

URGENT ACTION

ALLOW HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER TO RETURN HOME

The Moroccan authorities confiscated Sahrawi human rights defender Aminatou Haidar's passport on 13 November and expelled her from the country the following day, leaving her stranded in Lanzarote Airport, in Spain's Canary Islands. She has been on hunger strike since 15 November in protest.

Aminatou Haidar, who is 42 and has two children, was detained at Laayoune airport, Western Sahara on 13 November when she returned from a month-long trip, to countries including the USA, where she accepted the 2009 Civil Courage Prize, which is awarded every year "for steadfast resistance to evil at great personal risk." She was questioned about why she had given her home as "Western Sahara" rather than "Moroccan Sahara" on her landing card; she was also asked about her travel, as well as her political opinions and affiliations. Her Moroccan passport and identity card were then confiscated and she was detained in the airport overnight. She said that on 14 November officials offered to release her in return for a public acknowledgement of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. She refused to do so, and a few hours later she was put on a flight to Lanzarote, in the Canary Islands.

Aminatou Haidar has been on hunger strike since 15 November in protest. According to her family, she has grown quite weak; her health is at particular risk because she suffers from anaemia and a stomach ulcer. She is refusing to take her regular ulcer medication, as part of her hunger strike. Aminatou Haidar has rejected the possibility of obtaining refugee status in Spain, insisting on her right to return to Western Sahara. Without travel documents, Aminatou Haidar is effectively confined to Lanzarote. Her situation is further complicated by the fact that neither she, nor her family, can access her bank account. A source who has asked to remain anonymous has told her family that a high-ranking security agent instructed the bank to block her account.

Amnesty International believes that Aminatou Haidar's expulsion and confiscation of her Moroccan identification document and passport are politically motivated and that she is being punished because of her stance on Western Sahara's self-determination.

PLEASE WRITE IMMEDIATELY in Arabic, French, English or your own language:

- ✓ Calling on the authorities to return Aminatou Haidar's passport and identity card, and allow her to return to Western Sahara immediately and unconditionally;
- ✓ Urging them to ensure that Aminatou Haidar's access to her bank account is not blocked by the security forces.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 15 JANUARY 2010 TO:

King
Mohammed VI
Bureau de Sa Majesté le Roi
Palais Royal
Rabat, Maroc / Morocco
Fax: +212 537 73 07 72
Salutation: Your Majesty

Minister of Foreign Affairs and
Cooperation
Taïeb El Fassi Fihri
Ministre des Affaires Etrangères et de la
Coopération
Avenue Franklin Roosevelt
Rabat, Maroc / Morocco
Fax: +212 537 76 46 79
Email: mail@maec.gov.ma
Salutation: Your Excellency

And copies to:
President
Ahmed Herzenni
Human Rights Advisory Board
Place Ach-Chouhada
Boîte Postale 1341
Rabat 10000, Maroc / Morocco
Fax: +212 537 72 68 56
Email: ccdh@ccdh.org.ma
Salutation: Dear Mr Herzenni

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For many years, Aminatou Haidar, President of the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders (Collectif des défenseurs sahraouis des droits de l'Homme, CODESA), 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 of human rights violations in Western Sahara. On 20 October she accepted the Civil Courage Prize, which includes an award of US\$50,000, from the Train Foundation in New York City. In a telephone interview with Amnesty International on 3 December, Aminatou Haidar said: "I am determined to continue my struggle to defend human rights peacefully... This generation and children [in Western Sahara] witness with their own eyes the police oppression... Just imagine, many children, instead of drawing toys, they draw a policeman with a gun and a stick beating people... I am scared that they will become violent and incite violence."

A mother of two, Aminatou Haidar was secretly detained, without charge or trial, 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 apparently assaulted by the security forces while she was on her way to join a demonstration in Laayoune.

The Moroccan authorities have little toleration for people who speak out in favour of self-determination for Western Sahara, which was Spanish territory until Morocco annexed it in 1975. They appear to be adopting an increasingly repressive approach to the activities of Sahrawi human rights defenders, in breach of their obligations under international human rights treaties, notably the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and contrary to the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

Western Sahara is the subject of a territorial dispute between Morocco, which claims sovereignty, 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 south-western Algeria.

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