

PUBLIC

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EXTRA 137/99

Fear of torture and ill-treatment / Fear for safety

1 October

MOROCCO / WESTERN SAHARA Sahrawi students and other protesters

Amnesty International is very concerned for the safety of demonstrators, mainly students and predominantly Sahrawis, who have been detained in Laayoune, Western Sahara, in the past week. This follows reports that dozens of Sahrawis who have since been released were tortured and ill-treated in detention.

On 22 September 1999, security forces violently broke up a sit-in by Sahrawi students in Laayoune city centre who were demanding financial help from the government for, in particular, the long journeys they need to make to attend university. According to witnesses, dozens of students were severely beaten and several, including at least three women, were hospitalized with broken limbs and head injuries. Dozens more were reportedly arrested.

On 27 September, Sahrawis marched through the city centre to protest at the brutal manner in which the student sit-in had been dispersed and to call for those responsible to be brought to justice. Violent clashes ensued again leading to the arrest of around 100 people and to police, in some cases accompanied by civilians, reportedly attacking homes and businesses in predominantly Sahrawi areas of the city.

Many of those detained were released the next day after hundreds of Sahrawis took to the streets calling for their release.

On 17 September at least four people are reported to have been injured in the town of Tan Tan when a Sahrawi student demonstration was broken up by the security forces.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Western Sahara is the subject of a territorial dispute between Morocco, which annexed the territory in 1975, and the Polisario Front, which calls for an independent state there. In the Settlement Plan agreed to in 1988 by the Moroccan authorities and the Polisario Front and approved in 1991 by the UN Security Council, both parties agreed that a referendum in which the Sahrawi population would be asked to choose between independence and integration into Morocco would be organized and conducted by the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). The referendum, originally set for 1992, has been repeatedly postponed and is now scheduled for 2000.

In the past few years excessive force has often been used by the security forces in Western Sahara to break up demonstrations with those who have taken part often being placed in incommunicado detention, tortured or ill-treated. Reports of human rights violations are higher in Western Sahara than in Morocco. In addition, Sahrawi victims have more restricted access to complaint mechanisms than those in Morocco.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send telegrams/faxes/express/airmail letters in Arabic, French, English or your own language:

- expressing concern for the safety of Sahrawi students and other protesters in detention in Laayoune after reports that they have been tortured or ill-treated;
- expressing concern at the excessive force used by security forces in breaking up student demonstrations in Laayoune on 22 and 27 September 1999;

- urging the authorities to initiate a full, immediate and impartial investigation into reports of torture and ill-treatment of demonstrators by security forces and to ensure all those found guilty are brought to justice;
- asking that all those still detained are immediately released unless charged with a recognizably criminal offence.

APPEALS TO:

Minister of the Interior

M. Driss BASRI

Ministre de l'Intérieur

Ministère de l'Intérieur

Quartier Administratif

Rabat, Morocco

Telegrams: Interior Minister, Rabat, Morocco

Faxes: (+ 212 7) 76 20 56 / 76 64 89 / 76 68 61

Salutation: Excellence / Your Excellency

Minister of Justice

M. Omar AZZIMAN

Ministre de la Justice

Ministère de la Justice

Rue Beyroul

Rabat, Morocco

Salutation: Justice Minister, Rabat, Morocco

Faxes: (+ 212 7) 738 940 / 723 710

Salutation: Excellence / Your Excellency

COPIES TO:

President of the Consultative Council for Human Rights

M. Driss DAHAK

Président du Conseil Consultatif des Droits de l'Homme

Place des Chouhada, B.P. 1341

Rabat

Morocco

Faxes: + 212 7 726856

and to diplomatic representatives of MOROCCO/WESTERN SAHARA accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 29 October 1999.