

## Occupied Western Sahara

**First they came for the journalists.**

**We don't know what happened after that**

**Urgent Public Appeal**

**4 December 2020**



# 1 Call for action: Denounce the targeting of Sahrawi journalists as Morocco cracks down on civilians following end of ceasefire

This is the second public appeal issued in response to the **alarming increase of repression and violence** against Sahrawi civilians in the territories of Western Sahara under Moroccan occupation, following the recent escalation of the 45-year conflict between the Polisario Front and Morocco on 13 November.

With the escalation of war between Morocco and Polisario, we have witnessed fierce repression in the occupied territories of Western Sahara. **Sahrawi citizen journalists and human rights defenders report a massive campaign of collective intimidation and harassment.** Reports from trusted sources say that in response to the escalation of armed conflict and protests carried out, allegedly over 35 young Sahrawis have been arrested since 13 November, the youngest being 12 years old and most reported to be between 16 and 17 years old.

The present appeal is prepared by the Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara and the Spanish human rights organization #NomadsHRC in collaboration with the Sahrawi journalist human rights organizations Equipe Media and Nushatta Foundation. In the appendix of this appeal, we provide information into the recent repression witnessed in the occupied territories from 13 November until 28 November. A first version of this appeal was published 20 November 2020.<sup>1</sup>

This second appeal focuses on one of the most at-risk collectives: Sahrawi citizen journalists, whose reporting work is fundamental to understanding the breadth and scope of human rights violations currently taking place inside the territory. **In response to their reporting, Sahrawi citizen journalists are under attack. With this appeal, we call on individuals and organizations alike to take actions to denounce the targeting of Sahrawi journalists. Most are unable to leave their homes or are in hiding. If Morocco succeeds in silencing their voices, the Western Sahara will go pitch dark.**

For decades, Morocco has tried to ensure that there are no international witnesses to its human rights violations and breaches of humanitarian law in Western Sahara. In an extensive report on press freedom inside Western Sahara published in June of 2019, Reporters without Borders called the territory a "news blackhole" and said that in addition to a "quasi systematic policy" of denying entry to foreign journalists, this silence also stems largely from "the constant persecution and repression of Sahrawi journalists who endeavour to practice their profession outside official Moroccan channels".<sup>2</sup>

Compounding this information void is the lack of action at the UN to monitor the human rights situation in the territory. The United Nations peacekeeping mission in the territory (MINURSO) lacks a human rights mandate, and calls by human rights organizations to add human rights monitoring and reporting to the UN mandate have gone unmet. UN Special Procedures continues to be denied independent access to the territory. Citing the deterioration of the human rights situation in Western Sahara and the lack of access to the territory by independent human rights monitors, on 30 November 2020 Amnesty International issued another call for the UN to engage in human rights monitoring and reporting in Western Sahara, as well as the need for independent reporting. Amnesty and many other international human rights organizations have been banned for years from entering Western Sahara.<sup>3</sup>

With no outside monitors and observers, Sahrawis are left on their own to document and report human rights violations against them. Enter Sahrawi "citizen journalists".

Organized into media collectives, Sahrawi reporters have become a key, trusted source of information both for international human rights monitors and for media organizations unable to access the territory. As one

<sup>1</sup> [https://vest-sahara.s3.amazonaws.com/skvs/feature-images/File/231/5fb80145bd5b7\\_Appeal\\_20.11.2020.pdf](https://vest-sahara.s3.amazonaws.com/skvs/feature-images/File/231/5fb80145bd5b7_Appeal_20.11.2020.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/morocco-western-sahara>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/human-rights-monitoring-needed-more-than-ever-in-western-sahara/?fbclid=IwAR0uAk6Ggi7e05lddlVakcFgF22ePNyL0PZf90BN0y-Y31Maex6TOYp86g8>

of many examples; in August of 2019 it was thanks to videos filmed by and verified with the help of Sahrawi journalists that Amnesty International was able to visually reconstruct the violent repression against dozens of non-violent Sahrawi civilians by Moroccan occupying forces in the city of El Aaiún, which resulted in the killing of a young Sahrawi woman and calls by AI for an investigation. And in March of 2020 it was also thanks to the investigative work of media collectives in Western Sahara that The Washington Post and Human Rights Watch were able to counter Moroccan official narrative regarding the brutal beating of Sahrawi journalist Walid El Batal in the city of Smara, which was videotaped (for more detail please see below). In addition, the extensive 2019 report by Reporters without Borders on press freedom in Western Sahara was put together with the collaboration of Equipe Media.

The figure of citizen journalists, often lacking an official title or accreditation, is particularly critical in places of the world where press freedom is severely restricted or absent, as is the case of Morocco-occupied Western Sahara, leaving Sahrawi journalists in an alarmingly vulnerable position.

In conjunction with the escalation of sieges, attacks, mass arrests and other violations by Moroccan armed units against the Sahrawi civilian population since 13 November, ***Morocco's attempts to silence and prevent Sahrawi journalists from reporting on the situation has aggravated the "news blackhole"***, providing Morocco with close to total impunity to act against Sahrawis.

Due to the repression carried out against Sahrawi journalists and activists, it has, during the last two weeks, been increasingly challenging to document what is happening on the streets of Western Sahara, and the videos and photos coming out of the territory are mostly taken by eyewitnesses with no prior reporting experience. In the case of one activist who has been filming the police siege against her own home, Moroccan police placed bars and black plastic on her window to prevent her from filming the police presence on the street.

***The increasing challenge of documenting what is happening in the occupied territories of Western Sahara is seen in direct correlation with the current targeting of Sahrawi journalists.***

During the last two weeks, we have received reports that Moroccan occupation forces have attempted to abduct three Sahrawi journalists belonging to the Sahrawi media/human rights organization Nushatta Foundation. Other members of Nushatta Foundation are finding their homes placed under continued police surveillance. On 16 November, reports were received that the police had raided the homes of the cameraman and reporter Mohammed Haddi and Cherif Bakhil who both work in the departments of photography and logistics within the Sahrawi journalists of Nushatta Foundation. Their houses were raided by over 20 armed special police forces and intelligence led by three well-known officers implicated in gross human rights violations against Sahrawis. They terrorized the families of the two journalists, who were not at home. The two managed to escape and subsequently went into hiding.

On 25 November, there was an additional abduction attempt against Sahrawi journalist Ibrahim Mrikli, also of Nushatta Foundation. According to local activists, Moroccan police tried to abduct him outside of the house of his grandparents in the boulevard of Tan Tan El Aaiún city, but he managed to flee in a car and subsequently went into hiding. Mrikli has been arrested or detained several times since 2017 and currently faces political prosecution in retaliation for his work as a reporter. This past 15 May, he was subject to arbitrary arrest and his trial hearings are still ongoing. Both Amnesty International<sup>4</sup> and Front Line Defenders<sup>5</sup> have issued urgent appeals asking Morocco to drop all charges against Mrikli, with Amnesty calling the charges against him "bogus".

Members of the award-winning Sahrawi media organization Equipe Media have also suffered increased repression from the occupying forces, with the journalists being subjected to intimidation, harassment and increased surveillance. On 21 November, reports were received that both the Moroccan police and the intelligence services had obstructed the wedding of Nazha El Khalidi and Ahmed Ettanji, both journalists at Equipe Media. According to direct reports, the Moroccan forces placed both family homes under surveillance, effectively placing them under house arrest, from 21 November until 23 November. No

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2931112020ENGLISH.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/arbitrary-detention-human-rights-defender-ibrahim-mrikli>

family members or friends were allowed to enter and leave the homes. There are photographs of the siege showing multiple police vehicles and police agents surrounding the homes. Both families were subjected to harassment and intimidation, with the repression believed to come in direct response to the two colleagues' reporting on the repression in Western Sahara since 13 November 2020. Both the Coalition for Women in Journalism<sup>6</sup> and the International Organization Against Torture (OMCT)<sup>7</sup> denounced the targeting of the two journalists.

Due to Morocco's criminalization of independent reporting on the issue of Western Sahara, Sahrawi journalists work under alarming conditions and without any real means of protection. Sahrawi journalists have for decades been subjected to fierce repression by the Moroccan authorities, including surveillance, harassment, threats, arbitrary arrest and arbitrary detention under harsh prison sentences.

The imprisonment of four Gdeim Izik journalists,<sup>8</sup> El Bachir Khadda, Hassan Dah, Abdellah Lakhfawni and Mohammed Lamin Haddi, who were tried along with Sahrawi leaders of the one-month 2010 protest camp and given harsh prison sentences, as well as the ongoing detention of Sahrawi journalists Mohamed al-Bambary,<sup>9</sup> Walid El Batal<sup>10</sup> and Khatri Dadda,<sup>11</sup> provide stark examples of this practice aimed at silencing those trying to break the current culture of impunity rampant inside the occupied territories of Western Sahara.

The 2019 violent arrest and police beating of Smara News journalist Walid El Batal in Smara received international attention after a graphic video showing the arrest went viral, with both Human Rights Watch<sup>12</sup> and The Washington Post<sup>13</sup> publishing in-depth fact-checking investigations that debunked Morocco's official account of the beating. El Batal was subsequently tried and sentenced to 2 years by the Appeals Court on charges unrelated to his arrest, which he said are false. He was arrested on the day that he and other Smara News journalists were attempting to welcome a Smara News colleague home after he had been released from prison.

*«I am just now able to feel the true feeling of those who were forced to leave in 1975»*

*Sahrawi citizen journalist following the recent escalation of the conflict*

<sup>6</sup> [https://womeninjournalism.org/cfwj-press-statements/morocco-amid-heated-conflict-sahrawi-journalist-nazha-elkhalidi-and-her-fiance-are-under-house-arrest-and-their-wedding-postponed-by-moroccan-authorities?fbclid=IwAR1jiDh9wkj4zeU58N5-8Yx2TmtWZ8e\\_mCl5VfYsSj7FEfmsKCymwNZDI8](https://womeninjournalism.org/cfwj-press-statements/morocco-amid-heated-conflict-sahrawi-journalist-nazha-elkhalidi-and-her-fiance-are-under-house-arrest-and-their-wedding-postponed-by-moroccan-authorities?fbclid=IwAR1jiDh9wkj4zeU58N5-8Yx2TmtWZ8e_mCl5VfYsSj7FEfmsKCymwNZDI8)

<sup>7</sup> [https://omct.org/fr/human-rights-defenders/urgent-interventions/morocco/2020/11/d26189/?fbclid=IwAR0d\\_Yef3ltdm3m6UIFkUdAquek\\_N5Kqyclw3D-0vRI-o2aajqIYqxiphY0](https://omct.org/fr/human-rights-defenders/urgent-interventions/morocco/2020/11/d26189/?fbclid=IwAR0d_Yef3ltdm3m6UIFkUdAquek_N5Kqyclw3D-0vRI-o2aajqIYqxiphY0)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.wsrw.org/a105x4753>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.freedom-now.org/campaign/mohamed-banbari/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://vest-sahara.no/en/news/attacks-on-Sahrawi-journalists-un-calls-on-investigations>

<sup>11</sup> <https://vest-sahara.no/en/news/un-concerned-over-situation-for-young-Sahrawi-prisoner>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/03/12/morocco/western-sahara-video-captured-police-violence>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/03/12/video-contradicts-moroccos-justification-brutal-beating-western-sahara/>

## 2 The “crime” of being a Sahrawi journalist

The UN Human Rights bodies, such as the UN Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Opinion and Expression, consistently report on the alarmingly high number of journalists detained globally, and the use of criminal laws to suppress the free operation of the press and silence discussion on politically sensitive topics;<sup>14</sup> which is also the case for Sahrawi journalists.

