

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

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## Morocco royal pardon an encouraging step

Amnesty International has welcomed yesterday's pardon of prisoner of conscience Chekib El-Khiari, jailed in June 2009 for speaking out against corruption. The organization has further welcomed yesterday's bailing of three Sahrawi human rights activists, who had been detained since October 2009 but called on the charges against them to be dropped.

Amnesty International has expressed its hope that these releases would signal a relaxing of the "red lines" on criticism of the authorities and the question of Western Sahara which human rights activists have traditionally been forbidden to cross rather than a measure to pacify protesters calling for reform in Morocco and Western Sahara.

Chekib El-Khiari had been serving a three-year sentence, following his conviction on 24 June 2009 of undermining or insulting public institutions and violating a 1949 regulation on exchange control. Amnesty International considered the charges to be politically-motivated, and linked to his allegations that high-ranking Moroccan officials had been involved in a drug-trafficking ring.

The pardon of Chekib El-Khiari came as part of a wider amnesty that commuted or shortened the sentences of 190 prisoners: reportedly 96 were released; 52 had their sentences reduced; 37 had life sentences reduced to shorter terms; and five had death sentences commuted to life imprisonment (Morocco has a long-standing moratorium on executions). The pardons followed a memorandum submitted to King Mohamed by President and Secretary General of the new National Human Rights Council.

Also reportedly pardoned were five sentenced in connection with the terrorism-related "Belliraj Cell" case, which had been marred by procedural irregularities and unexamined claims of torture and other ill-treatment. Mustapha Mouatassim, Mohammed Marouani, Mohammed Amine Regala, Alaa Badella Maa-El Ainin and Abdelhafid Sriti have reportedly been released from Salé Prison.

On 14 April 2011 the Casablanca Court of First Instance bailed Sahrawi activists Ahmed Alnasiri, Brahim Dahane and Ali Salem Tamek, who had been detained since their arrest on 8 October 2009. The men, together with four other Sahrawi activists, are facing charges of threatening Morocco's "internal security" in connection with their peaceful and legitimate activities in support of the self-determination of Western Sahara.

Brahim Dahane told Amnesty International that he was disappointed that the charges against the Sahrawis had not been dropped, but thanked the organization for its support. He said "Amnesty had been a main source of legal protection and psycho-social and legal solidarity on a personal level at times when we were in a great need of such support... We would have been in far worse circumstances if Amnesty had not been there."

The Moroccan authorities have been under pressure to respond to demands for political and human rights reform, following continuing demonstrations since 20 February inspired by the events in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. On 3 March 2011 the authorities announced a new National Human Rights Council, which called for the release of Chekib El-Khiari. On 9 March

2011, King Mohamed announced a plan of constitutional reform, and the devolving of some his political power.

Amnesty International welcomes the announcement of human rights reforms and the positive interventions of the new National Human Rights Council on behalf of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners.

While welcoming the release on bail of Ahmed Alnasiri, Brahim Dahane and Ali Salem Tamek, all considered as prisoners of conscience, Amnesty International urges the Moroccan authorities to drop the charges against them, and to provide a further signal of their renewed commitment to human rights.

### **Background**

The seven Sahrawi activists had been arrested by the Moroccan security forces following their return from refugee camps run by the Polisario Front in Tindouf, south-west Algeria. Three of the activists, Yahdih Ettarouzi, Saleh Labihi and Rachid Sghir, were provisionally released in May 2010; another, Dakja Lashgar, was released on medical grounds in January 2010.

All seven Sahrawis are charged with undermining Morocco's internal security under Article 206 and 207 of the Moroccan Criminal Code. The charges were apparently based on the fact that an amount of the Algerian dinars had been confiscated from two of the defendants upon their arrival to Morocco.