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Morocco/Western Sahara: Pardon of dozens of political prisoners is positive step

Amnesty International welcomes the royal pardon given today to around 25 political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, and several others who were being tried on political charges.

"The pardon is a significant step in the right direction," said Amnesty International. "It is the first royal pardon since 2001 to include political prisoners. We hope that the Moroccan authorities will take further measures by addressing, as a matter of urgency, the dozens of outstanding cases of political prisoners detained after conviction in unfair trials."

Among those pardoned are human rights defenders, journalists and Islamist activists on whose cases Amnesty International has been campaigning, sometimes for many years. These include Ali Lmrabet, a Moroccan journalist sentenced to three years' imprisonment in June 2003, and Ali Salem Tamek, a human rights defender from Western Sahara who was serving a two-year sentence he received in October 2002.

Moroccan authorities must deal with the dozens of outstanding cases of political prisoners in the country. Some were sentenced in the 1980s and 1990s, but the vast majority were imprisoned after unfair trials last year on suspicion of planning or inciting violent acts attributed to Islamists, such as the May 2003 attacks in Casablanca. Many of those sentenced were allegedly tortured in custody to extract confessions or to force them to sign or thumbprint statements they rejected.

Amnesty International also urges the Moroccan government to ensure that its ongoing revision of existing legislation culminates in changes in domestic law which guarantee compliance with the country's obligations under international human rights treaties. In particular, all provisions that permit prison sentences for the peaceful exercise of the right to freedom of expression must be removed and further safeguards for fair trials introduced.

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