

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: MDE 29/004/2002 (Public)
News Service No: 186
23 October 2002

Embargo Date: 23 October 2002 00:01 GMT

Morocco/Western Sahara: Free prisoner of conscience Ali-Salem Tamek

On the eve of the conclusion of his appeal trial, Amnesty International today called for the immediate and unconditional release of prisoner of conscience Ali-Salem Tamek, a human rights activist imprisoned for his views in favour of independence for the disputed territory of Western Sahara.

The trial of 29-year-old Ali-Salem Tamek comes at a time when an alarming number of Sahrawi (Western Saharan) civil society activists, many of whom are perceived to have pro-independence tendencies, are being persecuted by the Moroccan authorities.

"While significant steps have been taken to push back the boundaries of freedom of expression in recent years, the persecution of peaceful opponents of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara remains a serious blemish on their human rights record," Amnesty International said today.

Ali-Salem Tamek is a prominent activist in the Western Sahara branch of the Forum for Truth and Justice -- an association set up in 1999 to campaign for the rights of victims and families of victims of torture, "disappearances" and other human rights violations. He was sentenced on 10 September 2002 to two years' imprisonment and a fine of 10,000 Moroccan dirhams (about US \$1,000) for "undermining the internal security of the state".

Tamek's conviction was based on two elements. The first was his stated belief that Western Sahara should be an independent state. The second was a statement made by three former Sahrawi prisoners of conscience during questioning by Moroccan security forces in 1999 that Tamek received funds from the Polisario Front, the pro-independence movement based in neighbouring Algeria. Tamek has denied the accusation.

The three former prisoners, who were sentenced on similar charges in 2000 to four years' imprisonment, but released in November 2001 following a royal pardon, have alleged that the statement was extracted from them under torture. Their allegations have never been investigated.

Tens of other Sahrawi civil society activists have been the subject of harassment and intimidation by the Moroccan authorities in recent months. Many have been members of the Western Sahara branch of the Forum for Truth and Justice.

Some have been arrested, remanded into custody and brought to trial on apparently politically motivated charges. Others have been arrested and released after being questioned about their alleged support of the Polisario Front. Several are reportedly denied a passport.

Two members of the Western Sahara branch of the Forum for Truth and Justice, Abdessalam Dimaoui and Ahmed Nasiri, were reportedly beaten in police custody during the summer in an attempt to force them to sign police statements admitting they had instigated violence at an anti-government protest last year. Both denied the charge. Dimaoui was acquitted after nearly two months' detention. Nasiri is still awaiting the outcome of his trial.

In September 2002 five members of the Sahara Unemployed Association, which believes Sahrawis are discriminated against in the Western Sahara job market, were sentenced to up to one year in prison on public order charges after participating in a demonstration on the right to work. All were convicted on the basis of police statements which they refused to sign.

Background

Western Sahara is the subject of a territorial dispute between Morocco, which annexed the territory in 1975 and claims sovereignty there, and 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 southwestern Algeria.

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.

Public Document

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