Sahrawi journalists from the occupied territories of Western Sahara operate under Moroccan law, as a direct consequence of the continued occupation and annexation of the non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara. As such, Morocco controls Western Sahara as an integrated part of Morocco, and the occupied territories of Western Sahara are thus placed under the same governmental administration and rules of law as the Kingdom of Morocco -- a direct consequence of the continued occupation and illegal annexation of the territory.<sup>15</sup>

In Morocco, the situation for journalists is regulated by the Moroccan Constitution, the *Code de la Presse*, the Moroccan Penal Code, and the High Authority for Audiovisual Communication, as well as by Moroccan Journalist associations. Pursuant to Article 28 of the Moroccan Constitution, freedom of press shall be secured, and the constitution prohibits prior censorship. However, the vague language of the Constitution fosters wide latitude for interpretation and hinders enforcement of media protections. Further, the Moroccan Penal Code effectively allows journalists to be prosecuted and imprisoned for their work. The Moroccan Penal Code provides that journalists can be prosecuted and imprisoned for speech deemed to harm Islam, the monarchy, or Morocco's territorial integrity, as well as for defaming state institutions, insulting public officials, inciting hatred or discrimination, and denigrating court decisions.<sup>16,17</sup> The reference to the territorial boundaries of the Kingdom of Morocco specifically relates to Western Sahara, and the Kingdom's sovereignty claim over the territory.

**Independent reporting on the Western Sahara conflict is therefore criminalized by law under the Moroccan Penal Code, and the practice of independent journalism relating to the Western Sahara conflict is thus a violation that can lead to prison sentences ranging from six months to two years in prison.** Moroccan journalists operate under the same threats of imprisonment and political persecution. There are several documented incidents of Moroccan journalists having been persecuted and imprisoned in response to their reporting on Western Sahara. In some cases, they were persecuted due to their mere mentioning of Western Sahara. This criminalization of independent reporting on the Western Sahara issue is in clear violation of Morocco's treaty obligations governing freedom of expression, notably article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

The administrative policy in Morocco similarly prohibits independent reporting on the Western Sahara issue. The Moroccan state body High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HACA) is the entity responsible for issuing broadcast licenses and monitors content to ensure compliance with licensing requirements. The law on HACA was amended in July of 2016 by the Parliament, producing a new version of the broadcasting law that broadly maintains restrictions on critical coverage of sensitive issues, such as the monarchy, religion, and Western Sahara. The King and the government continue to control the editorial

<sup>14</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Human Rights Council, A/HRC/20/17, Jun. 4, 2012

<sup>15</sup> In 1975, Morocco invaded Western Sahara; a territory in which it does not hold sovereignty over (ICJ Advisory Opinion, Western Sahara, 1975). Since that time, a part of Western Sahara (estimated to be around 80 percent) has been placed under occupation by the Kingdom of Morocco and subsequently illegally annexed. To this day, the situation in the territory remains a humanitarian crisis with systematic, gross human rights violations and breaches of international humanitarian law being committed as direct consequence of the prolonged illegal military occupation. Morocco has, as the Occupying Power, the de facto control, both over most of the territory and the people living on the occupied land, who are deprived of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

<sup>16</sup> The article in which criminalized independent reporting on the Western Sahara issue is Article 267-5 of the Moroccan Penal Code in which reads (French version): «Est puni d'un emprisonnement de six mois à deux ans et d'une amende de 20.000 à 200.000 dirhams ou de l'une de ces deux de ces deux peines seulement quiconque porte atteinte à la région islamique, au régime monarchique ou incite à porter atteinte à l'intégrité territoriale du Royaume. La peine encourue est portée à deux ans à cinq ans d'emprisonnement et une amende de 50.000 à 500.000 dirhams ou à l'une de ses peines seulement lorsque les actes visés au premier alinéa ci-dessus sont commis soit par discours, cris ou menaces proférés dans les lieux ou réunions publics, ou par affiches exposées aux regards du public soit par la vente, la distribution ou tout moyen remplissant la condition de publicité y compris par voie électronique, sur papier et par voie audiovisuelle».

<sup>17</sup> Article 267-5 came in response to the adoption of the new Press and Publications Code by the Moroccan Parliament on July 26, 2016, in which provided for the elimination of prison time as punishment for independent reporting on the Western Sahara issue. Five days prior to adopting the new press code, the Moroccan parliament therefore added new provisions to the Penal code, imposing prison on those "causing harm" to Islam, the monarchy, the person of the king and the royal family, and Morocco's "territorial integrity". For further information, we referred refer to the report of Human Rights Watch, «The red lines stay red, Morocco's reform of its Speech Laws», published in 2017. See in particular page 21-24, including an answer from the Moroccan government, explicitly referring to the conflict. The report is made available here: <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/590c3b2e4.pdf>



content of public broadcast, and are the sole authority that can appoint the managers of public radio and television stations.

Journalists in Morocco are generally organized through a union called the “Moroccan journalist association”. Journalists operating in compliance with Moroccan law are admitted as members and granted a press card. However, journalists not operating in compliance with Moroccan law, such as Sahrawi journalists providing independent reporting on the issue of Western Sahara, are not granted a press card. Pursuant to the Moroccan Penal Code Article 381, a person operating as a journalist without necessary accreditation from the Moroccan authorities can be sentenced to imprisonment, which was the case for Sahrawi journalist Nazha El Khalidi of Equipe Media who in 2019 was subjected to criminal prosecution in response to her calling herself a journalist without having necessary accreditation.

With this background and as a direct consequence of the continued occupation and illegal annexation of Western Sahara by Morocco, Sahrawi journalists are operating in conflict with Moroccan law and face the constant threat of imprisonment.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, they are not granted a license, nor are they admitted as members of unions concerned with the protection of press freedom and the security of journalists. Sahrawi journalists are thus compelled to work “underground” through Sahrawi media groups such as Equipe Media, Nushatta, RASD TV, Smara News, Intifadamay, Red de Activistas, Bentili Media center etc. The collectives are located throughout the territory.

Sahrawi journalists are citizens who have organized into media collectives to counter the media blockade imposed by Morocco in Western Sahara and in the absence of international human rights monitoring. Working under enormous risk to themselves and their families and with scarce resources, these self-taught citizen journalists are on the frontlines filming and reporting on human rights violations clandestinely, often from rooftops or inside homes. Because they also provide critical information about human rights violations, Sahrawi citizen journalists are also considered to be human rights defenders. These citizen journalists have managed to document widespread human rights against Sahrawi civilians and activists.

Due to their reporting, Sahrawi journalists are actively being persecuted by the Moroccan authorities and find themselves in an extremely vulnerable situation due to their reporting work and their exercise of their right to freedom of expression. They lack any real means of protection in the occupied territories of Western Sahara, either under international, regional or local mechanisms. As stated by ICRC in an article in 2010;

“It is often said that the first casualty of war is truth. Accurate, impartial media reports conveyed from conflict zones serve a fundamental public interest: in the information era, images and news can have a decisive impact on the outcome of armed conflicts. As a consequence, the obstruction of journalistic tasks in times of armed conflict is alarmingly frequent. The spectrum of interference is wide: it ranges from access denial, censorship and harassment to arbitrary detention and direct attacks against media professionals.”<sup>19</sup>

*“The protection mechanisms for journalists do not exist in the occupied territories of Western Sahara. The media work that shows the violations of human rights is criminalized.*

*There is a union of Moroccan journalists [“Moroccan journalist association”] in the occupied territories which on several occasions have attacked us by saying that we are not journalists, but separatists, because we work against the Kingdom of Morocco.”*

*Sahrawi journalist belonging to Equipe Media*

<sup>18</sup> Sahrawi Journalists are Sahrawi’s whom provide independent reporting on the Western Sahara conflict, by providing that Western Sahara is a non-self-governing territory entitled to the right to self-determination, and not a part of the “Southern provinces” of the Kingdom of Morocco. Consequently, journalistic work holding that Western Sahara is distinct from Morocco, or which contradicts the official story of the Moroccan Kingdom, is criminalized by law. Since the beginning of the conflict, Morocco has presented the conflict as a regional conflict between Algeria and Morocco, where, Morocco holds that Polisario “was a proxy group created by Algeria”, and portrays the Sahrawi refugee population in Tindouf as “Moroccans who had been kidnapped and retained there against their will.” As declared by King Mohammed VI on the occasion of the 39th Anniversary of the Green March: “I say no to the attempt to alter the nature of this regional conflict by presenting it as a case of decolonisation. Morocco has never been an occupying power or an administering power in its Sahara. Rather, it exercises the attributes of its sovereignty over its land”, see Case C-266/16 Western Sahara Campaign UK v Commissioner, [2018] CJEU Opinion of Advocate General Wathelet, para.249.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/interview/protection-journalists-interview-270710.htm>

This is also the case for Sahrawi citizen journalists trying to report on what is happening in the occupied territories of Western Sahara: conveying a truth that the Moroccan occupying forces use all possible means to deny and to hide, thus leading to the current culture of impunity and silence imposed on the occupied territories.

Due to their reporting, Sahrawi journalists face numerous challenges when attempting to report from the occupied territories, especially when trying to produce footage that complies with the highest evidentiary standards. One obvious obstacle is the high cost of getting caught while filming. This includes beatings, arrest and possible imprisonment in addition to having their cameras destroyed or stolen.

There are additionally few places to film from clandestinely in order to capture protests and police activity, with house owners facing threats from the police if it is discovered that journalists have used their roof or hidden inside homes to record. As most filming takes place from rooftops and inside homes, far from the action, images can also be blurred or difficult to interpret. At the same time, the authorities use concealment tactics, with Moroccan police dragging or pushing victims into small alleys and other places hidden from view before abusing them. On some occasions, Moroccan police use parked trucks and buses near protests to obscure camera views. In Western Sahara, there is also a scarcity of trained video operators and journalists. The imprisonment and lengthy sentences of Sahrawi journalists effectively remove them from their crucial work of providing reliable reporting from the occupied territories of Western Sahara.

Despite these challenges, Sahrawi citizen journalists continue to be one of the very few sources for verified information from Western Sahara. A one-year report published by the New York-based NGO WITNESS and the video curation project Watching Western Sahara that reviewed over one hundred videos filmed by Sahrawi citizen journalists found that "videos by citizen journalists provide a critical window into the social movements taking place on the streets of Western Sahara and attacks on voices of dissent" and observed that "Individually, the videos show disturbing scenes of protests and repression within a police state. Collectively, they portray stories of widespread social upheaval and patterns of abuse that Morocco doesn't want the world to see".<sup>20</sup>

Due to their reporting, Sahrawi journalists are often punished for their activities by being fired from their daily jobs, and consequently lose their income and find themselves without any means to support themselves. Additionally, the family members of Sahrawi journalists frequently also lose their income as retaliation for their family member's activism. It is also common practice for journalists to be harassed, threatened and attacked by the police or agents in plainclothes, and to have their equipment confiscated or broken.

Sahrawi journalists are also subjected to surveillance, both digitally through the use of spyware, hacking of phones, e-mail and social media accounts and through house raids and searches by agents in plainclothes using procedures that include beatings and ill-treatment of the inhabitants, and the interrogation and questioning of their friends and neighbours.<sup>21</sup> Journalists working to report on the human rights abuses in the occupied territories of Western Sahara are also often prosecuted and imprisoned based on false criminal charges such as the "forming of a criminal organization", assaulting against police officers or charges based on security reasons. The charges and the imprisonment of journalists are often not legally connected to their work as journalists, although they are a direct consequence of their work. Prosecutors often rely on confessions obtained under torture, and defendants are rarely able to review evidence against them or present witnesses and exculpatory evidence.<sup>22</sup>

In these instances, the exercise of their right to freedom of expression as protected by Article 19 is the cause for the targeting.

