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Morocco: Human rights defenders sentenced to imprisonment

Amnesty International condemns the sentencing yesterday in Rabat of 36 human rights defenders to three months in prison and a fine of 3,000 dirhams (around \$300) each for organizing an unauthorised demonstration on 9 December 2000.

“The verdict is a clear reminder that freedom of expression remains under serious threat in Morocco,” Amnesty International said today.

The demonstration of 9 December 2000 was organized by the Association marocaine des droits humains (AMDH), Moroccan Association of Human Rights, to demand justice for victims of human rights violations, such as “disappearances”, torture and arbitrary imprisonment, in previous decades and to call for an end to the impunity which those responsible for these crimes still enjoy.

“This trial should never have taken place in the first place,” said Amnesty International. “Intimidating human rights defenders with jail sentences for exercising their right to freedom of expression is unacceptable.”

The 36 human rights defenders were sentenced yesterday before the Court of First Instance in Rabat. Under Moroccan law, they remain free pending an appeal against the verdict. If they are imprisoned, they will be considered prisoners of conscience.

The human rights defenders include members of the AMDH, notably its President Amine Abdelhamid and his predecessor Abderrahmane Benameur, as well as members of the executive office of the Forum pour la vérité et la justice (Forum for Truth and Justice) and of the Comité de coordination du groupe des Sahraouis victimes de la disparition forcée et de la détention arbitraire (Coordination Committee of the Group of Sahrawi Victims of Enforced Disappearance and Arbitrary Detention).

Background

On 9 December 2000 some 42 people were arrested for taking part in a demonstration which had been organized by the AMDH in front of the parliament in Rabat and detained for one night. Six people were freed the following day without charge. The 36 others were charged with involvement in the organization of an unauthorised demonstration and taking part in an unarmed gathering in a public place liable to disturb public order, and freed awaiting trial. Dozens of demonstrators were beaten by the security forces during the break-up of the demonstration.

Leading members of the AMDH had informed the authorities about the demonstration, but received, the day before the event, a prohibition notice which made reference to "security reasons" but without specifying them. Some days before the demonstration, the AMDH had written to the Moroccan parliament asking it to set up an independent commission to shed light on the alleged participation of 16 senior Moroccan officials in the torture and "disappearance" of opposition activists during recent decades.

At a first session on 12 December the trial was postponed to 28 February 2001, before resuming again on 5 April. Amnesty International sent a delegate to observe the hearing of 28 February.

Recent months have seen other developments damaging to freedom of expression in Morocco. In March two journalists, Aboubakr Jamaï and Ali Amar, both of whom work for the Moroccan weekly *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, were sentenced in Casablanca to respectively three and two months in prison for defamation. The two journalists are free pending an appeal. In addition, more than 100 members and sympathizers of the banned Islamist association *al-'Adl wa'l-Ihsan* (Justice and Spirituality), including seven members of the family of the group's spiritual leader, Abdessalam Yassine, have been sentenced to prison terms in courts in several cities in Morocco following demonstrations which took place on 10 December 2000.

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