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Morocco/Western Sahara: Irene Khan acknowledges positive steps and calls for more progress

(Rabat) In her first official visit to Rabat, Amnesty International Secretary General, Irene Khan, congratulated the Moroccan authorities on progress made on human rights, but also called for urgent action on a range of major concerns.

In a meeting with Justice Minister Abdelwahed Radi and Interior Minister Chakib Benmoussa in Rabat today, Ms Khan noted the positive steps taken on laws on women's rights.

"King Mohamed VI's government must now consolidate the progress by criminalizing violence against women, which has long been a demand of Moroccan women's groups," said Ms Khan.

She acknowledged the establishment of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission (*Instance Equité et Réconciliation*) which looked into enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions between 1956 - 1999, as the first of its kind in the Arab world. Ms Khan expressed concern however, that many of its recommendations are yet to be implemented three years after it was established. She urged the Government of Morocco to promptly ratify the International Convention on Enforced Disappearances.

Referring to Amnesty International's reports of human rights violations in the context of counter-terrorism since 2003 and the climate of impunity, she called for independent investigations into allegations of torture and other ill-treatment, in particular in the case of Binyam Mohamed. He was reported to have been held in secret detention and tortured in Morocco for 18 months prior to being transferred to Guantanamo Bay in September 2004.

Ms Khan urged the authorities to respect the right to peaceful expression of political opinion. Too often, human rights defenders and activists face restrictive measures when working on sensitive issues, such as Western Sahara.

Ms Khan called for release of human rights defender Chekib El-Khiari, who has been adopted by Amnesty International as a prisoner of conscience.

On the positive side, Amnesty International noted that Morocco has not carried out any executions since 1993.

"Morocco can be a role model in the region by instituting a moratorium on the death penalty. The Moroccan authorities should join the majority of the world that no longer carries out capital punishment," said Ms Khan.