<sup>20</sup> <https://lab.witness.org/human-rights-in-western-sahara-a-year-in-review/>

<sup>21</sup> See also Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Morocco. CCPR/C/MAR/CO/6, at para 37.

<sup>22</sup> Robert F. Kennedy, "Human Rights Submit report to United Nations Documenting Morocco's Widespread Abuses in Western Sahara" (28.09.2016). Available here: <http://rfkhumanrights.org/news/news/robert-f-kennedy-human-rights-submits-report-united-nations-documenting-moroccos-widespread-abuses-western-sahara/>

### 3 Sahrawi journalists & relevant practices of the UN human rights mechanisms

The systematic and systemic persecution of Sahrawi journalists and civilians have been widely documented by the United Nations human rights mechanisms. The UN Working Group observed these trends, amongst other, during its visit to Morocco from 9 to 18 December 2013 (A/HRC/27/48/Add.5, para 62-71). After its Mission to Morocco in 2013, and its visit to El Aaiún/Western Sahara, the Working Group stated that it had considered the situation in El Aaiún, Western Sahara, and “found that torture and ill-treatment were used to extract confessions and that protestors were subjected to excessive use of force by law enforcement officials”.<sup>23</sup> It had also “received numerous complaints indicating a pattern of excessive use of force in repressing demonstrations and in arresting protestors or persons suspected of participating in demonstrations calling for self-determination of the Sahrawi population”.<sup>24,25</sup> The Working Group found that “people arrested are beaten, insulted and forced to reveal names of other protestors”, and that these practices are “aimed at punishing and intimidating protestors in order to prevent further support for the call for independence”.<sup>26</sup> Similar observations were also made by the United Nations Committee against Torture<sup>27</sup> and the Special Rapporteur on Torture, having expressed their concerns regarding the systematic use of force against the Sahrawi population, highlighting that people advocating for the right to self-determination are subjected to comprehensive police violence, abductions, torture, and subjected to arbitrary arrest and arbitrary detention. The Working Group has similarly documented the political persecution of Sahrawis in numerous decisions rendered; as documented in Opinion No. 39/1996, Opinion No. 4/1996, in Opinion no. 11/2017 concerning Salah Eddin Bassir, in Opinion No. 31/2018 concerning Mohamed Al-Bambary, in Opinion No. 58/2018 concerning Ahmed Aliouat, in Opinion No. 60/2018 concerning Mbarek Daoudi, Opinion No. 23/2019 concerning Laaroussi Ndour, in Opinion No. 67/2019 concerning the Student Group and latest in Opinion No. 52/2020 concerning Ali Saadouni.<sup>28</sup> The opinions rendered documents how Sahrawis are subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention in response to their opinions and their support for the right to self-determination; in breach of the equality of human rights with the persecution of Sahrawis constituting racial discrimination. The opinions rendered by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention are supported by communications issued by the United Nations Special Procedures.<sup>29</sup>

As for the documentation of the persecution of Sahrawi journalists, the cases of Salah Eddine Bassir (WGAD Opinion No. 11/2017), Mohammed Al-Bambary (WGAD Opinion No. 31/2018) and Ndor Laaroussi (WGAD Opinion No. 23/2019), in addition to communications by the UN Special Procedures into the case of the Gdeim Izik prisoners (AL MAR 3/2017), Walid El Batal (Al Mar 3/2019), Naziha El Khalidi (AL MAR 2/2019, AL MAR 1/2019) and Khatri Dadda (Al Mar 3/2019) is of particular importance.<sup>30</sup>

The communications issued by the UN Special Procedures into the cases of Sahrawi journalists Walid El Batal and Khatri Dadda relates to their violent arrest and detention in response to their work as journalists, wherein the communication rendered into the case of Naziha El Khalidi relates to her facing criminal charges after having stated to be a Sahrawi journalist without having an accreditation from the Moroccan government. The case of Naziha serves as a testament to the very criminalization of the work carried out by Sahrawi journalists trying to document the situation in the occupied territories of Western Sahara. The

<sup>23</sup> Report of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Mission to Morocco. A/HRC/27/48/Add.5, para 63.

<sup>24</sup> Report of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Mission to Morocco. A/HRC/27/48/Add.5, para 64.

<sup>25</sup> Similarly highlighted in: Report from the Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Morocco. CCPR/C/MAR/CO/6. Report of the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, Juan E. Méndez. A/HRC/22/53/Add.2. See paragraph 61-67.

<sup>26</sup> Report of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Mission to Morocco. A/HRC/27/48/Add.5. See para 64.

<sup>27</sup> Committee against Torture, Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 19 of the Convention, concluding observations of the Committee against torture (CAT/C/MAR/CO/4)

<sup>28</sup> See also Opinion No. 3/1994, Opinion no. 21/1993, Opinion No. 54/2013 concerning Moroccan citizens persecuted on the basis of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly (Category ii).

<sup>29</sup> Communications issued by the Special Procedures include inter alia the communication issued in relation to the arrest and torture and the breach of the right to a fair trial for the Gdeim Izik prisoners (AL MAR 3/2017), the communication issued in response to the violent arrest of Sahrawi journalist Walid Salek El Batal (AL MAR 3/2019), and communication issued in response to the illegal charges brought against the Sahrawi journalist Naziha El Khalidi (AL MAR 2/2019 and AL MAR 1/2019) The latest communications issued relates to the imprisonment of the young Sahrawi journalist Khatri Dadda (Al Mar 3/2020) and imprisoned Sahrawi student Hussein Bachir Brahim (JAL Mar 2/2020), further documenting the systematic persecution of Sahrawi s by Morocco.

<sup>30</sup> Reference is made to the report published 20 April 2020, “A Call from the occupied territories of Western Sahara”, by the League for the protection of Sahrawi political prisoners within Moroccan jails and the Norwegian Support Committee Western Sahara, compiling relevant case law from the United Nations human rights mechanism in its appendices: [https://vest-sahara.s3.amazonaws.com/skvs/feature-images/File/101/Sea2b523bc7f3\\_PrisonerAppealApr2020Eng.pdf](https://vest-sahara.s3.amazonaws.com/skvs/feature-images/File/101/Sea2b523bc7f3_PrisonerAppealApr2020Eng.pdf)



continued imprisonment of the Gdeim Izik journalists were similarly addressed in a communication launched by the UN Special Procedures, with their detention coming in direct response to their coverage of the Gdeim Izik protest camp and its violent dismantlement by the Moroccan military forces in November 2010.

In the Opinions rendered by the UN Working Group, the practices of arbitrary detention used as a mean of punishing and silencing Sahrawi journalists is further documented, with the Working Group holding, in all decisions rendered, that Sahrawi journalists are subjected to racial discrimination breaching the equality of human rights.

In Opinion No. 11/2017, concerning Salah Eddine Bassir, the Working Group highlighted that Bassir was associated with the political movement, and considered that “Mr. Bassir had been victimized for expressing his political opinion on the situation of Western Sahara, which constitutes a violation of the protection afforded under articles 18, 19 and 26 of the Covenant against discrimination based on a person’s political opinion”.<sup>31</sup>

In Opinion No. 31/2018, concerning Mohamed Al-Bambary, the Working Group highlighted that Al-Bambary was to be considered a journalist, and noted that it was not necessary to have a press card or to be a member of an association for journalists in order to carry out such activities, in contrast to the argument imposed by the Moroccan government.

In Opinion No. 23/2019 concerning the detention of Sahrawi journalist Ndor Laaroussi, the Moroccan government had again argued that Ndor is Moroccan and that he is not a journalist, as he does not hold an official accreditation from the Moroccan Government. The Working Group however concluded that Ndor Laaroussi is a Sahrawi *and* a journalist, holding that his profession as a Sahrawi journalist is protected under international human rights law (article 19 ICCPR). In light of the arrest of Ndor and his activities as a journalist, the Working Group found it clear that Ndor Laaroussi had been arrested in response to his activities as a Sahrawi journalist, breaching Category II; violating Article 19 ICCPR.

As noted, due to Morocco's criminalization of independent reporting on the issue of Western Sahara, Sahrawi journalists work under alarming conditions and without any real means of protection while systematically facing trumped up charges and arbitrary detention under harsh prison sentences. Most Sahrawi journalists who are targeted for arbitrary arrest are not charged with practicing their reporting, but with often very serious crimes that include property destruction, assault against police and even murder -- crimes that carry with them long prison sentences and that effectively remove them from their journalistic work. Prosecutors often rely on confessions obtained under torture, and defendants are rarely able to review evidence against them or present witnesses and exculpatory evidence. Currently, seven Sahrawi journalists remains imprisoned, including the four Gdeim Izik journalists,<sup>32</sup> El Bachir Khadda, Hassan Dah, Abdellah Lakhfawni and Mohammed Lamin Haddi, in addition to the continued detention of Sahrawi journalists Mohamed al-Bambary,<sup>33</sup> Walid El Batal<sup>34</sup> and Khatri Dadda<sup>35</sup>.

*“When our members are put on trial we are never charged with violating the press code, but always some made-up accusations of us assaulting the police or something like that. Foreign journalists are kicked out, Moroccan journalists know the law and keep their mouths shut and us Sahrawis are treated in the worst way possible”*

*Sahrawi journalist belonging to Equipe Media*

<sup>31</sup> Opinion No. 11/2017, at para 47-48.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.wsrw.org/a105x4753>

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.freedom-now.org/campaign/mohamed-banbari/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://vest-sahara.no/en/news/attacks-on-Sahrawi-journalists-un-calls-on-investigations>

<sup>35</sup> <https://vest-sahara.no/en/news/un-concerned-over-situation-for-young-Sahrawi-prisoner>

**Published 4 December 2020**

This Public Appeal is prepared by the Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara and the Spanish human rights organization #NomadsHRC in collaboration with the Sahrawi journalist human rights organizations Equipe Media and Nushatta Foundation.

This public appeal is the second appeal published in relation the recent escalation of the Western Sahara conflict and the repression witnessed in the occupied territories of Western Sahara. A first version was published 20 November 2020 and is available online.<sup>36</sup>

This second appeal focuses on Sahrawi citizen journalists. These Sahrawi journalists are currently under attack. With this appeal, we call on individuals and organizations alike to take actions to denounce the targeting of Sahrawi journalists. In the appendix of this appeal, we provide information into the recent repression witnessed in the occupied territories from 13 November until 28 November.

Please feel free to distribute and to republish this report. If you are need additional information, please contact the undersigned organizations at [mcarriondequesada@protonmail.com](mailto:mcarriondequesada@protonmail.com) or [tone.s.moe@protonmail.com](mailto:tone.s.moe@protonmail.com)

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<sup>36</sup> [https://vest-sahara.s3.amazonaws.com/skvs/feature-images/File/231/5fb80145bd5b7\\_Appeal\\_20.11.2020.pdf](https://vest-sahara.s3.amazonaws.com/skvs/feature-images/File/231/5fb80145bd5b7_Appeal_20.11.2020.pdf)

## APPENDIX

The present appendix provides information into the recent events in the occupied territories of Western Sahara and the escalation of the conflict. The present appendix includes:

- 1) Summary of repression witnessed in the occupied territories of Western Sahara
- 2) Factsheet: The escalation of the Western Sahara conflict and the repression in the occupied territories

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### 1 Summary of repression in the occupied territories, mid-November 2020

Western Sahara is listed by the United Nations as a non-self-governing territory, subjected to the right to self-determination in conformity with the principles contained in UN General Assembly resolutions 1514 (XV) and 1541 (XV). In 1975, Morocco invaded Western Sahara; a territory in which it does not hold sovereignty over (ICJ Advisory Opinion, Western Sahara, 1975). Since that time, a part of Western Sahara (estimated to be around 80 percent) has been placed under occupation by the Kingdom of Morocco and subsequently illegally annexed. To this day, the situation in the territory remains a humanitarian crisis with systematic, gross human rights violations and breaches of international humanitarian law being committed as direct consequence of the prolonged illegal military occupation. Morocco has, as the Occupying Power, the de facto control, both over most of the territory and the people living on the occupied land, who are deprived of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

On 13 November, Moroccan forces launched a military intervention in Guerguerat, a buffer zone in the Southwest corner of Western Sahara, targeting nonviolent Sahrawi protesters who had blocked a Morocco-built road in the zone since 20 October. The road, paved by Morocco in 2016 in contravention of the UN-sponsored ceasefire and military accords between Morocco and the Polisario Front, was a strategic route for Morocco to import and export goods towards Mauritania and West Africa, and the blockade had resulted in long lines of backed up traffic in both directions.

