

## AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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# MOROCCAN AUTHORITIES ASSAULT SAHRAWI WOMEN ACTIVISTS

On 15 and 16 April 2022, the Moroccan authorities beat and injured at least five women, who have participated in peaceful protests and showed support for prominent Sahrawi activist, Sultana Khaya, who has been under a *de facto* house arrest since November 2020 for her activism in favour of Western Saharan self-determination.

Moroccan police officers and security force agents in plainclothes used their fists, feet and sticks to beat Sahrawi women activists Zeinab Babi, Embarka Al Hafidhi, Fatima al-Hafidhi, Oum Al Moumin Al Kharashi and Nasrathum (Hajatna) Babi on the weekend of 15 April in Boujdour, a city in Western Sahara. In separate incidents, groups of four or more security officers targeted these women outside their houses, in an attempt to prevent them from joining Sultana Khaya in peaceful demonstrations on her rooftop calling for Western Saharan self-determination, they told Amnesty International.

In addition, on 16 April at least seven members of security forces verbally assaulted three of these women and sexually assaulted two of them. Authorities ripped the clothes of Zeinab Babi and Embarka Al Hafidhi and touched Embarka in the groin area. The authorities threatened Nasrathum Babi with more violence and threatened Embarka with death if she ever tries to visit Sultana Khaya again.

All five women were left badly injured and scared to leave their houses. In interviews with Amnesty International, most of the women stated that they did not call for an ambulance, based on previous experiences where ambulances have not been sent to them when they called. When Zeinab Babi's family called an ambulance on 16 April, security forces stationed in front of her house sent it away when it came, and her family had to drive her to Boujdour Hospital. Doctors in Boujdour and Laayoune hospitals treated Zeinab for her injuries sustained from the beatings, including several broken bones in her left hand. Amnesty International reviewed videos and photos of the women's injuries and bruises, consistent with their descriptions of the events.

Sultana Khaya is the president of an organization called the 'League for the Defense of Human Rights and against Plunder of Natural Resources' and is known for her vocal activism in defence of the right of self-determination for the Sahrawi people. She is also a member of the Sahrawi Organ against Moroccan Repression (ISACOM). The Moroccan authorities have held Sultana and her family under de-facto house arrest since November 2020, during which time they have subjected them to multiple episodes of torture or other ill-treatment and prevented people from accessing the house until mid-April 2022. In May 2021, Security forces raided Sultana Khaya's home, stole valuables, assaulted and attempted to rape her, and raped her sister.<sup>1</sup> They also arrested and tortured or otherwise ill-treated three activists who were there to support her and her family. In November 2021, Moroccan security forces again broke into the house of Sultana Khaya, raped her and sexually abused her sisters and assaulted her 80-year-old mother.<sup>2</sup>

On 16 March 2022, four American volunteers managed to enter Khaya's house as part of a mission led by several non-profit organisations working to promote human rights and peacebuilding worldwide, including the Human Rights Action Center (HRAC), Non-Violence International, Karama Sahara and Solidarity 2020.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of their mission was to show solidarity with the Khaya family and demand an end to their house arrest and ill-treatment, and call for international human rights organizations to be permitted access. Since their arrival, activists have been holding peaceful protests on Sultana Khaya's rooftop daily, in which they wave Sahrawi flags and chant. In the first month following their arrival, security forces appeared to reduce their presence outside Sultana Khaya's house and Sahrawi activists, friends and family were able to gather on Sultana's rooftop for peaceful demonstrations. Since 16 April, though, the restrictions and threats on those trying to enter Khaya's house have increased, and the police presence has intensified outside Khaya's house as well as the houses of other activists.

