

AI members only

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Dear Friends,

The last time many of us met together we were sitting round a table in Tel Aviv or Gaza. Now I am writing to you to update you all on the recent visit to **Morocco**. I know that this is a country of special interest to many of you, given the high profile of campaigning activities we have had in the past (Morocco was the subject of a country campaign in 1991), the fact that Morocco is currently a high priority for development and lastly because we shall be holding our next ICM in Rabat in August 1999. The mission was intended to achieve a number of objectives:

- we aimed to support our Moroccan members' efforts to promote human rights awareness and enhance their position as a key player in Moroccan civil society, particularly in the context of the campaign for the 50th anniversary of the UDHR.
- we aimed to raise our outstanding human rights concerns with the new government, and press for fast action to address them
- we aimed to prepare the way for AI's first ICM to be held in a Middle East/North African country

The delegation was composed of three members of the Middle East/North Africa Program: June, Donatella and Gershab, (Director, Researcher and Development Coordinator) and two members of the Swiss Section, Daniel Bolomey who agreed to be our Press Attache and Nicole Blanchoud as my assistant for the mission. We were particularly pleased to have them as part of our team given their skills and experience, as well as the Swiss Section's on-going support for development in Morocco. Of course our delegation included representatives of the Moroccan membership, and we were pleased to have the Secretary General Mohamed Sektaoui with us for most of our meetings with officials and representatives of civil society.

I am not going to give you a daily account of our mission - this would take too long, and this letter is not intended as a formal mission report but rather to share with you some of my impressions, and these are both vivid and varied. Morocco is a country which has witnessed years of gross human rights violations. Who can forget the terrible stories that emerged from

secret detention centres such as Tazmamert after decades of silence and official denials? In recent years there have been changes: hundreds of prisoners of conscience and political prisoners have been released, there have been important legislative changes to increase human rights safeguards, nearly 200 death sentences were commuted and hundreds of “disappeared” were released. As I learned in the course of this mission, many feel strongly that, in tandem with the internal pressure for change, Amnesty International’s energetic international campaigning was instrumental in bringing about these key changes.

In March this year the new Prime Minister, Abderrahman el-Youssoufi, formed his new government and announced a programme that gave a strong emphasis to human rights protection and promotion. The Prime Minister is no stranger to Amnesty International. Arrested in the 1960s and sentenced to death, he was adopted as a prisoner of conscience. As Deputy Secretary General of the Arab Lawyers’ Union, in the years he lived in exile, he attended many ICMs and was our guest of honour at the 1981 ICM in Montreal. He and other members of his government welcomed AI’s decision to hold the next ICM in Rabat and gave assurances of their cooperation to ensure the ICM would be a success. For example, we have assurances that visas for AI members from all countries will be granted, and that we shall be able to conduct our ICM business in accordance with our usual requirements.

We discussed with him and with members of his cabinet (Ministers of Interior, Justice and Human Rights) as well as with *the Conseil Consultatif des droits de l’homme* our outstanding human rights concerns, handing over a memorandum and recommendations. We called for the release of all remaining “disappeared” (including hundreds of Sahrawis) and prisoners of conscience; we urged that families be informed without further delay of the fate of their loved ones. We asked that the mortal remains of those who died in detention be returned for burial, that the former victims or their families receive compensation, and that the victims be rehabilitated and reintegrated into normal life, including being given medical treatment and the right to employment. We said that the page cannot be turned unless Morocco comes to terms with and addresses the violations of the past, and puts an end to the climate of impunity. We had an additional concern: that our membership in Morocco should be given the proper legal registration to enable them to carry out their work without hindrance. We welcomed the government’s human rights proposals and concrete judicial reforms but we called for swift action now to go further in building a safer society, and to compensate for the human rights violations of the past.

As I wrote the word “disappearance” the faces of former “disappeared” came immediately to my mind. We met them on the first day of the mission: to listen to their testimony, and to consult with them, and they remained present with us through many of the week’s activities. We also met relatives of those who remain “disappeared” - including the extraordinarily courageous and articulate 12-year-old young woman who had never known her uncle, trade unionist Houcine el Manouzi who “disappeared” 30 years ago. All wanted - and were given - our assurances that they would not be forgotten by our movement. We have given our commitment that we shall continue to fight on their behalf.

To demonstrate that commitment we invited five former prisoners, “disappeared” or their relatives to participate in our press conference held at the Journalists’ Syndicate headquarters in Rabat. On that day, scores of journalists crammed into the conference. We were hosted by Younis Moujahed, the President of the Journalists’ Syndicate, who, as a former adopted prisoner, gave his personal message of thanks to our movement. We talked about progress, about the government’s human rights commitments and our hopes for the future, we talked about our

development plans and the ICM. I gave a clear message: The outstanding concerns MUST be addressed - without this the page cannot be turned.

When the moment came for our concerns to be presented by those closest to the situation: the former victims or their relatives, there was total silence in the room. Some of the journalists present were themselves former prisoners, others worked for newspapers of human rights ngos. For most of those present the testimony we heard was years' old and not "news". But no one could fail to be moved - and most were moved to tears - by the simple, personal testimony our friends presented. Each paid solemn tribute to our movement's work, and each signed the UDHR book to renew their personal commitment to its provisions.

Throughout my stay in Morocco I found myself constantly with former prisoners on whose behalf we had worked: inevitably among the human rights activists working with ngos like the OMDH (*Organisation marocaine des droits de l'homme*) and the AMDH, (*Association marocaine des droits de l'homme*) among journalists, our own members, among all sectors of civil society and in government ministries: Amnesty International is widely and genuinely understood and respected.

I must pay tribute here to our own members in Morocco who worked tirelessly to make our visit a success. Mohamed Sektaoui, the Secretary General, Abderrahman Bourhim, the treasurer, Saleh Abdellaoui and Touriya Boueheid, the Director and Secretary of the Rabat office, were working 24 hours a day with seemingly limitless energy and charm. But there were many other dynamic members who, during, our visit, helped to organize the official inauguration of our office in Rabat, a two day conference on conditions of employment for women and children in Sale, a week long festival of cinema and human rights in Casablanca (and where the famous Egyptian actor, Nour el-Sherif signed the UDHR book), a round table discussion with women's organizations, talks with students at Faculty of Law at Rabat University and with youth representatives in Casablanca - and so on. And what was consistently impressed upon me was that AI Morocco has forged its own identity and is respected among civil society and the ngo community in Morocco on its own merits. My own experience of talking and working with these members confirmed for me that Morocco was the right choice for a high priority country for development and the right choice for our next ICM.

The next months are crucial. We are encouraged by what we have seen, and I believe the government has demonstrated that there IS the political will to bring about the change, but there is also some resistance to the movement for change, and we need to be vigilant. The government and the people of Morocco know that we are monitoring the situation closely and we have made our position very clear.

It is our hope that the ICM will give a further boost to the move for positive change and to the contribution of our AI Morocco friends' activities in effecting that change.

With my best wishes to you all

Pierre Sane

Secretary General