The protests were well documented by the Sahrawis themselves, who shared photos and videos of the civilians chanting, holding up signs, digging up the asphalt and even playing traditional Sahrawi games or dipping their feet in the nearby waters of the Atlantic Ocean. On several occasions, the protesters allowed specific travellers to cross, including Senegalese, Mauritians and some Moroccans. They did not allow the circulation of trucks laden with products, which they said included resources plundered from Western Sahara.

Reports on the ground indicated that the Moroccan military entered the buffer zone by making a breach in a wall built by Morocco that separates the Polisario-controlled Western Sahara from the territory occupied by Morocco, and that Polisario whisked the civilians to safety. According to some images, the small camp erected by the protesters was set on fire.

The Polisario Front responded to the Moroccan intervention on 13 November, stating that it was a serious breach to the 29-year-long ceasefire between the two parties and declaring it to be over. During the night of 13 November, Polisario launched military attacks in the form of artillery strikes at the Morocco-built wall dividing the territory of Western Sahara in two. Further military attacks was similarly reported from 14 until 29 November.

On 13 November, corresponding with the end of the 29-year-long ceasefire, the occupied territories of Western Sahara witnessed a wave of military, gendarmerie, police and intelligence forces entering the cities, further strengthening the military siege imposed.

Sahrawi activists, journalists and human rights defenders found themselves effectively under house arrest, with their houses completely besieged by Morocco's occupying forces. There were reports that houses of prominent activists were attacked by Moroccan forces throwing rocks and knocking on their doors, trying to enter, terrifying and intimidating the activists.

Reports were simultaneously received that Sahrawi political prisoners of the so-called Gdeim Izik group held in Kenitra and Tifelt prisons were being subjected to verbal assaults, intimidations and increased isolation, with the prisoners constantly monitored by prison guards. Reports were received that human rights defender and political prisoner Yahya Mohamed El Hafed Iaazza remains disappeared since October 13, when he was removed from his cell at Bouzairkarn Prison and taken to an unknown location after telling his family that he had been exposed to a prisoner ill with COVID-19. In an urgent appeal,<sup>37</sup> Front Line Defenders has called for Morocco to allow his family access to El Hafed Iaazza and to release him.

During the night of 13 November, massive protests in the occupied cities took place, particularly in the capital El Aaiún, with young Sahrawis coming out to the streets to protest Morocco's military intervention in Guerguerat. On 14 November, the protests continued; now in support of Polisario's declaration of ending the ceasefire. The Sahrawi journalist organization Equipe Media reported that, "*The streets of Samara, Tantan, Fasit, Mazwar, Al-Batimat, Al-Nahda, Hayy Al-Nahda, and Zenga Al-Sharif Al-Radi, witnessed hundreds of protesters, among them women and men*". The protests were reportedly met with excessive police violence and arrests which led to clashes between the protesters and the police.

On 15 November, and in response to the protests, the Moroccan police and intelligence forces raided several houses of Sahrawi civilians and activists, reportedly looking for young Sahrawis that participated in the demonstrations of 13 and 14 November. According to Equipe Media, at least seven young Sahrawis were arrested. In the evening of 15 November, protests again erupted in the cities of the occupied territories in support of Polisario and the Sahrawi right to self-determination in which lead to clashes between the protesters and the police.

On 16 November, Moroccan forces raided the houses of several Sahrawi activists and civilians. Reportedly, the police were looking for young Sahrawis who had participated in the protests on the day prior. According to Equipe Media, following the raid of 16 November, a total of 25 young Sahrawis have been arrested. The identity and current location of some remain unknown. On 16 November the police also raided the homes of Mohamed Haddi and Cherif Bakhil, two Sahrawi journalists from the media collective Nushatta Foundation.

On 17 November, reports were received about the continued massive presence of military, police and intelligence forces. According to activists, the repression, including raids on homes and collective arrests of the days prior, has led to the muffling of demonstrations, with many civilians not daring to enter the streets. On 18 November, local activists reported arbitrary violence carried out by Moroccan forces against Sahrawi civilians and activists in the streets of the occupied cities.

Also on 18 November, Moroccan authorities at the El Aaiún airport prevented prominent Sahrawi human rights defender Aminatou Haidar, president of ISACOM and winner of the Right Livelihood Award of 2019, from boarding an aircraft bound for the Spanish Canary Islands. Haidar recorded a video<sup>38</sup> from the airport explaining what had happened and saying that her son had been allowed to board along with the rest of the passengers, while she had been told that she needed a negative PCR test. Spain will not be requiring PCR's from travellers until November 23 and Haidar reported that no other passenger was asked for a test.

On 19 November, and in response to Aminatou Haidar having denounced her illegal ban on travelling the previous day, Royal Air Maroc issued a statement that Aminatou Haidar had tested positive for COVID-19.

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/whereabouts-imprisoned-human-rights-defender-yahya-mohamed-el-hafed-aazza-unknown>

<sup>38</sup> <https://twitter.com/AminatouHaidar/status/1329142471612362762>

Reporting about the incident, the BBC<sup>39</sup> quoted the document by Royal Air Maroc stating that the reason for Haidar's flight ban was that she had tested positive for COVID-19, which Haidar promptly denied through another videotaped statement<sup>40</sup> in which she also called on the ICRC and human rights organizations to assume responsibility in protecting human rights defenders in Western Sahara.

It appears that Haidar was singled out for discriminatory treatment through the weaponization of COVID-19. A prominent pro-Morocco activist by the online name of Zine el abidine El ouali, whose profile information states he is Vice President of the Sahara League for Democracy and Human Rights (LSDDH), also shared on his Twitter account<sup>41</sup> an official-looking document with Moroccan Ministry of Health letterhead that included Haidar's passport number, and which stated that on 12 of November she had tested positive for COVID-19 per a lab called Kamar. It has not been possible to verify the authenticity of the document. Concerns are however raised about the nature of this type of online activity, which potentially can incite to hatred, stigmatization and violence.

On 18 November, alarming reports were further received that a 12-year-old Sahrawi girl had been arrested and tortured by the Moroccan police after having attended school wearing a T-shirt with the flag of Western Sahara. Campaigns have later been organized by Sahrawi human rights organizations calling for the end of violence against Sahrawi children, also in response to the mass arrests of young children during the latest days.

On 19 November, reports were received that prominent Sahrawi activist and human rights defender Sultana Khaya was detained and abused at a checkpoint between the cities of El Aaiún and Bojador after returning to the occupied territories from Spain. Reports state that she was beaten while under police custody. According to local activists, she was released from custody after 1,5 hours. Before her release, police surrounded and then raided her house, subjecting her elderly mother to an aggression to her head and back that left her in critical condition. Family members and activists have since then been prevented from visiting them, and the family is unable to obtain medical help from a trusted doctor. On 20 November, reports were received that Sultana's house continued to be under surveillance and surrounded, and that it had been subjected to another raid. The family reported that Sultana's sister was assaulted by police at the doorway of her home and hit on the head with a nightstick, resulting in a serious injury and head wound. The family has provided videos and photographs of the aftermath of both assaults, as well as of the police siege around the home.

On 21 November, reports indicate that received that the wedding of two prominent Sahrawi journalists from Equipe Media, Ahmed Ettanji and Naziha El Khalidi, was targeted by the Moroccan forces. Both families were effectively placed under house arrest until 23 November, and their wedding celebrations were obstructed. Further news of the targeting of Sahrawi journalists came on 25 November with the attempted abduction of Sahrawi journalist Ibrahim Amrikli, who works with Nushatta Foundation. The attacks on Sahrawi journalists are believed to come in direct response to their reporting on the current repression in the occupied territories, especially given the fact that they are one of the few sources of information coming out of the territory, an activity that places them at great risk to their own personal safety.

On 22 November it was reported that Moroccan military forces had slaughtered a herd of camels belonging to Sahrawi nomads. On 24 November, the Sahrawi journalist organization Equipe Media reported that the slaughtering of the camels affected a total of 50 Sahrawi families living close to the berm, who were given just hours by the Moroccan military to abandon their settlement with their herds. Photographs and video of the slaughtered animals were shared through social media.

In addition, disturbing news and images were received that several Sahrawi civilians had been arrested by Moroccan military close to the berm and then subsequently killed by the Moroccan forces. The news proved difficult to verify. However, on 25 November, the Sahrawi human rights organization CODESA reported that the killing of the three Sahrawi civilians was to be deemed as extrajudicial killings. Along with the slaughter of animals and the killing of civilians by the Moroccan military, news were further

<sup>39</sup> <https://fb.watch/1Tp8bC9ZrL/>

<sup>40</sup> <https://twitter.com/malainislama/status/1329541999129726981>

<sup>41</sup> [https://mobile.twitter.com/zine\\_ouali/status/1329167241015926785](https://mobile.twitter.com/zine_ouali/status/1329167241015926785)



received that the Moroccan military had planted new landmines around a newly constructed berm in the Guergerat area on 22 November.

On 25 November, alarming news emerged about the case of the so-called Gdeim Izik prisoners. The Gdeim Izik prisoners are a group of imprisoned Sahrawi human rights defenders, journalists and political activists who were arrested prior to and after the dismantlement of the Gdeim Izik protest camp outside the occupied city of El Aaiún in 2010, which some analysts and experts say was precursor to the Arab Spring. On 25 November, the Moroccan Court of Cassation confirmed the decision rendered by the Court of Appeals in Salé in July 2019, thus upholding the lengthy prison sentences for the prisoners. The Moroccan Court of Cassation had already on 21 October announced the acceptance of the appeal submitted by the defence, with the hearing taking place on 4 November. With the confirmation of the verdict rendered by the appeals court, the Moroccan Court of Cassation announced its decision to uphold the sentences against the prominent Sahrawi political prisoners -- which range from 20 years to, 25 years, 30 years and life in prison. Human rights defenders believe that the decision of the Moroccan Court of Cassation is directly linked to the escalation of armed conflict between the two parties, with the Gdeim Izik prisoners serving as a negotiation card for Morocco in the peace talks.

On the 28 of November, the home of former political prisoner and prominent Sahrawi human rights defender, Ali Salem Tamek, who is a member of the human rights organization CODESA's executive committee, was attacked by Moroccan occupying forces. The attack is believed to be related to CODESA's continued monitoring of the situation with the establishment of a committee concerned with regulating the situation both under human rights law and humanitarian law.

On 28 November, news also emerged that the house of prominent Sahrawi human rights activist Sultana Khaya had been placed under a military siege by the Moroccan military, effectively placing her family under house arrest. Images taken from the home show police vehicles and agents on the street, right outside the home.

