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Morocco/Western Sahara: Sahrawis prevented from travelling and punished for their stance

Amnesty International is concerned by reports that Moroccan security officials forcibly removed six young Sahrawis from Agadir's Al Massira airport on 6 August 2009 and then assaulted them, after refusing them permission to travel to the United Kingdom (UK) on 5 August.

The organization is calling on the authorities to launch an immediate investigation into the beatings and forced removal of the six, who include three young women, and to explain why they were refused permission to travel to the UK to participate in a programme intended to foster reconciliation between young people from different backgrounds.

The six are reported to have been assaulted by officials at three different locations - outside Agadir's Al Massira airport, at a border police station near Laayoune, and again at the Laayoune home of one of the six.

Amnesty International wrote to Interior Minister Chakib Benmoussa on 6 August to express concern that the six Sahrawis from Western Sahara and another group of young people from Morocco had both been prevented from travelling for what appear to be politically-motivated reasons. In its letter, Amnesty International drew attention to Morocco's obligation, under Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to respect the right of individuals to leave a country, including their own, and called on the government to lift the ban and allow the two groups to travel to the UK immediately and without further impediment.

The six Sahrawi – named as Mimouna Amidan, Mohamed Da'noun, Nguia ElHaouasi, Mohamed Fadel El'asri, Choummad Razouk and Hayat Rguibi, whose ages range between 17 and 24 years - are reported to have been forcibly removed from Al Massira airport shortly after 5 pm on 6 August. They were scheduled to travel to London on 5 August to take part in the *Youths Talk Together about Western Sahara*, a programme organized by Talk Together, a UK-based non-profit initiative. The programme aimed to bring together young people from Morocco and Western Sahara, the Tindouf camps in Algeria, Norway and the UK for a period of two weeks (5-19 August 2009) to discuss issues affecting their daily lives and political concerns.

The six young Sahrawis were scheduled to take Royal Air Maroc flight AT422 from Agadir to Casablanca at 11:30 am on 5 August in order to travel on to London later that afternoon. However, when they arrived at the departures hall of Agadir Al Massira airport, they were informed by plain-clothed security officials that they were

not permitted to travel. The officials did not disclose the reason or legal basis for this prohibition, stating simply that they were acting “under instructions from above”, but castigated the students as “separatists and members of the Polisario”. The six students were all in possession of valid travel documents and visas for the UK.

The six Sahrawis remained at the airport and went on hunger strike to protest the authorities’ action but after about 30 hours were forcibly removed by a combined force of security officials said to have included members of the police, the Royal Gendarmerie and the Auxiliary Forces. After being escorted from the airport, the students were beaten, had their belongings including their mobile phones temporarily confiscated, and were forced into a vehicle and driven to Laayoune, about 350 kilometres south of Agadir. The vehicle was reportedly accompanied by cars containing members of the Royale Gendarmerie. On the way, the six were taken to a border police station and questioned, including about the *Youths Talk Together about Western Sahara* programme and their contacts with international organizations, and are said to have been beaten and insulted. They were then beaten again by security officials when they arrived at the home of Mimouna Amidan at about 3:30 am on 7 August, where they were greeted by family members who carried flags of the Polisario Front and chanted slogans in favour of the independence of Western Sahara. Some of their relatives are also reported to have been assaulted. Mohamed Fadel El’asri and others sustained minor injuries as a result and security officials are now reported to be staking out the home of Mimouna Amidan.

Background

Seven young Moroccans and their group leader, who were due to attend the same programme in the UK, were prevented by Moroccan security authorities from taking the August 5 Air Arabia flight 30491 from Casablanca to Stansted, UK, also without being informed of the reason or legal grounds for the authorities’ action.

Amnesty International is concerned that the Moroccan authorities’ refusal to allow these two groups of young people from travelling abroad to take part in the *Youths Talk Together about Western Sahara* programme is part of a wider pattern of curbs imposed by the Moroccan authorities on the legitimate exercise of freedom of expression concerning issues that they deem politically-sensitive, such as the role and status of the monarchy, national security and the status of Western Sahara. Human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers and others continue to face intimidation and even prosecution when they transcend certain “red lines”, which include expressing views in favour of the independence of Western Sahara. On numerous occasions, Amnesty International has called on the Moroccan authorities to uphold their obligations under Article 9 of the Moroccan Constitution and Article 19 of ICCPR, which guarantee the right to freedom of expression.