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Morocco/Western Sahara: President Obama must press King Mohammed VI over 'rape and kissing' laws

US President Barack Obama must urge Moroccan King Mohammed VI to scrap laws which see women and girls forced to marry their rapists, and teenagers facing jail for kissing in a public place, Amnesty International said ahead of a meeting between the two heads of state on Friday.

Several teenage survivors of sexual violence have committed suicide in recent months.

Public pressure to protect survivors of sexual violence had peaked in March 2012 when 16-year-old Amina Filali swallowed rat poison and killed herself, after being forced to marry the man she said had raped her.

"It is dreadful that this sort of attitude is enshrined in law. The Penal Code allows rapists to escape prosecution by marrying their victims. This discriminates against women and girls and provide them with little protection when they are subjected to sexual violence," said Philip Luther, Middle East and North Africa Director at Amnesty International.

As Obama and King Mohammed VI meet in Washington, three teenagers will appear in court in Morocco for kissing and posting photos on Facebook. Two 15-year-old boys and a 14-year-old girl were charged with "public indecency", while one of the boys was accused of "indecent assault" on a minor for a kiss. This offence carries a prison sentence of between two and five years' and a possible fine.

"The King's visit to the USA provides an opportunity for President Obama to add his voice to calls inside Morocco for these pressing issues to be addressed," said Philip Luther.

"Despite official promises to reform the Penal Code, the Moroccan authorities have failed to take action over the last couple of years to protect women and girls from violence and guarantee freedom of expression."

Earlier this month, the Moroccan government finally submitted a draft law to protect women from violence to parliament – nearly a year after a parliamentary group first proposed it.

"Delays in legal reform in Morocco are leaving women and girls exposed to abuse. Unless the gap is closed between the authorities' rhetoric about improvements to the law and their delivery of these changes, more lives will be at risk," said Philip Luther.

Two years after Morocco's celebrated new Constitution came into force, human rights violations are still an everyday reality. Flawed laws and practices continue to deny Moroccans and Sahrawis - people from Western Sahara, a territory annexed by Morocco in 1975 – access to fair trials, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, among other human rights.