At present, reports indicate that the siege imposed on the occupied territories remains in force with few Sahrawi activists, journalists and human rights defenders daring to go to the streets in fear of retaliations, increasing the chances that human rights violations will go unreported. Following two weeks of escalated repression, it is reported that allegedly over 35 young Saharawis have been arrested since 13 November, with the youngest still being 12 years old with most arrested being between 16 and 17 years old. Numbers of currently detained persons remain unknown due to the limitation of freedom of movement.

## 2 The escalation of the Western Sahara conflict and the repression in the occupied territories

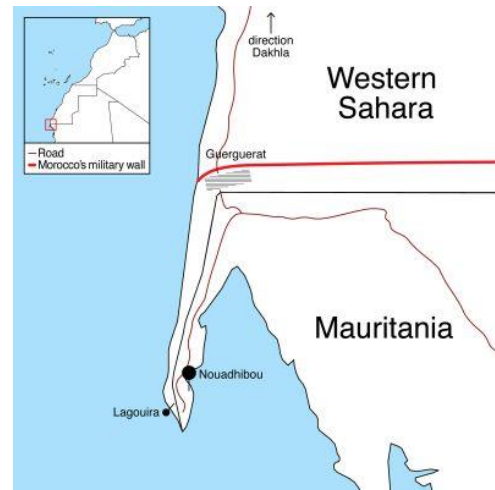
Below, the events of 13 November until 28 November are provided in a chronological order. The present factsheet is not intended to be exhaustive but intends to provide an overview of the recent events. *Based on the principle of doing no harm and in light of the current culture of total impunity in the occupied territories, names of Sahrawi civilians have been attempted removed from the present factsheet.*

### The events of 13 November

#### *The first Moroccan military invasion and the end of a 29-year-long ceasefire*

On Friday 13 November, in the early morning, Morocco launched a military operation in the area called Guerguerat, in the south-west corner of Western Sahara.<sup>42</sup> The area is part of a 5-kilometer wide demilitarized area created as part of the UN-sponsored 1991 ceasefire agreement between Morocco and the Polisario Front, and it was a strictly no-go buffer zone for the military personnel or equipment of either party.

According to reports from the ground, the Moroccan military penetrated the buffer zone via three breaches that it had opened in the wall separating the Western Sahara occupied by Morocco from the buffer zone. Its aim was to forcibly remove a group of Sahrawi civilians who were staging a peaceful sit-in that for several weeks had blocked a road built and used by Morocco as a trade route from Western Sahara to Mauritania and beyond.



The road, located in the buffer zone to connect the last Moroccan checkpoint in occupied Western Sahara and the Mauritanian border and considered illegal by the Polisario Front, has become a major route for Morocco's export of products to Mauritania and West Africa. It is used to export products from Western Sahara that transit through the port of Nouadhibou, Mauritania. Spanish truckers also use the route to transport seafood.

Polisario refers to Morocco's use of Guerguerat as "illegal". Its claim is substantiated. When Morocco and Polisario entered into the ceasefire agreement in 1988,<sup>43</sup> and the so-called Military Agreement No 1 in 1997, the trading point was not there. Eight years later, the EU started talks with Morocco for trade from Morocco and Western Sahara and in 2001, Morocco started the construction of the asphalted road across the buffer-strip in Guerguerat. The UN condemned the undertaking, stating it "involved activities that could be in violation of the ceasefire agreement", but never acted on the "commercial and civilian traffic" in the area, as it has been described in reports by the UN Secretary General.<sup>44</sup>

In 2016, Morocco completed paving the road. According to an article<sup>45</sup> published on August 30, 2016 by the Associated Press, a confidential U.N. document leaked to the news agency stated that the U.N. considered Morocco had violated the ceasefire agreement by deploying armed personnel and equipment to the construction site. While Polisario protested vehemently, tensions did not escalate into armed conflict.

On 20 October, a group of Sahrawi refugees who had travelled around 2000 kilometres from the refugee camps in Algeria staged a sit-in on the road, blocking transit. Along with protesting the road, which they said was used by Morocco to export plundered goods from their land, they demanded that the UN mission for Western Sahara finally implement its mandate and organise a long-promised referendum on self-

<sup>42</sup> About Western Sahara: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-14115273>

<sup>43</sup> Ceasefire agreement is available here: <https://sandanddust.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/military-agreement-1.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> Compilation of statements from the two parties at the website of Center for Studies on Western Sahara, at the University of Santiago de Compostela

<sup>45</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/e8085398ed0644848a41e4fb8bbe6691>

determination. The protest included nonviolent direct actions such as chipping away at the asphalt, forming human chains, chanting, waving signs and flags, playing traditional Sahrawi games and even a visit to the nearby Atlantic Ocean, where the Sahrawi refugees dipped their feet in the water. The protesters filmed and photographed their actions and shared them with a wide network of solidarity organizations and supporters.

As days and weeks went by, the traffic in both directions grew in length. Protesters periodically allowed some to pass, such as Senegalese, Mauritanian and Moroccan citizens who were trying to get home, but they refused transit to trucks carrying goods from Western Sahara. Some drivers turned around, while others tried to wait out the protest. Stranded Moroccan truckers in Mauritania complained to the Moroccan consulate that they had run out of money. Bloomberg News<sup>46</sup> reported on November 5 that around 150 trucks transit the road daily as Morocco tries to build trade relationships with sub-Saharan Africa after its economy took a dive from the effects of Covid-19 on tourism. The blockade, according to Bloomberg, had already affected prices for fresh produce in Mauritania, which gets most of its fruits and vegetables via this route.

On 6 November, reports began to emerge that the Moroccan troops deployed in Western Sahara were moving south in the direction of Guerguerat. In the next day, protesters reported hearing heavy machinery noises on the other side of the Morocco-built separation wall, and they photographed a bulldozer. On 8 November, Polisario announced that it remained committed to the ceasefire agreement, but that it would “take the necessary action” to protect Sahrawi civilians should Morocco's military enter the buffer zone.

In the early hours of the 13 November, Polisario reported that the Moroccan military had entered the buffer zone via three breaches on the wall, and that a group of men dressed in civilian clothing had rushed towards the protesters. Videos emerged of columns of smoke, destroyed vehicles and what appeared to be civilians riding in a truck. Polisario said it had moved the protesters to safety. That morning, the Moroccan General Staff of the Royal Armed Forces said in a statement that “The Royal Armed Forces (FAR) set up, on the night of Thursday to Friday, a security cordon in order to secure the flow of goods and people across the Guerguarate buffer zone, linking Morocco to Mauritania”. Polisario responded that the military invasion was a violation of the ceasefire with Morocco having carried out a military invasion in the “liberated territories”.

During the night of 13 November, shooting was reported from the front line along a Moroccan built sand wall currently dividing Western Sahara in two. The Polisario Ministry of National Defense reported 13 November that Polisario had attacked the wall.<sup>47</sup> The Sahrawi media outlet Sahrawi Voice reported:<sup>48</sup>

*“We've received official confirmation that the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army has launched #artillery strikes against Moroccan military targets alongside the Moroccan military wall that divides Western Sahara.*

*The targets of the strikes are the following Moroccan military bases and surveillance points along the wall:*

*Moroccan Military Base No. 23 (Mahbes)*

*Moroccan Military Base No. 4 (Hauza)*

*Surveillance point No. 71*

*Moroccan Military Base No. 17 (Auserd)*

*Surveillance point No. 172*

*Moroccan Military Base No. 17 and No. 18*

*A press release from the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army added that their shelling of Moroccan #military positions has caused losses of life and material losses to the Moroccan army, and that Moroccan soldiers fled some of their positions along the Moroccan wall”.*

Several videos of artillery strikes circulated online. The videos have however not been verified. *Continued attacks by Polisario have been reported every day from 14 November until 27 November.*

***The intensification of the military siege in the occupied territories and the persecution of a whole people***

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-05/a-stalled-conflict-in-sahara-risks-reigniting-as-trade-blocked>

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.spsrasd.info/news/en/articles/2020/11/13/28461.html>

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/SahrawiVoice/posts/3846414342044179>

On 13 November, shortly after the attack on the Sahrawi protesters in Guerguerat, reports from activists inside Western Sahara stated that Moroccan military, police and intelligence forces were effectively “flooding” into the cities of occupied Western Sahara. The Sahrawi journalist organization Equipe Media issued the following statement:<sup>49</sup>

*“The occupation forces mobilize their units in all cities of occupied Western Sahara and terrifies civilians, militants and activists*

*Equipe Media - El Aaiún  
November 13, 2020*

*Moroccan occupation authorities early hours deployed their forces in all streets of occupied Western Sahara cities and imposed strict security surveillance around the houses of Sahrawi militants and human rights activists in what they believe to be an attempt to attack or intimidate them, such as attempts by occupying army units to control the illegal breach of the Guerguerat (Western Sahara).*

*Hundreds of occupying police and ancillary forces were seen on alert on the streets of El-Aaiún city, as well as various vehicles charged with collecting public information, as well as public employees in the occupied city of El Aaiún. They are still being used to collect information and pulse from the Sahrawi population about what is happening in Guerguerat, south of occupied Western Sahara.”*

Later in the evening, reports emerged that Sahrawi human rights defenders and journalists were placed under surveillance with their houses being besieged. Some reported that their homes were attacked by military personnel, police and intelligence officers throwing rocks at their houses and knocking on their doors, threatening to enter. According to Equipe Media, young Sahrawis took to the streets to protest the attack on the demonstrators in Guerguerat. The following day, Equipe Media explained the events of 13 November in the following way:<sup>50</sup>

*“Equipe Media 14 November 2020*

*Friday 13 November 2020, scores of Moroccan military and police have been deployed in the occupied El Aaiún to suppress any form of protest against Morocco or any demonstrations supporting the decision of the Frente Polisario in resuming war.*

*Raids were made by paramilitary and police forces of activist houses, such as the house of Fatimato Dhawar and the house of Ms. Doughila, wife of the civilian prisoner, Mohamed Bani.*

*In the evening, on Samara street, dozens gathered to express their support for the POLISARIO and chanted slogans against the Moroccan occupation but the police quickly intervened and violently attempted to end their peaceful protest.»*

The Sahrawi journalist organization Nushatta Foundation reported the same incidents of police violence against young Sahrawis protesting.<sup>51</sup> Reports received indicate that clashes emerged between the Moroccan police and the protesting Sahrawis involving throwing of rocks and other means of defence. The clashes were met with massive repression by the police.

On 13 November, news were also received stating that Sahrawi political prisoners of the Gdeim Izik group held in Tifelt and Kentria prison were being subjected to ill-treatment and abuse in the form of verbal assaults, threats, increased isolation and revocation of phone rights. According to the families, the prisoners are being followed by a guard when they exit the cells, with a guard permanently sitting outside of their cells.

## The events of 14 November

Massive presence of Moroccan military, gendarmerie, police and intelligence forces, intimidated both Sahrawi civilians and prominent Sahrawi activists. According to the local activists, the Moroccan

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/EquipeMedia2010/posts/2086775688122800>

<sup>50</sup> [https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.emsahara.com%2F%3Fp%3D66812&h=AT2myZwIsHVnrIxBpvCNe5E7CGyoqLct8GWgZLY9bB\\_XrNtYCz7OVDd2fHWvdi2UjV0OodX-E2r2OBzfgPm13goqz9ahgSh6DwFGK8Dw9zda8jEYdA-BA8n8a1QLtmIBh32V1Nh0&s=1](https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.emsahara.com%2F%3Fp%3D66812&h=AT2myZwIsHVnrIxBpvCNe5E7CGyoqLct8GWgZLY9bB_XrNtYCz7OVDd2fHWvdi2UjV0OodX-E2r2OBzfgPm13goqz9ahgSh6DwFGK8Dw9zda8jEYdA-BA8n8a1QLtmIBh32V1Nh0&s=1)

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=841350009950050>

authorities are using the corona legislation already in place in order to limit the movements of activists, with the authorities having ordered a lockdown.

