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Morocco: Crackdown on freedom of expression

"The beating by the security forces of dozens of people over the weekend and the arrest of dozens more during demonstrations organized by human rights activists and political associations represent a serious affront to freedom of expression in Morocco," Amnesty International said today.

These beatings and arrests come at a time when the world is celebrating the 52nd anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

"The Moroccan authorities were publicly calling on all sectors of society to work towards an improvement of the human rights situation in the country," Amnesty International said. "The authorities need to match words with actions."

On 9 December dozens of demonstrators were beaten with batons by security force personnel as they gathered in front of the parliament building in Rabat to renew a call for an end to impunity in the country. Among those beaten were Moroccan and Sahrawi human rights activists, victims and families of victims of human rights violations committed during past decades, and journalists covering the event. Two demonstrators were taken to hospital, one with a fractured nose.

The demonstration had been organized by the Association marocaine des droits humains (AMDH), Moroccan Association of Human Rights, to demand the formation of an independent commission to investigate human rights violations committed over the past decades and to bring to justice those responsible.

Thirty-nine protesters, including the AMDH's President Abderrahmane Benameur and Vice-President Amine Abdelhamid, along with members 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), were arrested on the same day and taken into custody for questioning by the police. Six were released the following day without charge. The rest were charged with organizing an illegal demonstration and participating in a gathering liable to disturb the public order and released awaiting trial. At the first hearing today their trial was postponed until February 2001.

Earlier this week, the AMDH had written to parliament, urging it to set up an independent body to shed light on the alleged involvement of 16 senior Moroccan officials in the torture and "disappearance" of opposition activists during the last few decades. Most of the officials named by the AMDH are now retired.

On 10 December the security forces arrested hundreds of members and supporters of the banned Islamist association al-'Adl wa'l-Ihsan (Justice and Charity) as they violently dispersed

demonstrations organized by the association in Rabat, Casablanca and at least five other major Moroccan cities. Most of those arrested were released the same day after questioning, but dozens were still being held in custody in various parts of the country on Monday.

Some 18 of those arrested in Rabat were detained until Monday afternoon, when they were released pending an appearance before the courts tomorrow. Among them were four family members of the group's spiritual leader, Abdessalam Yassine, who was released in May after over 10 years of administratively imposed house arrest. The four included the association's spokesperson, Nadia Yassine, Abdessalam Yassine's daughter.

Scores more demonstrators were beaten by the security forces as the protests were dispersed in Rabat, Casablanca and the other cities. Some were reportedly taken to hospital suffering from fractures. The gatherings marked the anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and demanded the legalization of al-'Adl wa'l-Ihsan and the lifting of the ban on its publications.

In an earlier development, on 2 December the authorities banned three weekly newspapers - Le Journal, As-Sahifa and Demain - following a story alleging the implication of the political left in a bid to kill the late King Hassan II. The decision followed the appearance in Le Journal of 25 November of a letter attributed to former opposition leader Mohamed Basri, implicating socialist politicians in a foiled 1972 coup attempt.

"The anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is to be celebrated and not violated by denying people their fundamental human rights," Amnesty International said.

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