

70/96

AI INDEX: MDE 29/07/96

EMBARGOED UNTIL 0001 HRS GMT 18 APRIL 1996

MOROCCO/WESTERN SAHARA: HUMAN RIGHTS IN WESTERN SAHARA MUST BE PUT HIGH ON MINURSO'S AGENDA.

Despite the presence of United Nation (UN) troops, serious human rights violations are still being committed by Moroccan security forces in Western Sahara, Amnesty International said in a report released today.

“People are being arrested for the peaceful expression of their views, detainees may be held for weeks or months incommunicado and torture continues to be reported,” the human rights organization said.

“Hundreds of Sahrawis who “disappeared” after arrest between 1975 and 1987 remain unaccounted for.”

Next month the UN will decide whether to renew the mandate for its Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), which has been present in Western Sahara since 1991. This follows an agreement reached between the UN (in corporation with the Organization of African Unity, OAU), Morocco and the Polisario Front (which calls for the independence of Western Sahara) on a settlement concerning the Western Sahara, which has been under Moroccan rule since 1975.

“We will be calling on the security council to ensure that human rights protection is put high on MINURSO' agenda,” Amnesty International said.

The improvements in the human rights situation in Morocco have not extended to Western Sahara. Prolonged secret detention, a practice now rarely reported in Morocco, continues to be routine in Western Sahara, where most of those arrested are never put through any legal process.

At the very time of the UN's presence to oversee preparation for a referendum to decide the future of Western Sahara, people have been arrested, tortured and imprisoned for participating in pro-independence demonstrations. Some of them remain in jail, serving sentences imposed by the Moroccan military court on charges of threatening the external security of the state.

“The mandate of MINURSO does not include comprehensive human rights provisions. There are limited human rights safeguards contained in MINURSO's mandate but they are not fully implemented and violations are not reported,” Amnesty International said.

More than 300 Sahrawi “disappeared” were released in 1991 from up to 16 years in secret detention centres where scores died in inhuman conditions. Amnesty International welcomed the releases, but remains concerned that to date no investigations have been carried out and those responsible continue to enjoy total impunity.

Hopes for further improvements in the human rights situation have not materialized. On the contrary, many of the “disappeared” released in 1991 have since been rearrested and again held in secret detention for weeks and months. Others live under strict surveillance and their rights to freedom of expression, association and movement are curtailed.

In Amnesty International’s report, which also addresses the organization’s concern at past human rights abuses committed by the Polisario authorities in the Sahrawi refugee camps in southern Algeria, Amnesty International is calling:

- on the Moroccan Government to take measures to put an end to human rights violations in Western Sahara, ensure that no one is imprisoned for their beliefs and that legal procedures are respected. The Moroccan Government should clarify the fate of the remaining “disappeared”, investigate “disappearances” and other past and current human rights violations, and bring those responsible to justice;
- on the United Nations to take urgent measures to ensure that the human rights safeguards contained in MINURSO’s mandate are respected, and to widen the mandate of MINURSO to include on-site monitoring of the human rights situation, and investigations and reporting of allegations of human rights violations;
- on the Polisario authorities to take the necessary measures to ensure that no one is arbitrarily detained, tortured or ill-treated, and that anyone suspected of having been responsible for past human rights abuses is removed from position of authority.

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