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Morocco/Western Sahara: Expulsion of human rights defender reflects growing intolerance

Amnesty International deplores the decision of the Moroccan authorities to expel human rights defender Aminatou Haidar from Western Sahara on 14 November, and urges the authorities to immediately allow her to return to her home in Laayoune. Amnesty International is concerned that she is being targeted because of her human rights work and her public stance in support of self-determination for the people of Western Sahara.

Aminatou Haidar, President of the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders, was intercepted by security officials when she arrived at Laayoune airport on 13 November 2009 after a month long trip abroad during which she received a prestigious human rights award in the USA. Officials took exception to her stating on her landing card that her home is in Western Sahara, rather than "Moroccan Sahara", and she was taken aside and questioned in the presence of the General Crown Prosecutor of Laayoune by a group of some 15 judicial police and security officials. She was questioned about her political beliefs and human rights activities, what she had done during her travel abroad and who had paid for her travel, and about medical treatment she had received in Spain. After some hours, while still held at the airport, she was confronted with one of her relatives and other Sahrawi people who sought to dissuade her from continuing to advocate self-determination for the people of Western Sahara; after she declined to do so, she was asked to sign a police statement and her passport and identification documents, issued by the Moroccan authorities, were confiscated. Next morning, officials said they would release her if she were to publicly acknowledge Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. She refused to do so and then several hours later, security officials put her on a flight to Lanzarote in the Canary Islands and expelled her from Western Sahara. During the almost 24 hours that she had been detained at Laayoune airport, she was allowed to make only one brief telephone call to her family, to request that they bring her food, and warned not to disclose details of her situation.

Since her arrival at Lanzarote, Aminatou Haidar has remained at the airport demanding to be allowed to return to Laayoune and has been on a hunger strike since 15 November in protest at her forcible expulsion. At night, she sleeps in an ambulance provided by the Red Cross and there are growing concerns for her health; she suffers from anaemia and has an ulcer.

On 14 November, Morocco's official new agency said that Aminatou Haidar had left to the Canary Islands after refusing to complete standard airport police procedures and had "renounced" her Moroccan nationality and "reconfirmed" her support of "separatists". The following day, Morocco's Minister of Foreign Affairs repeated allegations that Aminatou Haidar has "renounced her Moroccan citizenship". Aminatou Haidar, who travels frequently, says that she has regularly since 2006 completed airport landing cards in the same manner, without identifying herself as a Moroccan national and stating her address to be in Western Sahara.

The expulsion of Aminatou Haidar, who received the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award in 2008, is the latest of a series of measures taken by the Moroccan authorities against Sahrawi human rights defenders and advocates of self-determination for the people of Western Sahara. In October 2009, the Moroccan authorities confiscated the travel documents of six Sahrawi activists - Sidi Mohamed Daddach, Ahmed Sbai, Laarbi Massoud, Atig Brai, Ibrahim

Ismaili and Sultana Khaya - to prevent them from travelling to Mauritania and Spain. On 6 November, in a speech marking the anniversary of the “Green March”, when Morocco took possession of the former Spanish territory of Western Sahara in 1975, King Mohamed VI said that challenges to Morocco's “territorial integrity” - a reference to Western Sahara's incorporation - will not be tolerated. “It is not possible to enjoy citizenship rights and to renounce them at the same time as plotting with enemies of the homeland”, the King warned, suggesting that Sahrawis who advocate self-determination may be stripped of their Moroccan citizenship for expressing their opinions.

Amnesty International is urging the Moroccan authorities to comply with their international obligations under Article 12.4 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). This stipulates that “no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of the right to enter his own country”. Aminatou Haidar must be permitted to return to Laayoune immediately and unconditionally, and the Moroccan authorities should return her travel and identification documents without delay and also return the travel and identification documents confiscated from six other Sahrawi activists in October, and respect their right to freedom of movement.

Background

For many years, Aminatou Haidar has played a leading role in a number of campaigns organized for the release of Sahrawi prisoners of conscience and political prisoners, and in raising local and international awareness about human rights violations in Western Sahara. She is a former victim of enforced disappearance who was held without charge or trial in secret detention centres from 1987 to 1991. In 2005, she was sentenced to seven months in prison after an unfair trial, on charges arising from her alleged involvement in protests in Western Sahara. Before her arrest, she required hospital treatment for injuries she sustained when she was assaulted by members of security forces while she was on her way to join a demonstration in Laayoune.

Amnesty International deplores the Moroccan authorities' failure to respect Sahrawis' freedom of expression and the right of Sahrawi human rights defenders to collect and disseminate information and views on human rights issues without fear of harassment. The Moroccan authorities appear to be adopting an increasingly repressive approach to the exercise of these rights by Sahrawis, in breach of their obligations under international human rights treaties, notably the ICCPR, and the UN Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998.

For more information on the recent deterioration of the human rights situation in Morocco/Western Sahara, please see:

Morocco/Western Sahara: Eight new prisoners of conscience in October (MDE 29/ 011/2009), 6 November 2009.

Found at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE29/011/2009/en>

Morocco/Western Sahara: Sahrawi activists targeted for Tindouf visit (MDE 29/010/2009), 13 October 2009.

Found at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE29/010/2009/en>