

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **Morocco/Western Sahara: Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders face obstacles while European Parliament delegation visits Morocco and Western Sahara**

Amnesty International welcomes that after a delay of over three years a European Parliament ad hoc delegation on Western Sahara was able to conduct a “fact-finding mission” to Morocco and Western Sahara between the 25 and the 29 of January. While Amnesty International is satisfied that the delegation was able to meet Moroccan officials as well as members of human rights organizations in Morocco and Western Sahara, the organization remains concerned about reports that a number of Sahrawi human rights defenders faced harassment in the context of the visit. Amnesty International calls on the Moroccan authorities to uphold the rights to freedom of expression, assembly and association in Morocco and Western Sahara and to allow Sahrawi human rights defenders to collect and disseminate information and views about human rights without fear of reprisals.

The visit by the ad hoc delegation was reportedly characterized by a heavy security presence of law enforcement officers in official and civilian dress around Laayoune and particularly around Hotel Parador where the delegation was staying. Reports also indicate that a number of homes of human rights defenders in Laayoune were surrounded by security officials during the visit and that some human rights defenders were delayed and verbally harassed at security checks.

Amnesty International received reports that four human rights defenders were stopped by law enforcement officers in civilian clothes on 27 January about 500 meters from Hotel Parador where the delegation was holding its meetings. Rachid Sgheir and Ahmed Moussa, both members of the Committee against Torture in Dakhla, were reportedly prevented from entering the hotel. Their two companions, the Secretary General of the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations Committed by the Moroccan State (ASVDH), and Mahjoub Oulad Cheikh, a member of the Committee against Torture in Dakhla, were allowed to proceed to the scheduled meeting. Mahjoub Oulad Cheikh reported being hit on his legs during the security check. Reports also indicate that Ahmed Moussa was arrested by the security officials and detained until the night of the 27 of January. During the incident, a number of items such as two mobile telephones, reports and other documents as well as one USB stick were reportedly confiscated by the security officials, and have not been returned to date.

Amnesty International also received reports that on 26 January, Ali Salem Al-Tamek, member of the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders (CODESA) and former prisoner of conscience, was stopped at a road block between Tan Tan and Laayoune for three hours before being allowed to proceed to the scheduled meeting between members of CODESA and the European Parliament ad hoc delegation.

On a number of occasions, Amnesty International has raised its concerns with the Moroccan authorities regarding various obstacles that members of Sahrawi human rights groups continue to face because of their work to document past and present human rights abuses and their public expression of their views on the right to self-determination for the people of Western Sahara. Of

particular concern is that Sahrawi human rights groups are severely hampered in their work as they are unable to obtain legal registration due to politically-motivated administrative obstacles. The local authorities in Laayoune have repeatedly refused to acknowledge receipt of the ASVDH registration file, despite administrative courts' rulings in their favour. In a similar vein, CODESA was unable to hold its founding congress on 7 October 2007 because the local authorities refused to acknowledge their request for authorisation of a public meeting. When Amnesty International raised this issue, the authorities in Laayoune contended that the statute of CODESA made clear that it was a "separatist" organization, in reference to the views on the right to self-determination of its members.

Amnesty International repeats its calls on the Moroccan authorities to comply by their obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Morocco is a state party, by respecting freedom of association, expression and assembly.

### **Background**

Since the European Parliament ad hoc delegation first decided to conduct a fact finding mission to the region in late 2005, the mission was postponed a number of times due to the Moroccan authorities' objection to the composition of the delegation. The mission was finally rescheduled for November 2008, only to be postponed again reportedly because the ad hoc delegation was notified very late on the content of the programme by the Moroccan authorities. Upon the termination of the mission which took place between the 25 and the 29 of January, the Chairman of the ad hoc delegation on Western Sahara, Ioannis Kasoulides, expressed satisfaction at being able to meet a variety of stakeholders including Moroccan officials, the Human Rights Advisory Council and a wide range of human rights organizations in Morocco and Western Sahara.