<sup>1</sup> See Amnesty International, *Urgent Action: Sahrawi activist raped by Moroccan forces*, 30 November 2021, [amnesty.org/en/documents/mde29/5058/2021/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde29/5058/2021/en/)

<sup>2</sup> See Amnesty International, *Urgent Action: Sahrawi activist raped by Moroccan forces*, 30 November 2021, [amnesty.org/en/documents/mde29/5058/2021/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde29/5058/2021/en/)

<sup>3</sup> See Amnesty International, *Urgent Action: Investigate violations against raped activist*, 6 April 2022, [amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/MDE2954572022ENGLISH.pdf](https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/MDE2954572022ENGLISH.pdf)

The Moroccan authorities have long imposed arbitrary restrictions on the rights of Sahrawis to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association, particularly where the exercise of those rights relates to the status of Western Sahara. Moroccan security forces have used, during several incidents, unnecessary and excessive force to disperse peaceful demonstrations and Sahrawi activists have faced harassment, intimidation and prosecution solely for peacefully expressing their opinions and exercising their other human rights.<sup>4</sup>

Most of Western Sahara has been under Morocco's *de facto* control since it seized it after Spain, its former colonial administrator, withdrew in 1975. The Moroccan government considers it Moroccan territory and rejects demands for a vote on self-determination. That option was included in the referendum that Morocco and the Polisario, agreed to in a 1991 UN-brokered ceasefire agreement.<sup>5</sup> The international community does not recognize Morocco's *de facto* annexation and the United Nations considers Western Sahara a non-self-governing territory. Yet, in December 2020, the US recognized Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara in exchange of Morocco's normalization of its relations with Israel.<sup>6</sup> The Biden administration has not changed this position.

Following an incident of armed confrontation between Moroccan troops and the Polisario front in November 2021 and the US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in December 2020, Moroccan authorities intensified their violations against pro-independence Sahrawi activists through ill-treatment, arrests, detentions and harassment in an attempt to silence or punish them for their peaceful activism against Morocco's push to further consolidate its control over the disputed territory of Western Sahara.<sup>7</sup>

In July 2021, the UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor, issued a statement condemning the Moroccan government for their "systematic and relentless targeting of human rights defenders" in the Western Sahara, highlighting the physical and sexual assault committed by masked officers against Sultana Khaya and her family members. The statement expressed particular concern about the Moroccan authorities' use of violence and threat of violence to prevent women human rights defenders from carrying out their peaceful human rights activities.<sup>8</sup>

The Moroccan authorities have limited monitoring bodies and independent journalists' access to Western Sahara, meaning that the repression has gone largely undocumented. For the past decade, Amnesty International has been calling on the UN Security Council to add a human rights component to the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), which would allow for monitoring and reporting on human rights abuses, as is done by the vast majority of comparable UN missions around the world. In October 2021, the United Nations Security Council adopted resolution 2602/2021 renewing MINURSO for twelve months. The latest developments are a stark reminder of the urgent need for an independent, impartial and effective human rights monitoring mechanism in the territory.

Amnesty International calls on the Moroccan authorities to uphold their obligations under international human rights law to respect the rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly, and freedom from torture and other ill-treatment, and to:

- Ensure prompt, impartial, independent and effective investigations into all allegations of torture and other ill-treatment of Sultana Khaya and the other women activists at the hands of Moroccan police officers and security agents.
- Lift all arbitrary house arrests and conduct independent investigations into the arbitrary and abusive use of force in raids on the houses of Sahrawi activists.

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<sup>4</sup> See Amnesty International, *Morocco/Western Sahara: Investigate brutal crackdown on Sahrawi protesters*, 1 August 2019, [amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/08/morocco-western-sahara-investigate-brutal-crackdown-on-sahrawi-protesters/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/08/morocco-western-sahara-investigate-brutal-crackdown-on-sahrawi-protesters/); and *Morocco/Western Sahara: Targeted Crackdown of Sahrawi Activists*, 19 July 2021, [amnesty.org/en/documents/mde29/4404/2021/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde29/4404/2021/en/)

<sup>5</sup> The Polisario Front is a political movement which calls for an independent state in the Western Sahara. In 1991, Morocco and the Polisario Front signed a ceasefire and a UN peacekeeping mission (MINURSO) was set up. On 14 November 2020, the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) President Brahim Ghali announced that the Polisario Front was ending the ceasefire.