On 14 November, continued protests in support of Polisario ending the 29 year-long ceasefire took place. Reportedly, the protestors consisted mainly of young Sahrawis. Equipe Media reported the following:<sup>52</sup>

*“Equipe Media, Occupied  
November 14, 2020*

*Demonstrations continue in the occupied city of El Aaiún in support of the decision of the Frente POLISARIO to resume the armed struggle for the second day in a row despite the Moroccan police alert and demolition.*

*The streets of Samara, Tantan, Fasit, Mazwar, Al-Batimat, Al-Nahda, Hayy Al-Nahda, and Zenga Al-Sharif Al-Radi, witnessed hundreds of protesters from women and men in demonstrations during which they raised the Sahrawi flags of the Republic and echoed slogans of enthusiasm. Passing cars joined the protests by honking their horns. The occupation forces with various devices surrounded the neighbourhood and violently dismissed the demonstration.*

*Eye-witnesses told Equipe Media reporters that protesters faced the oppression of the occupation forces with initially closing the roads and allies, to ensure that their demonstration continued, before reinforcements from various forces, including elements riding motorcycles and cars and police, chased them and seven young men were arrested. Equipe Media couldn't confirm their identities.»*

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On 14 November, further artillery strikes by Polisario on Moroccan military bases were reported. On 14 November, it was also reported by the same news agency that Polisario had received a phone call from UN Secretary-General expressing serious concerns over the situation.<sup>53</sup>

## The events of 15 November

On 15 November, military and intelligence forces carried out several raids on different houses of Sahrawi activists reportedly in search of young Sahrawis having participated in the protests on 13 and 14 November. According to Equipe Media, at least seven young Sahrawis were arrested:<sup>54</sup>

*“Occupation forces raid Sahrawi houses in response to Friday and Saturday demonstrations in El Aaiún*

*Equipe Media - Editing Department  
Occupied El Aaiún November 15, 2020*

*Moroccan special forces with police units and intelligence raided the houses of three Sahrawi families Sunday afternoon without telling them the reasons. It concerns the houses of Belamish, Hamniha and Ismaili.*

*A source confirmed that it is about demonstrations in Zenga Al-Sharif Al-Radi yesterday to express Sahrawi's support for the decision of the Frente POLISARIO to resume armed struggle.”*

Later in the day, Equipe Media provided further information into the raids, calling on ICRC to urgently intervene:<sup>55</sup>

*“Equipe Media,  
November 15, 2020,*

*Hordes of the occupation authorities raided a number of Sahrawi houses in the occupied El Aaiún in Zamaleh neighbourhoods, and at the end of Tantan Street and Batmat, intimidating Sahrawi families and arresting a*

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/EquipeMedia2010/posts/2088316781302024>

<sup>53</sup> <https://www.sprasad.info/news/en/articles/2020/11/14/28502.html>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/EquipeMedia2010/posts/2088983467902022>

<sup>55</sup> <https://l.facebook.com/l.php?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.emsahara.com%2F%3Fp%3D66829&h=AT2X7qhgMCN49nH6lvLggiXuxSPKBM41gK3CFIGsjRqsSkKh1km1bqpfiaFF4yLEkqLDABD1NNWTaGrApMmN20JegGkWvNREFX5vseovu2W25k9HyYi05x4fV6qNb7HLnh-cl&s=1>



*number of young people on the pretext of their participation in the demonstrations in the city yesterday. We didn't get the overview of detainees and raided houses.*

*These Moroccan violations of Sahrawi citizens come after protests in the Occupied El Aaiún over Morocco's violation of ceasefire. The declaration by the Frente POLISARIO to end the ceasefire and the beginning of war is a legal and legitimate justification, which obliges the International Red Cross to intervene to protect Sahrawi civilians and enjoy all their rights, especially their right to peaceful demonstration....”*

According to Equipe Media, the raids carried out on 15 November followed with arrests and torture.

On 15 November, the Sahrawi journalist organization Nushatta published the names of two of the young Sahrawi s arrested, reporting that the two young men had been subjected to torture of a violent nature. Nushatta issued the following statement:<sup>56</sup>

*“Western Sahara: As War Begins, Morocco Escalates Violence Against Sahrawis*

*Nushatta Foundation Staff  
15 Nov 2020*

*Al-Ayouun, occupied Western Sahara — The Nushatta Foundation, a non-profit media and human rights organization, based in the warzone of Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, has learned that two days ago [victim], age nineteen, was abducted by the Moroccan authorities.*

*After breaking down the door of his family’s home last Sunday, the Moroccan police forcibly removed [victim] and transported him to police headquarters in the down town of occupied city of Al-Ayouun.*

*Over the next 24 hours, [victim] was subjected to such horrific torture and abuse that he is currently unable to move or speak.*

*When his family attempted to ascertain his whereabouts, they were told that their son is being held as a civil prisoner in Ben Al Mahdi Hospital in Al-Ayouun.*

*In an interview with the Nushatta Foundation, [victim]’s mother described a conversation that the family had with the doctor who is in charge of her son. His family has been forbidden from seeing him, but they have been told by the doctor that he is currently being treated for mental and psychological issues resulting from his mistreatments at the hands of the occupying authorities. Furthermore, his doctor described his condition as “critical.”*

*The wrongful capture of [victim] is just one instance of a widespread campaign by Moroccan authorities to threaten, abduct, and silence Saharan citizens living in the occupied territory, whether they are ordinary citizens or political or human rights activists. These actions are understood to be a direct result of the situation that arose in the Guerguerat buffer zone last week.*

*On Friday, November 13th, Moroccan authorities attacked peaceful protesters, in a double violation to the international law - ending a thirty-year-old ceasefire agreement with the Polisario. The Sahrawi protesters then returned fire, and this has lead to a declaration of war by the Polisario.*

*Today, the situation continues to escalate as plain-clothes policemen have been leading a contingency of special forces from house to house searching for Saharan citizens who clashed with the Moroccan authorities yesterday.”*

## The events of 16 November

On 16 November, further raids of houses of Sahrawi civilians and prominent Sahrawi activists were carried out in the Sahrawi neighbourhoods in the cities of occupied Western Sahara, with Moroccan forces looking for youth who participated in the demonstrations.

According to Equipe Media, a total of 25 young Sahrawis have been arrested in response to the protests carried out in the latest days. The raids, carrying with them intimidations, threats and abuse, was intended to intimidate Sahrawi civilians and activists, according to Equipe Media. On 16 November, Equipe Media issued the following statement:<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> <https://nushatta.com/en/?p=1168>

<sup>57</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/EquipeMedia2010/posts/2090470787753290>

*“Occupied El Aaiún: The arrests and intimidation campaign continues and raids on media activists houses*

*Equipe Media - Editing Department  
November 16, 2020*

*Moroccan occupation forces raided several houses in the occupied El Aaiún to arrest a number of young men for participating in peaceful demonstrations organized in El Aaiún over the past three days to demand the independence of Western Sahara and in support of the decision of the Frente Polisario to resume the armed struggle, and the liberation of the Sahrawi republic from Morocco.*

*These raids included the home of activists [victims] who were not in their homes during the raid*

*The Moroccan arrest and intimidation campaign continues, and the fate of the detainees is not yet known after the occupation authorities have banned their families from visiting them.”*

On 16 November, the police also raided the homes of two Sahrawi journalists, Mohammed Haddi and Cherif Bakhil, from the media collective Nushatta Foundation. They were reportedly able to flee and they, as well as other journalists from Nushatta, have gone into hiding. Nushatta reported on 17 November that:

*“the Moroccan campaign of aggression against Sahrawi citizens continues to intensify. Yesterday, occupation special forces raided the home of journalists Mohamed Haddi and Cherif Bakhil in El Aaiun. Both men are wanted by the Moroccan authorities for their media and human rights activism with the Nushatta Foundation. Mohammed Haddi is involved in photography and presentation and Cherif Bakhil works in the department of photography and logistics. Although neither of the journalists were at home during the raids, the Moroccan special forces, led by Ahmad Khaya, Ali Buffiri and Yonse Fadel (known as Ould Al-Tahaima), intimidated the families of the two men with insults and threats and continue their search for Haddi and Bakhil”.*

Reports were also received that several of the Nushatta journalists have been placed under continuous surveillance and intimidation by the Moroccan occupying forces.

In the past years, media activists from Nushatta have reported being followed and monitored, and several have been arrested. Most recently, on May 15 2020, photographer Ibrahim Mrikli was arbitrarily detained in El Aaiún by agents in plainclothes and accused of, among other things, "insulting public servants" and "violating quarantine regulations". An urgent appeal from Front Line Defenders stated that the arrest was "in direct reprisal for his peaceful and legitimate human rights work, documenting violations in Western Sahara".<sup>58</sup>

## The events of 17 November

On 17 November, it was reported that the massive presence of military, police and intelligence forces was still increasing. According to local activists, the cities of the occupied territories were placed under a fierce siege with few people daring to leave their houses. According to activists, the repression has led to the muffling of demonstrations with civilians not daring to enter the streets.

On 17 November, Equipe Media detailed the events of the latest days by publishing the following statement on their website:<sup>59</sup>

*“State of war and violent repression of civil protests in Western Sahara*

*Following the action of the Moroccan occupying forces in Gargarat against Sahrawi civilians on November 13, 2020, and the response, also armed, by the Polisario against the Moroccan berm which cuts the country, the Sahrawis of the various cities of Western Sahara have expressed their support for their national liberation movement and its war action.*

*In Morocco’s occupied Western Sahara west of the berm, towns have been besieged by Moroccan security forces, with checkpoints blocking all roads. The homes of Sahrawi militants have been particularly monitored.*

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/arbitrary-detention-human-rights-defender-ibrahim-mrikli>

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.emsahara.com/?p=66843>

*Every night since Friday, November 13, 2020, hundreds of demonstrators have taken to the streets of El Aaiún and Dakhla.*

*In the streets of all districts of El Aaiún, demonstrators shout and wave SADR flags, chanting “Free Western Sahara”. Long convoys of cars joined the demonstrators honking their horns. Clashes took place with the Moroccan security forces who wanted to disperse the crowds.*

*Encirclement of the neighbourhoods is not without difficulty everywhere.*

*In the district of the Red Apartments, the demonstrators succeeded in completely closing the streets, thus blocking the access of the occupying forces. They gathered to continue their protests until Moroccan reinforcements succeeded in dismantling the makeshift roadblocks. The protesters were then chased away by motorcycle squadrons, police cars and auxiliary forces.*

*25 young Sahrawis were arrested after the demonstrations. They are in solitary confinement and banned from visitors. According to several accounts, Moroccan agents in masks or in civilian clothes, mixed with the crowds of demonstrators, film the activists, including the leaders, who are then chased and arrested.*

*In occupied Dakhla, protests took place in the Ksaikisat and Oum Tounsi neighbourhoods.*

*In the Oum Tounsi neighbourhood, whose inhabitants are Sahrawis forced to leave their village of Bir Anzaran 150 km east of Dakhla, women came out in large numbers, shouting against the Moroccan occupation, and in support of their army.*

*“We want to return to our village, to live there free and without worry, under the flag of the Sahrawi Republic. We are also interested in choosing our way of life without fear” says one participant.*

*In Boujdour, 4 Sahrawi citizens arrested on November 16 are appearing today in El Aaiun.*

*Since November 15, long columns of Moroccan military reinforcements have been observed in El Aaiun, Tan-Tan, Dakhla and Smara.*

