

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## Public Statement

AI Index: MDE 29/005/2005 (Public)  
News Service No: 227  
18 August 2005

### **Morocco/Western Sahara: Amnesty International welcomes the release of Moroccan prisoners of war**

Amnesty International welcomes today's release of 404 Moroccan prisoners of war who had been held for well over two decades by the Polisario Front. The prisoners remained in detention almost 14 years after the formal cessation of hostilities between the Morocco and the Polisario Front. Amnesty International had repeatedly called for the release of these prisoners.

However, according to the International Committee of the Red Cross, some 250 Moroccans are still missing in connection with the conflict, which started in 1975 when Morocco annexed the territory of Western Sahara. In addition, hundreds of Sahrawis who "disappeared" at the hands of the Moroccan security forces, mostly in the 1970s, also remain unaccounted for.

Amnesty International also reiterates its calls for the fate of all those who have "disappeared", during and after the conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front, to be clarified, and calls for those responsible for "disappearance", torture and other grave violations of human rights on both sides of the conflict to be brought to justice.

#### **Background**

Western Sahara has been the subject of a territorial dispute between Morocco, which annexed the territory in 1975 and claims sovereignty there, and the Polisario Front, which calls for an independent state in the territory and has set up a self-proclaimed government-in-exile in refugee camps in south-western Algeria. A UN Settlement Plan was agreed to in 1988 by both the Moroccan authorities and the Polisario Front and was approved by the UN Security Council in 1991.

After more than a decade of conflict, both parties agreed that a referendum in which the Sahrawi population would be asked to choose between independence and integration into Morocco would be organized and conducted by the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). The referendum was originally set for 1992, but has been repeatedly postponed.