<sup>6</sup> See Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report 2020/21: The state of the world's human rights: Morocco and Western Sahara*, 7 April 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/3202/2021/en/>

<sup>7</sup> See Amnesty International, *Morocco/Western Sahara: Targeted Crackdown of Sahrawi Activists*, 19 July 2021, [amnesty.org/en/documents/mde29/4404/2021/en/](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde29/4404/2021/en/)

<sup>8</sup> United Nations OHCHR, *Morocco: UN human rights expert decries "clampdown" on human rights defenders* 01 July 2021, [ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/07/morocco-un-human-rights-expert-decries-clampdown-human-rights-defenders](https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/07/morocco-un-human-rights-expert-decries-clampdown-human-rights-defenders)

- End restrictions on the access to Morocco and Western Sahara for journalists, peaceful activists and human rights defenders and allow for impartial and independent UN human rights monitoring and reporting in Western Sahara.

## ZEINAB BABI

On Saturday 16 April, at around 12 pm, Moroccan police arrested Zeinab Babi, 43, pro-independence Sahrawi activist, who was in a taxi going to a supermarket in Boujdour. Zeinab told Amnesty International that two unmarked cars pulled up next to her taxi and four police officers and security agents in plain clothes got out and took away the driver's car keys, telling the driver "you are not concerned by this".<sup>9</sup> After around ten minutes, three more unmarked cars and one police car arrived containing eight officers. The head of the Boujdour police got out of the police car and told Zeinab that she was under arrest, without saying why. Zeinab told Amnesty international that she had recently participated in several peaceful demonstrations in Boujdour, including those on the rooftop of Sultana Khaya's house.

"They didn't say why they were arresting me, but I know they were arresting me for my political activities here, for demonstrations here in Boujdour".

The police officers pushed Zeinab into the police car and drove her to Boujdour police station. While in the car, two police officers hit and kicked Zeinab all over her body and insulted her. At the police station, four officers interrogated Zeinab from 12.30pm until around 3.20pm about her activism, whether Polisario was paying her and how much, while insulting her and intermittently hitting and punching her. Zeinab said that she left the police station at 3.20 pm, barefoot as the police officers had taken her sandals from her. Her *melehfa* (traditional Sahrawi scarf) was torn from the beatings. Two police cars followed Zeinab and, once she reached an empty road, they stopped. Zeinab told Amnesty International that a Mercedes car approached her from the opposite direction and five men wearing Covid-19 masks and hats got out and beat her with their sticks, aiming at her knees, arms, and hands, for few minutes, while the police that had been following her watched from inside their cars. She told Amnesty International:

*They kept beating me. I saw the walkie-talkie on one of the agents, I could see they were police. They were trying to stop me struggling by beating me with the iron sticks. They beat me without any mercy.*

Zeinab said she recognized the officers that beat her with sticks, despite their masks, as they are well-known in Boujdour. Zeinab managed to walk home despite her injuries. When she reached her house, a group of six agents in plain clothes and Covid-19 masks, beat her with their hands, feet and wooden sticks. Zeinab told Amnesty that she could barely stand, that her clothes were badly torn, and that the agents beat her until she lost consciousness.

Zeinab's family came outside the house and called for an ambulance but, when the ambulance arrived in front of Zeinab's house, the authorities sent it away. Her family drove her to Boujdour hospital in the car, where she was treated for two broken bones in her left hand. On the same day, Zeinab was transferred to a hospital in Laayoune, the capital of Western Sahara, for treatment and, on 21 April, doctors conducted reconstructive surgery on her broken hand. She told Amnesty International that she also sustained cuts on her legs and shoulders and has a wound above her left eye. Amnesty International reviewed videos and photos, showing Zeinab in hospital and her injuries. Laayoune hospital refused to provide Zeinab with a medical report. Zeinab told Amnesty International that police officers have been stationed outside her house since the day of the attacks.