*Équipe Média, November 17, 2020”*

The Sahrawi human rights organization ISACOM published the following statement on its Facebook page:<sup>60</sup>

*“Statement on the kidnapping of Sahrawi militants and raiding of family homes*

*The Sahrawi Organ against the Moroccan Occupation (ISACOM) was notified on several raids carried out by the Moroccan occupation forces against a number of Sahrawi family homes in the city of El Aaiun, after serious deterioration of the human rights situation in the occupied cities of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. This has taken place after the military aggression launched on Friday 13 November by the Moroccan army against Sahrawi civilians who were peacefully protesting in front of the illegal breach opened in El Guerguerat region. The raids are part of a retaliatory campaign targeting the Sahrawi civilians, after Morocco violated the ceasefire agreement signed between the Frente POLISARIO and the Moroccan Kingdom in 1991.*

*In this regard, we have registered the following violations:*

- *Raided houses in the occupied city of El Aaiún: [victim], [victim], [victim], [victim], [victim], [victim], [victim], [victim] and [victim], (one of this family members was bitten by security agents) and [victim] (their son [victim] was arrested).*
- *In the occupied city of Bojador, the Moroccan repressive forces arrested three minors, mainly: [victim], [victim] and [victim], in addition to young man [victim] on the evening of 16 November 2020, after they participated to a protest demanding independence and the immediate withdrawal of the Moroccan occupying forces from Western Sahara. The minors were presented under arrest before the Persecutor of the King in the First Instance Court of the Moroccan occupying state.*
- *We also received information from eyewitnesses regarding the persecution of peaceful demonstrators in the occupied cities of Dajla and Smara, who were also participating in demonstrations to demand the Sahrawi people’s right to freedom and independence.*
- *We further learned that the Sahrawi activists Ali Saaduni and Nurdin Al-Argubi were abducted on November the 10th afternoon. Two police vehicles, from the Moroccan security services took part in the kidnapping operation near Tantan Street, in the occupied city of El Aaiun. The activists were intercepted by two security agents in plain clothes. These two police agents are well known torturers named Ali Al-*

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/isacom.official/photos/a.115015757026407/154080269786622/>

*Buifri and the other one known by the nickname 'Uld Touhima', both have committed numerous violent crimes and repressive practices against Sahrawi civilians in total impunity.*

- o *Ali Saaduni and Nurdin Argubi were bitten inside police vehicles then transported to separate directions towards the northern area of Al-Hagunia where they were, again, subjected to physical and psychological tortures in the outskirts of the city. Then they were threatened to be incarcerated and even raped if they continue expressing their demands for freedom and independence.*

*The Sahrawi Organ against the Moroccan Occupation condemns the intimidation, violence and raids on the Sahrawi citizens during the past two days, as well as the kidnappings, torture and serious abuses committed against the Sahrawi activists Ali Saadouni and Nuredin Argubi, as a result of their peaceful struggle and their steadfast rejection to the continued Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara. We also would like to draw the attention of the international community towards the seriousness of the crime of forced disappearance previously carried out by the Moroccan authorities of occupation in the occupied city of El Aaiun against several members and militants of ISACOM as well as hundreds of other Sahrawi civilians, many of whom are still missing. This is one of the most heinous political crimes that require the attention of all peace loving people and to ensure that the perpetrators are taken to justice.*

*The Sahrawi Organ against the Moroccan Occupation, while we consider that the cowardly kidnappings of Ali Saaduni and Nureddin Argubi is a revenge measure deliberately committed by the Moroccan security services; And while we continue to be concerned about the constant monitoring and persecution of members of ISACOM by Moroccan police vehicles using special tag numbers, since the end of September 2020, and wonder if that is related to preparations to kidnap them.*

- o *We call on the International Red Cross to intervene urgently to pressure Morocco in order to implement and respect the Fourth Geneva Convention on the Protection of Civilians in Time of War, after the Moroccan occupation regime ignited a new war against the Sahrawi people on November 13. Therefore we remind the ICRC of responsibilities it has ignored for a long time under the pretext that there was no war in the territory.*
- o *We also launch an urgent appeal to the United Nations and all international human rights organizations to intensify their pressure on Morocco to find out the truth and circumstances of the operation of kidnapping carried out by the Moroccan authorities. We also call for the perpetrators, mentioned above, and many others to be brought to international justice.*
- o *We condemn the Moroccan regime's continued acts of intimidation against Sahrawi civilians, including physical and verbal attacks as well as raiding of their homes. We hold the United Nations responsible for Morocco's persistence in these violations due to its decades-long silence on this issue. We call on the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights and its related organs to dispatch investigation missions to the occupied territories, particularly now, in times of war.*
- o *We renew our call to the ICRC to guarantee international protection for Sahrawi militants by virtue of its responsibilities in accordance with the Fourth Geneva Convention, and we hold the United Nations and its various organs responsible for the safety and security of the Sahrawi peoples, whom it has failed for 30 years on false promises and delays as a result of their submission to the Moroccan pressures.*

*The Executive Bureau of the Sahrawi Organ against the Moroccan Occupation.  
Occupied El Aaiun / Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.  
17 November 2020"*

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On 17 November, news surfaced that Polisario's three demands for ending the war were (i) to close the Guerguerat crossing, (ii) to set a date for a referendum and (iii) to free Sahrawi political prisoners.<sup>61</sup>

A report published in April 2020 details the different cases of **Sahrawi political prisoners**.<sup>62</sup> Sahrawi human rights defenders advocating for social justice and activists who demand the celebration of a long-promised UN referendum on self-determination for Western Sahara are often charged with violent crimes, tortured into signing confessions and given long prison sentences, effectively ending or severely limiting their advocacy work. The arbitrary detention of Sahrawi human rights defenders have been widely documented by the United Nations human rights mechanisms, particularly by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, whom has found that Sahrawi 's advocating in favour of self-determination is subjected to discriminatory practices in breach of the equality of human rights.

<sup>61</sup>[https://alakhbar.info/?q=node%2F29203&fbclid=IwAR3OYMXf0Or7tpwKfyPezqCWt9QvLMEIZgDiNRXC3pC2U\\_zF\\_2G2IRvXkEE](https://alakhbar.info/?q=node%2F29203&fbclid=IwAR3OYMXf0Or7tpwKfyPezqCWt9QvLMEIZgDiNRXC3pC2U_zF_2G2IRvXkEE)

<sup>62</sup> [https://vest-sahara.s3.amazonaws.com/skvs/feature-images/File/101/5ea2b523bc7f3\\_PrisonerAppealApr2020Eng.pdf](https://vest-sahara.s3.amazonaws.com/skvs/feature-images/File/101/5ea2b523bc7f3_PrisonerAppealApr2020Eng.pdf)

There is particular concern over the situation of human rights defender and political prisoner Yahya Mohamed El Hafed Iaazza, who remains disappeared since October 13, when he was removed from his cell at Bouzaikam Prison and taken to an unknown location after telling his family that he had been exposed to a prisoner ill with COVID-19. In an urgent appeal, Front Line Defenders has called for Morocco to allow his family access to El Hafed Iaazza and to release him.<sup>63</sup>

The latest developments in the case of Yahya Mohamed fall in line with the continuous and systematic racial discrimination and punishment of Sahrawi political prisoners, continuing throughout their detention, as also recently witnessed in other cases:

- Two of the members of the so-called Student Group were recently transferred within the prison of Bouzaikarn, with one of them, Elkantawi Elbeur, being subjected to physical abuse before being forced to stand for six hours in the courtyard of the prison; under the scorching sun. Their case was treated in an opinion rendered by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Opinion No. 67/2019,<sup>64</sup> holding that their detention is arbitrary and that the students should be released. Still, Morocco has not implemented the decision. On the contrary, the young students have been subjected to acts of reprisals<sup>65</sup> in response to their appeal made to the United Nations (see A/HRC/45/16).<sup>66</sup>
- On 21 October, a young Sahrawi student Al-Hussein Al-Bachir Ibrahim was sentenced to 12 years in prison by the Appeal courts. Prior to this, his case had been treated in a joint communication issued 7 July 2020 by the UN Special Procedures (Jal Mar 2/2020),<sup>67</sup> expressing serious concerns into the lack of evidence, usage of confessions signed under torture as evidence and evidence that Hussein had solely been imprisoned due to his activism.
- The continued isolation and ill-treatment of Khatri Dadda, a 21-year old Sahrawi activist and journalist recently sentenced to a total of 20 years in prison, remains of great concern, according to a joint communication issued 21 July 2020 by the UN Special Procedures (JAL Mar 3/2020).<sup>68</sup> In the communication, the UN Special Procedures also expressed serious concerns into the violation of the right to due process.
- The continued isolation of several of the Gdeim Izik prisoners similarly remains of great concern, after having been held under arbitrary detention for nearly a decade following their arrest in conjunction with the dismantlement of the Gdeim Izik protest camp in the occupied territories of Western Sahara in November 2010. The case of the Gdeim Izik prisoners have amongst other been treated in a joint communication issued by the UN Special Procedures in July 2017 (AL Mar 3/2017)<sup>69</sup> with the Special Rapporteurs expressing their concern over the violation of the right to due process and evidence showing that the activists had solely been arrested and imprisoned in response to their human rights activism and participation in the peaceful protest.

## The events of 18 November

On 18 November, local activists reported the continuance of the fierce repression by the occupying forces. Few Sahrawi civilians and activists dared to leave their houses, reportedly leading to the suppression of any public demonstrations.

Local activists further reported about an “arbitrary campaign of violence” against Sahrawi civilians who go out into the streets and who are targeted and subjected to arbitrary abuse and violence by Moroccan police officers. Activists reported that “Moroccan occupying forces are stopping cars and taxis to get people out of them and beat them up, and target those walking the streets”.

<sup>63</sup><https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/whereabouts-imprisoned-human-rights-defender-yahya-mohamed-el-hafed-aa-za-unknown>

<sup>64</sup>[https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Detention/Opinions/Session86/A\\_HRC\\_WGAD\\_2019\\_67\\_AdvanceEditedVersion.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Detention/Opinions/Session86/A_HRC_WGAD_2019_67_AdvanceEditedVersion.pdf)

<sup>65</sup><https://vest-sahara.no/en/news/the-un-calls-on-morocco-to-release-imprisoned-Sahrawi-s>

<sup>66</sup>[https://vest-sahara.s3.amazonaws.com/skvs/feature-images/File/187/5f67a5f0c0aa9\\_WGAD2020.pdf](https://vest-sahara.s3.amazonaws.com/skvs/feature-images/File/187/5f67a5f0c0aa9_WGAD2020.pdf)

<sup>67</sup><https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=25422>

<sup>68</sup><https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=25448&fbclid=IwAR0TJPydV1yiH-KPlqJNkOJQxAGOCuXN0zmgXONvGkIdeWdBt1-TxE0sV0>

<sup>69</sup>[https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=23226&fbclid=IwAR1\\_-DNY-asBo74awPowBXYmPPUKEPuNWAfSb\\_oevB3VVJ\\_Ke7RGmo6KVBu](https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=23226&fbclid=IwAR1_-DNY-asBo74awPowBXYmPPUKEPuNWAfSb_oevB3VVJ_Ke7RGmo6KVBu)



On 18 November, reports indicated that there was an escalation in the persecution of Sahrawi human rights defenders. The president of the newly established Sahrawi human rights organization ISACOM and recipient of the 2019 Right Livelihood Award, Aminatou Haidar, was prevented from travelling from the occupied territories of Western Sahara to the Canary Islands in Spain on the grounds that she needed to present a medical examination, including a negative COVID-19 test, prior to boarding the aircraft. However, her son was allowed to travel to Spain. Spain's requirement for travellers from abroad to provide a negative COVID-19 test did not apply until the 23 of November.

