

Morocco/Western Sahara: The Grueling Experience of a Sahrawi HRD

“Several grave human rights violations have occurred since the seventies, but unfortunately, because of censorship (information blackout) the world did not hear about them.”

Ali Salem Tamek in an interview with Amnesty International

The human right situation in Western Sahara continues to cause serious concern. Human right defenders (HRD) in this region suffer human rights violations at the hands of the Moroccan authorities. Ali Salem Tamek is a human right defender in Western Sahara and a member of the Sahrawi Human Right Defenders Grouping (SHRDG) and has met with Amnesty International (AI) during his latest European tour last month.

The Moroccan authorities have arrested Ali Salem Tamek more than once. According to him, AI has contributed to his release twice.

“In 1992, I was detained, put on trial and sentenced to five years in prison. I spent almost one year over there. In 1996, I was detained for two months. In November 1997, I was also detained for two months then released. In 1998, I was detained and received a two months suspended sentence, because of my trade union activities.” He added “Then I had my fourth detention. This time AI has contributed to my release on 07 January 2004. I was detained for the fifth time after I returned from a European tour on 18 July 2005. After that AI helped freeing me again.”

Ali Salem Tamek stated as well that he had been forcibly displaced when he was a student in 1992, because he was the representative of the student movement. He was also unfairly dismissed from his job, adding that because he refused to comply with the decision of displacement, he was sacked from his job, and after being released from detention, he was forbidden from entering the Western Sahara province on 24 July 2007.

In 2003, he alleged that the Moroccan secret service tried to enlist his wife to spy on him and on his friends. When she refused, she was abducted near the jail, along with his daughter, and raped.

In his interview with AI, Ali Salem Tamek gave a brief description of human rights violations in Western Sahara. In addition, he pointed out that grave human rights violations took place in the seventies of the last century, such as political detentions, unfair trials and forcible displacement from Western Sahara to Morocco.

“A wave of indiscriminate kidnapping has occurred as well in which 357 male and female hostages of various ages spent around 16 years at secret detention

centres like Magouna fortress, Akdess and al-Bississimi centre (Headquarters for the rapid deployment force) in the Laayoun town in Western Sahara.”

He said that in the nineties, because of the changes in the international organizations, as well as the increased influence of the international human rights movement and the huge number of the victims of grave human rights violations, there were signs that a rights movement was emerging.

Tamek added “Moroccan people coexist peacefully along side the Sahrawis in Western Sahara, not only that but they work together in trade unions, human rights, and political organizations in the Moroccan civil society. For almost thirty years, no violence of any kind has erupted”.

Tamek explained that the human rights committees he works with has been filing complaints with the Moroccan justice system, “Unfortunately, such complaints are never investigated and are filed away as has happened in some cases of human rights defenders in Western Sahara”.

Moreover, he addressed the situation of the Sahrawi prisoners who have been detained in police stations from one to four days where they “are tortured, and then are either forced to sign a written statement. Later on they were either brought to court, or released and dropped several kilometers away from the town. These incidents have happened recently”.

As far as political prisoners are concerned, the group consisting of 8 human rights defenders has been freed in two batches: the first batch on 25 March 2006 and the second batch on 22 April 2006. But now another group has been arrested and dispersed among a number of Moroccan prisons such as Likhil prison (black prison in the local dialect and formally known as Laayoun Central Prison) in Western Sahara, Tisneet and Anzikan prisons, and the central prison in al-Qunaitarah”.

Commenting on AI’s role and campaigns for HRDs in Western Sahara, Tamek said:

“Whether through letters sent by its global membership, appeals or country reports, AI represents a principal factor and brings considerable pressure to bear on western countries for the release of political prisoners”. He added that AI since the seventies has followed closely the file of grave human rights violations in Western Sahara. It took the credit, as the Sahrawi human rights activists in Western Sahara together with HRDs firmly believe, in redressing part of the injustice that has been inflicted upon the Sahrawi HRDs by the Moroccan state. Consequently, AI has contributed to highlighting this situation and putting it in its legal and historical perspective. He added: “I believe AI should continue with its campaigns vigorously, because this will substantially contribute to reducing such grave violations”.

Then he referred to the harassment that his family had suffered when he was detained on July 18, 2005 for 10 days in prison together with five other HRD. After that, the Casa Blanca national judicial police unit took them away. In his description of the circumstances they faced, he said: "We were kidnapped in a humiliating fashion, with no food, no drink, blindfolded and handcuffed, as for the rest of my colleagues (inmates), they were transferred to Okasha prison in Casa Blanca. Three days later, on 03 August 2005, the Moroccan authorities decided to admit me to a mental hospital. Many journalists wrote about such decision.

Tamek added that as a result of going on 22 hunger strikes, he had to stay in his wheel chair, and suffered chronic illnesses.

"The other issue is that the number of strikes which I went on during various stages of my detention amounted to 22 hunger strikes. As you may know, in one of my hunger strikes that lasted 52 days, I was the spokesperson of the group defending the rights of political prisoners."

In response to a question about the problems and difficulties endured by his family, he said:

"In fact, it is difficult to withstand certain practices that hurt you deep inside, like the crime of rape that my wife has suffered. I will be exaggerating if I say that I managed to cope with it. This incident is engraved in my memory. I was shocked when I learned about it. When I recount the details of this problem, I have difficulty carrying on. Despite this I have convinced myself over time that what happened to my wife happens to hundreds of Sahrawi women in Western Sahara, and applies to hundreds of women HRDs, or women who are related to HRDs all over the world".