

8 November 2001

AI Index MDE 29/010/2001 - News Service Nr. 197

Morocco/Western Sahara: Release of 56 political prisoners is positive step

The Moroccan authorities took the important step yesterday evening of releasing 56 political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, following a royal pardon earlier in the day.

"The release of the prisoners is a positive move," Amnesty International said today. "We urge the Moroccan authorities to take the next step in addressing, as a matter of urgency, the outstanding cases of political prisoners still detained after conviction in unfair trials in previous years."

Among those released yesterday evening was the longest-serving prisoner of conscience in Morocco, Mohamed Daddach, a Sahrawi who was arrested in 1979 and was serving a life sentence for having tried to desert from the Moroccan security forces into which he had reportedly been forcibly enlisted.

Three Sahrawi prisoners of conscience sentenced following a trial in 2000 to four years' imprisonment also benefited from the royal pardon. Brahim Laghzal, Cheikh Khaya and Laarbi Massoudi had been convicted solely for the peaceful expression of their political beliefs. They were charged with "threatening state security" in connection with alleged links with the Polisario Front, a movement which calls for an independent state in Western Sahara (see background). Salek Bahahaould Mahmoud, who was sentenced to four years' imprisonment on a similar charge in a separate trial in 2000, was also released.

The other releases concerned people who had been imprisoned in a number of trials since 1999 in connection with demonstrations in the cities of Laayoune and Marrakech. These included protesters arrested and imprisoned following demonstrations in Laayoune in September 1999 which were violently suppressed by the security forces. Their sentencing to prison terms of up to 15 years for, among other things, destruction of property and looting followed unfair trials. Allegations that dozens of the protesters had been tortured in detention were not investigated by the courts during the trials.

Amnesty International urges the Moroccan authorities to take further steps to resolve the outstanding cases of political prisoners in the country. In particular, the organization calls on the authorities to immediately and unconditionally release prisoner of conscience Mustapha Adib, a Moroccan Air Force captain who is currently serving a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence detained for the non-violent expression of his beliefs on charges of indiscipline and dishonouring the army following an unfair trial in 2000. The trial followed the publication of an article in a French newspaper which quoted him as denouncing corruption in the Moroccan armed forces.

Some 30 political prisoners sentenced after unfair trials since the 1970s should also be released unless they are immediately retried in full compliance with international standards for fair trial.

Amnesty International urges the Moroccan government to ensure that its ongoing revision of existing legislation culminates in changes in domestic law which guarantee compliance with the country's obligations under international human rights treaties. In particular, all provisions that permit the imprisonment of prisoners of conscience must be removed and further safeguards for fair trials introduced.

Background

Western Sahara is the subject of a territorial dispute between Morocco, which annexed the territory in 1975 and claims sovereignty there, and the *Frente Popular para la Liberacion de Saguia el-Hamra y Rio de Oro*, Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro (known as the Polisario Front), which calls for an independent state in the territory.

A UN Settlement Plan was agreed to in 1988 by both the Moroccan authorities and the Polisario Front and was approved by the UN Security Council in 1991. After more than a decade of conflict both parties agreed that a referendum in which the Sahrawi population would be asked to choose between independence and integration into Morocco would be organized and conducted by the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). The referendum was originally set for 1992, but has been repeatedly postponed.

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