

AI-Index: MDE 29/24/91
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£MOROCCO: @HUNDREDS OF "DISAPPEARED" SAHRAWIS
STILL UNACCOUNTED FOR

Amnesty International said today it feared that hundreds of Western Saharan civilians who "disappeared" up to 15 years ago are still held in secret detention in Morocco or have died.

In a new report the organization said over 300 "disappeared" Sahrawis have been released after a royal amnesty in June, but hundreds more remain unaccounted for. The Moroccan government has in the past persistently denied knowledge not only of those still missing but also of those recently set free.

"Many of the released Sahrawis suffer severe physical or mental problems after having spent up to a decade and a half in secret captivity," the worldwide human rights organization said. "Some are paralysed or blind due to harsh prison conditions, others left their cells insane."

At least 43 of their fellow inmates have died in custody since 1975, when Morocco first took control of the former colony of Spanish Sahara and began wholesale arrests of people for known or suspected links with the Polisario Front which is fighting for independence. None of the "disappeared" have ever been charged or tried.

This year's royal amnesty is the first solid confirmation of the mass "disappearances" in Western Sahara. However, the releases, which occurred in the course of a peace initiative for the region under United Nations auspices, were accompanied by almost complete official silence. Those released were instructed to keep silent about what had happened to them and not to celebrate their homecoming publicly.

Among the first to "disappear" were four brothers and a cousin of the Mayara family arrested at the end of 1975. Only since their release have the remaining relatives learned that the youngest brother died in custody in 1977. He left a wife and eight children. The four other men of the family were released from prison in June 1991 -- the eldest was 81, and bent and stooped with age.

Information Amnesty International has received over the past years clearly indicates that only some of those arrested after the annexation of Western Sahara have now been set free. Although the true number is not known to the organization there are strong indications that hundreds are still missing. They include former students, housewives and elderly people, one of them said to be in his 90s today.

In a letter sent to King Hassan II the organization urged his government to break its 15-year silence on the "disappeared" and clarify the fate of those missing. Sahrawis still in detention should be released immediately.

Amnesty International also sought permission to send a research team to Morocco in order to obtain further information about the human rights situation in the country, including that of the "disappeared" Sahrawis. The organization has been denied access to Morocco since March 1990, when a team was forced to leave the country.

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