## FATIMA AL-HAFIDHI

Fatima Al-Hafidhi, 40, is an independent Sahrawi activist who has participated in protests calling for independence of the Western Sahara, including on Sultana Khaya's rooftop. Fatima told Amnesty International that on 15 April 2022, at 8 am, she left her house to take her four children to the local school where she lives in Boujdour, and saw between six and eight security agents in plain clothes outside her house watching her from an unmarked car. At 12 pm, Fatima left her home to go to Sultana Khaya's house, to assist in the daily peaceful protest held on her rooftop. The group of Moroccan security agents, who were waiting outside Fatima's house, encircled her and beat her using their hands, feet and sticks, for around one minute. Fatima told Amnesty International that the agents were wearing Covid-19 face masks and hats, and that one of the agents covered her face with his hands so that she could not scream or see.<sup>10</sup> She told Amnesty International:

<sup>9</sup> Interview by voice call with Zeinab Babi and her interpreter and friend Khayya Abdellah (Cheikhtoo), 19 April 2022

<sup>10</sup> Interview by voice call with Fatima Al-Hafidhi and her interpreter and friend Khayya Abdellah, 19 April 2022

*They came and made a circle around me and beat me. They jumped on me outside my house and it happened very quickly, they were afraid of cameras and filming and so did it quickly.*

Following the beating, the security agents left and she continued walking towards Sultana's house, despite a severe pain in her knee. She told Amnesty International: "after, when I tried to move, it was difficult because [of the] bleeding from my knee, I tried to move slowly to continue on my walk to Sultana Khaya's house, but another group of agents began to come towards me with sticks and threatening me in order to stop me from reaching Sultana's house." This group of security agents wore plain clothes and no masks and they beat Fatima with sticks all over her body. Fatima told Amnesty International that she hid in a nearby Sahrawi house until the agents left and then went home, as she was afraid of more agents beating her. At the time of the interview, she said that there had been agents in plain clothes stationed outside her house, where she lives with her four children, since 15 April and that she had not left her house for fear of another attack. She did not call for an ambulance as she said that when she has called for an ambulance in the past, the hospital has refused to send one to her. She told Amnesty International:

*My knee is too painful, so I didn't try to go to Sultana's house since then, I am afraid to leave in case they hurt me again.*

Amnesty International reviewed videos and photographs, taken on 16 and 17 April in which Fatima is seen crying and showing to the camera her right leg, covered in blood and with visible puncture marks of where the skin has been broken.

## **EMBARKA AL-HAFIDHI**

On 16 April, at 12 pm, Embarka Al-Hafidhi, 44, left her house with her eldest son to join a peaceful gathering on Sultana Khaya's rooftop. She told Amnesty International that an unmarked car stopped next to her, and five plain clothes agents got out and beat her using their hands and feet, in front of her child. One of the agents dragged Embarka by her hair, while others tore at her *melehfa*, and touched her on her groin area. Embarka said that the agents covered their faces with Covid-19 masks but that she recognized some of them, including the vice-president of the Boujdour police, who was holding a walkie-talkie.<sup>11</sup> After beating her for a few minutes, the agents lifted her off the ground and put her down in front of the gate in front of her house. They insulted her and threatened to kill her if she ever visits Sultana Khaya again. One of the officers took her keys from her handbag, opened her front door and pushed her inside the house. A Sahrawi man passed in his car and offered to take her to her parents' house, but the agents told the man to leave. The agents remained near to her house watching her for the rest of the day. At 4 pm, Embarka went outside to greet her youngest son. The agents pushed her and told her to get back inside. Embarka told Amnesty International that, at the time of the interview, she had a headache from where the agents had beat her on the head, and agents remained outside her house, sitting on chairs and watching the house. She was too afraid to leave the house and so neighbours were bringing her food and supplies. She told Amnesty International:

