco's economic capital, Casablanca, to the desert town of Smara in Western Sahara.

"It is cruel and inhuman that a woman whose husband was arrested in front of her during the 1960s or 1970s should still be trying to obtain an answer from the authorities on whether he continues to be held in secret detention or was tortured to death," the organization said, adding "It is high time those answers were given."

Amnesty International has publicly welcomed the series of positive initiatives undertaken by the Moroccan authorities in recent years to improve the human rights situation, including the establishment by King Mohamed VI in July 2000 of an arbitration commission to decide on compensation for material and psychological damage suffered by victims of "disappearance" and their families. Compensation has so far been awarded in several hundred cases. "However, there can be no substitute for truth and justice," Amnesty International said.

On this day, Amnesty International adds its voice to those families of "disappeared" and calls on the Moroccan authorities to conduct prompt, thorough, independent and impartial investigations into each individual case of "disappearance" and to bring those responsible to justice.

Background

The issue of "disappearances" has marked the history of Morocco / Western Sahara in the past four decades and remains one of the most painful unresolved human rights problems. More than a thousand people, the majority of them Sahrawis, "disappeared" between the mid-1960s and the early

1990s at the hands of Moroccan security services.

Several hundred Sahrawis and Moroccans were released in the 1980s and 1990s after spending up to 18 years completely cut off from the world in secret detention centres. Dozens more "disappeared" are reported to have died in secret detention. However, the fate of hundreds of others remains unknown.

In June / July 2002 an Amnesty International delegation conducted a research mission to Morocco / Western Sahara, focussing primarily on the pressing issue of "disappearances". During their visit, delegates met dozens of families of "disappeared" and former "disappeared" in Rabat, Casablanca, Laayoune and Smara.

Public Document

For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566

Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW. web: <http://www.amnesty.org>

For latest human rights news view <http://news.amnesty.org>