

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **Morocco/Western Sahara: Release school student imprisoned for offending the King**

Amnesty International is urging the Moroccan authorities to order the release and drop the charge against Yassine Bellasal, an 18 year old student, sentenced to a one year prison term for allegedly insulting Morocco's King, and to investigate allegations that he was beaten and threatened in police custody following his arrest.

Yassine Bellasal was sentenced on 28 September 2008 by the Court of First Instance in Marrakesh. In addition to the prison term, he was fined 1,000 dirhams (approximately 115 US dollars). He was charged with insulting King Mohamed VI after he wrote on his school wall "God, The Nation, Barça", in a play of words on the country's motto "God, The Nation, The King" – according to his family, his intent was only to express his support for the FC Barcelona football team. Arrested at his home in Ait Ourir, 35 kilometres from Marrakesh, he was detained at the local Centre of the Royal Gendarmerie, where he is reported to have been beaten and threatened with electric shock torture. He was then brought before the Royal Prosecutor in Marrakesh on 21 September without legal representation and tried under article 179 of the Moroccan Penal Code, which prescribes imprisonment of up to five years and fines up to 1,000 dirhams for "any offence committed towards the person of the King or the Heir to the Throne".

Yassine Bellasal appealed against the court verdict. At a hearing before the Marrakesh Court of Appeals today, 29 October, his lawyers requested his provisional release. A further hearing is due on 5 November. Currently, Yassine Bellasal continues to be incarcerated at Boulemdharez prison in Marrakesh.

#### **Background**

Criticism of the monarchy remains a taboo subject in Morocco and several journalists, political activists and human rights defenders have been prosecuted in recent years, and in some cases sentenced to prison terms, for expressing views deemed by the authorities to be critical of or offensive to the King. Both the Penal Code and the Press Code provide for sentences of up to five years of imprisonment and heavy fines to be imposed on those convicted of "offences" against the person of the King or his family or for "undermining the monarchy". Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the Moroccan authorities to lift all impediments to freedom of expression and to act in conformity to article 9 of the Moroccan Constitution and to its obligations under article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by respecting freedom of expression.

Last year, eight members of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (*Association Marocaine des Droits Humains*, AMDH) were sentenced to prison terms of up to four years and fined for "undermining the monarchy", after they had participated in May Day demonstrations during which slogans criticizing the monarchy were chanted. They were pardoned by the King in April this year.

On 8 September 2008, Mohamed Erraji, a Moroccan blogger, was sentenced to two years' imprisonment and a fine of 5,000 dirhams (approximately 625 US dollars) for

"lack of respect due to the King". On 18 September 2008, the Court of Appeal in Agadir, Morocco, overturned the two-year sentence on the grounds of procedural irregularities in the first trial.