

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: MDE 29/009/2005 (Public)

News Service No: 318

28 November 2005

Embargo Date: 28 November 2005 00:01 GMT

Morocco/Western Sahara: Human rights defenders on trial

Amnesty International announced today that it is sending a delegate to observe the trial this week of seven human rights defenders from Western Sahara who the organization believes may be prisoners of conscience. They are standing trial together with seven other accused who are being prosecuted for participating in demonstrations against Moroccan rule.

Tunisian lawyer Samir Ben Amor will be representing Amnesty International at the trial proceedings, which are due to begin at the Court of Appeal in Laayoune on 30 November 2005. He is an experienced human rights advocate who previously was Amnesty International's observer at the October 2003 trial of Algerian human rights activist Salaheddine Sidhoum in Algiers.

Currently detained in Laayoune Civil Prison, the seven human rights defenders – Aminatou Haidar, Ali-Salem Tamek, Mohamed El-Moutaouakil, Houssein Lidri, Brahim Noumria, Larbi Messaoud and H'mad Hammad – were arrested between June and August 2005. They face charges of participating in and inciting violent protest activities and belonging to an unauthorized association, charges which they deny. Two of them allege that they were tortured during questioning.

Amnesty International is concerned that the seven and an eighth activist, Brahim Dahane, appear to have been targeted because of their leading roles as human rights defenders, as well as their public advocacy of self-determination for the people of Western Sahara. Most recently, all eight have been instrumental in collecting and disseminating information about human rights violations committed by Moroccan forces against Sahrawi protesters in the context of demonstrations in Laayoune and other towns and cities in Morocco and Western Sahara since May 2005.

Brahim Dahane, who was arrested on 30 October 2005, is also facing charges related to his human rights activities but his case remains under judicial investigation and he is expected to be brought to trial separately. Amnesty International believes he too may be a prisoner of conscience.

Amnesty International's concerns and recommendations regarding these cases are the focus of a newly released report *Morocco/Western Sahara: Sahrawi human rights defenders under attack* (AI Index: MDE 29/008/2005), which can be consulted on Amnesty International's website at the following address: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE290082005>

The report also details cases of other Sahrawi human rights defenders who have been subject to harassment and intimidation by Moroccan security forces in recent months and allegations of human rights violations against demonstrators, including the death in suspicious circumstances of a protester in

October 2005.

Background

Human rights activists in Western Sahara have repeatedly been targeted for their human rights work in recent years. Some have been prevented from travelling abroad to report on human rights violations, while others have been arbitrarily imprisoned.

Since May 2005, the territory of Western Sahara, particularly the town of Laayoune, has been rocked by a series of demonstrations. In many of them, demonstrators have expressed their support for the Polisario Front, which calls for an independent state in the territory and has set up a self-proclaimed government-in-exile in refugee camps in south-western Algeria, or called for independence from Morocco. These views are anathema to the Moroccan authorities, who have responded in a heavy-handed manner to the protests, exacerbating tensions.

Western Sahara is the subject of a territorial dispute between Morocco, which controversially annexed the territory in 1975 and claims sovereignty there, and the Polisario Front. Both parties have agreed that a referendum on the future status of Western Sahara should be organized under UN auspices, but this has been repeatedly postponed and is yet to be held.