

URGENT ACTION

SIX SAHRAWI ACTIVISTS AT RISK IN MOROCCO

Six Sahrawi prisoners of conscience are on hunger strike in protest at being held without trial in Morocco for over six months. Their families are gravely concerned for their health.

Ahmed Alansari, Brahim Dahane, Yahdih Ettarouzi, Rachid Sghir and Ali Salem Tamek, all men, have been on hunger strike since mid-March, in Salé prison near the Moroccan capital, Rabat. A sixth detained man, **Saleh Labihi**, who initially did not participate in a hunger strike for health reasons, joined the strike on 5 April in solidarity with the others. Their lawyers visited them on 12 April, and reported that five of the detainees were brought in to meet them in wheelchairs. They were so weak that they had difficulty speaking or even opening their eyes for long periods. In addition, Ali Salem Tamek also suffers from asthma, and according to his family, Brahim Dahane is suffering from acute stomach pain.

The six men, and a woman, Dakja Lashgar, were arrested on 8 October 2009 at Mohammed V airport in Casablanca when they returned from visiting refugee camps in Tindouf, in south-western Algeria. Dakja Lashgar was provisionally released in January on health grounds. All belong to a number of human rights organizations and other civil society groups in Western Sahara, a territory Morocco controversially annexed in 1975, and several have long track records in monitoring and reporting on human rights violations committed by the Moroccan authorities. Although they are all civilians, they have been referred for trial in front of the Military Court on charges of undermining Morocco's security including its "territorial integrity", but six months after their arrest no date for their trial has yet been set. The six Sahrawi activists are determined to continue their hunger strike unless they are referred to trial immediately, or released unconditionally.

PLEASE WRITE IMMEDIATELY in Arabic, French or your own language:

- Expressing grave concern for the health of Ahmed Alansari, Brahim Dahane, Yahdih Ettarouzi, Rachid Sghir, Ali Salem Tamek and Saleh Labihi, and urging the Moroccan authorities to ensure that they are given access to medical treatment of their choice, as well as regular access to their families and access to lawyers;
- Calling for the immediate and unconditional release of the six, as they are held solely for peacefully exercising their rights to freedom of expression and association, and for charges against them and Dakja Lashgar to be dropped;
- Calling on the Moroccan authorities to ensure that Sahrawi human rights defenders are able to conduct their work without fear of harassment in compliance with their obligations under international human rights treaties, notably the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and in conformity to the UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Declaration on Human Rights Defenders).

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 14 MAY 2010 TO:

Minister of Justice

His Excellency Mohamed Naciri
Ministry of Justice
Place Mamounia, Rabat
Maroc/Morocco

Fax: +212 537 72 37 10/ +212 537

73 07 72/ +212 537 73 47 25

Salutation: Your Excellency

Minister of Interior

His Excellency Taïeb Charkaoui
Ministry of Interior
Quartier Administratif, Rabat
Maroc/Morocco

Fax: +212 537762056

Salutation: Your Excellency

And copies to:

President of the Advisory Board of
Human Rights

Ahmed Herzenni
Place Ach-chouhada,
B.P. 1341, 10000 Rabat
Maroc/Morocco

Fax: +212 537 726856

Email: ccdh@ccd.org.ma

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives of Morocco accredited to your country. Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Moroccan authorities show little tolerance for expressing views in favour of the self-determination of Western Sahara, which is subject of a territorial dispute between Morocco which annexed it in 1975 and the Polisario Front, which calls for its independence and runs a self-proclaimed government in exile in the Tindouf camps.

Amnesty International fears that the charges against the seven Sahrawi activists are a result of their peaceful activities in support of the self-determination of the Sahrawi people. It believes that the activities that the seven are reported to have undertaken during their visit to Algeria, including the Tindouf camps, between 26 September and 8 October, such as meeting with Polisario representatives and attending festivals and other events organized in their honour, amount merely to the peaceful and legitimate exercise of their rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly as guaranteed in international law and standards. Amnesty International is concerned that the Moroccan authorities are treating peaceful political activities challenging Morocco's "territorial integrity" as a national security issue. Amnesty International believes that activities in support of self-determination, as long as they do not involve the use or advocacy of violence, should not be interpreted by the Moroccan state as threats to "national security".

In mid-April 2010, the activists' lawyers met with the investigative judge at the Military Court, responsible for conducting the investigation into their case. He told them that the investigation is ongoing, but provided no indication as to when it is expected to conclude.

Family visits between Western Sahara and the Tindouf camps in south-western Algeria have taken place under the auspices of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees; and Sahrawi activists have previously visited Algeria. The visit by the seven Sahrawi activists to the Tindouf camps in late September and early October was, however, the first of its kind. Since then, two other groups of Sahrawi activists visited the camps: one between 22 February and 7 March and the other between 15 March and 5 April 2010. While they did not face arrest and charges upon their return, they were subjected to other forms of harassment and intimidation. For instance, when 11 Sahrawi activists flew back to the city of Laayoune on 6 April after visiting the Tindouf camps, they were reportedly beaten and verbally insulted by Moroccan nationals in front of Moroccan law enforcement officials at Laayoune airport, who failed to intervene. The Moroccan nationals were chanting pro-Moroccan slogans including: "Moroccan Sahara. Autonomy. That is the solution" and "Oh traitors. Leave our country. This is our land". In another instance of harassment of Sahrawi activists who have returned from the Tindouf camps, the Moroccan authorities used excessive force to break up a demonstration on 9 March 2010 in favour of self-determination for Western Sahara held in Laayoune and beat some of the protesters including Brahim Sabbar, Secretary General of the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations Committed by the Moroccan State, who had returned a few days earlier from the Tindouf camps. He told Amnesty International that he was beaten by at least four law enforcement officers with wooden sticks on different parts of his body including his head.

In addition to the six Sahrawi prisoners of conscience on hunger strike in Salé prison, 30 other Sahrawis are on hunger strike in different prisons in Morocco and Western Sahara in protests at the treatment they are receiving from the Moroccan authorities.

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