*They are still watching my house. not the same people but other agents. They are outside hiding but people can recognise them. This happens daily, we know them, they are always sitting outside on chairs. My neighbours are getting me supplies, I am too afraid to go outside in case they beat me again.*

## **NASRATHUM (HAJATNA) BABI**

Nasrathum Babi, 35, has been peacefully demonstrating for Sahrawi independence with friends and other women since 2005. She told Amnesty International that on 16 April, at around 11.30 am, she left her house to join a peaceful demonstration at Sultana Khaya's house. Three Moroccan security agents in plain clothes approached her from behind and beat her with their hands and feet for around one minute. Nasrathum told Amnesty International that she fell, and the agents continued kicking her while she was on the floor.<sup>12</sup> She said that the agents asked her whether she was going to Sultana's house and told her that she would never reach it. They threatened her that they would inflict more violence on her if she continued going to Sultana Khaya's house. Nasrathum told Amnesty International that security force agents have been watching her house for years, and that the police surveillance increased since Sultana Khaya was placed under house arrest. She thinks that the intention of the attacks on the weekend of 15 April were to "stop us and beat us so that we can't move". At the time of the interview, on 27 April, Nasrathum said there were presently two agents in plain clothes stationed outside her house. She told Amnesty International:

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<sup>11</sup> Interview by voice call with Embarka Al-Hafidhi and her interpreter and friend Khayya Abdellah, 19 April 2022

<sup>12</sup> Interview by voice call with Nasrathum Babi and her interpreter and friend Khayya Abdellah, 21 April 2022

*They are trying to beat our arms and legs to stop us from climbing the rooftop with Sultana and to keep us quiet for a while.*

This is not the first time that Nasrathum has been targeted by Moroccan security forces. She told Amnesty International that, during the month of Ramadan in 2021, agents threw an unknown toxic substances on her house seven times, including once on her face and clothes because she was participating in a campaign against the Moroccan legislative elections of 8 September 2021. This toxic substance gave her skin problems, including rashes and burns, as well as difficulty breathing.

## **OUM AL MOUMIN AL-KHARASHI**

Oum Al Moumin, 57, is a Sahrawi pro-independence activist and has been a member, along with Sultana Khaya, of the Sahrawi League for the Defense of Human Rights and against plunder of Natural Resources since 2015. At 11 am on 16 April, while Oum Al Moumin and her son were walking to Sultana Khaya's house, 5 police officers in plain clothes and wearing Covid-19 masks pushed and insulted Oum Al Moumin and separated her from her son. She returned home with her son. At 12.30pm, Oum Al Moumin left her house again and three unmarked cars stopped in front of her house, each containing four agents in plain clothes, wearing Covid-19 masks and hats. Six of the agents beat her for several minutes, using their hands and feet, causing her to fall to the ground. One agent slapped her repeatedly on the side of her head. At the time of the interview, she said she has problems hearing as a result of the beating. Oum Al Moumin told Amnesty International that the agents insulted her throughout the beating and told her that she would never raise the Sahrawi flag again. The agents stayed in their cars in front of Oum Al Moumin's house that night.<sup>13</sup>

At 12pm on 17 April, four agents wearing Covid-19 masks and hats stopped Oum Al Moumin in the main street near her house, where she was trying to hail a taxi to go to her brother's house. The agents beat Oum Al Moumin in her back and body with wooden and metal sticks for several minutes, until she ran for safety into a nearby Sahrawi person's house, returning home only once the agents had left, after the iftar time when, during Ramadan, Muslims break their fast. During the interview, Oum Al Moumin told Amnesty International that the agents were still outside her house and that she had been afraid to leave her house since the beatings.

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<sup>13</sup> Interview by voice call with Oum Al Moumin Al-Kharashi and her interpreter and friend Khayya Abdellah, 19 April 2022