Through her Twitter account, Aminatou denounced, at the airport through a video she recorded, that she was being illegally stopped from travelling, with the occupation authorities preventing Sahrawi human rights defenders on discriminatory grounds from leaving the occupied territories.<sup>70</sup>

On 18 November, reports were also received that a 12 year-old girl had been arrested and tortured by the Moroccan police after having attended school wearing a T-shirt with the Western Sahara flag. Local activists report that the child was subjected to torture and that the Moroccan police forced her to sing the Moroccan national anthem and pay tribute to the Moroccan flag and the King of Morocco. Al Gargarat Media issued a statement detailing the arrest of the child:

*“Al Gargarat Media  
18 November 2020*

*A Sahrawi girl, [victim], tortured and kidnapped by the Moroccan occupation forces.*

*The Sahrawi girl [victim] was born in [victim] 2008. She was arrested at Al-Nahda secondary school last Monday and transferred to the Security Directorate of the Occupation of Morocco, where she was subjected to psychological and physical torture. The reason for her arrest is that she wore a military uniform and drew the Rasd national flag on her school uniform.*

*The Moroccan occupation forces and Moroccan intelligence teams are surrounding the house of the Sahrawi girl to prevent rights professionals and the Sahrawi media from visiting her,*

*It should be noted that the Moroccan occupation forces threatened the father of the girl that no Sahrawi journalist or human rights worker would be allowed to enter, or that the Moroccan occupation forces would punish him, And after all these events, a girl was in a state of fear and panic and could not return to the school for fear of being kidnapped and tortured by the Moroccan occupation forces.”*

## The events of 19 November

On 19 November, reports were received of arbitrary violence against Sahrawi civilians in the streets of the occupied territories of Western Sahara. The presence of military, police and intelligence forces continued to be massive, with Sahrawi activists finding themselves under continuous surveillance.

On 19 November, reports were received that prominent Sahrawi activist and human rights defender Sultana Khaya was detained and abused at a checkpoint between the cities of El Aaiún and Bojador after returning to the occupied territories from Spain. Reports state that she was beaten while under police custody. According to local activists, she was released from custody after 1,5 hours, and before her release her house was surrounded by Moroccan police. This is a typical modus of Moroccan authorities in the occupied Western Sahara: whenever an activist returns from abroad or from prison, their homes are put under siege to prevent people from gathering and welcoming them. There are videos showing this siege taken from the home.

According to Sultana's own account and eyewitnesses including her sister and other family members, police entered the family's home on the afternoon of 19 November before Sultana arrived in order to remove several young men who had arrived to welcome her home. Sultana's 82 year-old mother confronted the agents and told them to leave. One of them shoved her violently and she fell against a doorframe, hurting her back. He then pushed her again and she fell to the ground, hitting her head on the floor. There is

<sup>70</sup> <https://t.co/uLN4ay6FrQ>

video of the aftermath of the assault,<sup>71</sup> with the mother lying still on the ground. At around 4am on 20 November her condition was so concerning that the family took her to the Bojador Provincial Hospital. The family was told that she was in serious condition and needed to be evacuated to the hospital in El Aaiún, but that she could not be accompanied by anyone, so they decided to take her home.

It should be noted that due to prior experiences Sahrawis, particularly well-known activists, consider Morocco-run hospitals in Western Sahara to be unsafe places, and do not trust the medical teams, or treatments that they prescribe. The Bojador hospital did issue a medical report, which was shared, noting injuries to her back and head. The cause was listed as "aggression". The family also has an x-ray, which they have also shared. Although the family was seriously concerned for the mother's health, they were too afraid to return to the hospital and were also unable to transport her to El Aaiún or to obtain medical help from a trusted doctor, because police were not allowing anyone to enter or leave the house.

On 19 November, and in response to Aminatou Haidar having denounced her illegal ban on travelling the previous day, Royal Maroc Airlines issued a statement that she had tested positive for COVID-19. Reporting about the incident, the BBC quoted the document by Royal Air Maroc stating that the reason for Haidar's flight ban was that she had tested positive for COVID-19,<sup>72</sup> which Haidar promptly denied through another videotaped statement in which she also called on the ICRC and human rights organizations to assume responsibility in protecting human rights defenders in Western Sahara. It appears that Haidar was singled out for discriminatory treatment through the weaponization of COVID-19.<sup>73</sup>

A prominent pro-Morocco activist by the online name of Zine el abidine El ouali, whose profile information states he is Vice president of the Sahara League for Democracy and Human Rights (LSDDH), also shared on his Twitter account<sup>74</sup> an official-looking document with Moroccan Ministry of Health letterhead that included Haidar's passport number, and which stated that on the 12th of November she had tested positive for COVID-19 per a lab called Kamar. We have not been able to verify the document, but we are deeply concerned about the nature of this type of online activity, which can incite to hatred, stigmatization and violence.

Reports were further received that drones were flying over the occupied cities of Daklha, in Southern Western Sahara. Similar reports have also been received of drones flying over El Aaiún, terrorizing its citizens. The Sahrawi news outlet Sahrawi Voice outlet reported that the drones were acquired through a Moroccan-Israeli \$48m arms deal.<sup>75</sup>

## The events of 20 November

According to local activists, the siege imposed in the cities of the occupied territories continued throughout 20 November with few activists daring to leave their houses. News also surfaced that a herd of camels had been slaughtered by the Moroccan military forces close to the berm and that three Sahrawi civilians had been captured and killed by the Moroccan military.

On 20 November, reports were received that Sultana's house continued to be under surveillance and surrounded, and that it had been subjected to another raid. The family reported that Sultana's sister was assaulted by police at the doorway of her home and hit on the head with a nightstick, resulting in a serious injury and head wound that left her bleeding. The family has provided videos and photographs of the aftermath, some of which have circulated online.<sup>76</sup>

On 20 November, reports indicated that a Sahrawi student and activist had been arrested by Moroccan police in El Aaiún. The young student is known for his activism and his support for the right to self-

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/100001893204133/posts/4721428247930235/>

<sup>72</sup> <https://fb.watch/1Tp8bC9ZrL/>

<sup>73</sup> <https://twitter.com/malainislama/status/1329541999129726981>

<sup>74</sup> [https://mobile.twitter.com/zine\\_ouali/status/1329167241015926785](https://mobile.twitter.com/zine_ouali/status/1329167241015926785)

<sup>75</sup> <https://t.co/sTITGuShnX>

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=188603779560690>

determination. His current situation remains as of now uncertain to do the limitation imposed on movements.<sup>77</sup>

On 20 November, it was further reported that the father of Sahrawi female human rights defender Mahfouda Bomba Lefkir was subjected to medical negligence on discriminatory grounds when his surgery was cancelled after an officials at the hospital realized that he was the father of a well-known activist.

According to Mahfouda, her father had fractured his pelvis on 16 November after falling in the bathroom while taking a bath. He was transported in an ambulance to the “Bel-Mahdi” hospital in El Aaiún. His condition required surgery. According to Mahfouda, the Moroccan authorities intervened to halt her father's treatment, leading to a delay in the surgery and the consequent medical negligence against her father. On 20 November, and due to the postponement of treatment at the local hospital, the family tried to get the father admitted at the military hospital in El Aaiún, Western Sahara. However, when the family arrived, hospital administrators refused to admit him saying they had received “higher instructions” to refuse his admission to the military hospital.

The hospital's refusal to admit her father led Mahfouda to protest inside the hospital against the management of the hospital in Al-Mahdi in El Aaiún, which she shared on Facebook.<sup>78</sup> It is reported that Bomba Lefkir received the needed surgery on Sunday 22 November.

## The events of 21 November

On 21 November, news were received that the wedding of two prominent Sahrawi journalists belonging to the Sahrawi journalist organization Equipe Media, Nazha El Khalidi and Ahmed Ettanji was attacked by Moroccan police and intelligence forces. Several international NGOs have condemned the targeting of the two journalists, amongst them the Coalition for Women in Journalism<sup>79</sup> and the International Organization Against Torture (OMCT)<sup>80</sup>.

On 21 November, reports were received that both the Moroccan police and the intelligence services had obstructed the wedding of Nazha El Khalidi and Ahmed Ettanji, two well-known journalists at Equipe Media.

The two Sahrawi journalists had announced their engagement on Facebook earlier this year and their wedding celebrations were planned to be held the weekend of 21 November. On the day of the celebration, 21 November, the wedding was violently interrupted by Moroccan forces. The two activists reported that Ahmed's family home of Ahmed, where the celebration was to take place, was besieged by Moroccan forces.

Reports indicate that at 3pm on 21 November, Ahmed's family home was placed under surveillance by the Moroccan intelligence forces. Accompanying the intelligence forces were two police cars and a van belonging to the auxiliary forces. According to Ahmed, police closed the access to their street with vehicles belonging to the auxiliary forces. Ahmed informs that the Moroccan forces threatened him with arrest and with raiding his home, and that all the while the agents were hurling insults against his family. The police did not allow Ahmed's mother or his sisters and nieces to enter their own home.

Nazha, as per Sahrawi tradition, was in a different house that was also attacked by the Moroccan police. As of 21 November, it was surrounded by the Moroccan police. On the day of the wedding, Moroccan police and officers belonging to the intelligence forces blockaded the doors and did not allow anyone to enter or to leave. The police also raided another home of Nazha's relatives and smashed the electrical meter, switching off their electricity. Nazha's entire family was threatened, and Nazha was told by the

<sup>77</sup> <http://nushatta.com/2020/11/20/5ioI/>

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3508696719248448>

<sup>79</sup> [https://womeninjournalism.org/cfwij-press-statements/morocco-amid-heated-conflict-swahili-journalist-nazha-elkhalidi-and-her-fiance-are-under-house-arrest-and-their-wedding-postponed-by-moroccan-authorities?fbclid=IwAR1jiDh9wkj4zeU58N5-8Yx2TmtWZ8e\\_mCl5VfYsSj7FEfmsKCymwNZDI8](https://womeninjournalism.org/cfwij-press-statements/morocco-amid-heated-conflict-swahili-journalist-nazha-elkhalidi-and-her-fiance-are-under-house-arrest-and-their-wedding-postponed-by-moroccan-authorities?fbclid=IwAR1jiDh9wkj4zeU58N5-8Yx2TmtWZ8e_mCl5VfYsSj7FEfmsKCymwNZDI8)

<sup>80</sup> [https://omct.org/fr/human-rights-defenders/urgent-interventions/morocco/2020/11/d26189/?fbclid=IwAR0d\\_Yef3ltdm3m6UIFkUdAquek\\_N5Kqyclw3D-0vRI-o2aajqIYqxiphY0](https://omct.org/fr/human-rights-defenders/urgent-interventions/morocco/2020/11/d26189/?fbclid=IwAR0d_Yef3ltdm3m6UIFkUdAquek_N5Kqyclw3D-0vRI-o2aajqIYqxiphY0)

intelligence officers, that the reason for their actions against their wedding was that Nazha had denounced human rights violations on Facebook.

Later in the evening, on 21 November, Ahmed was followed to his bride by officers belonging to the intelligence forces and the couple was able to meet. The celebration was however still blocked by the Moroccan forces, with both families held hostage. The houses of both Sahrawi journalists were held under a siege until the end of 23 November, preventing the movement of the families and intimidating them. From that moment onward, the family homes were placed under surveillance. Ahmed and Nazha denounced that *“We fear for our lives and also fear the harassment we receive, especially in the current war situation. We fear for our lives because we report the reality in the territory to NGOs and to the media”*.

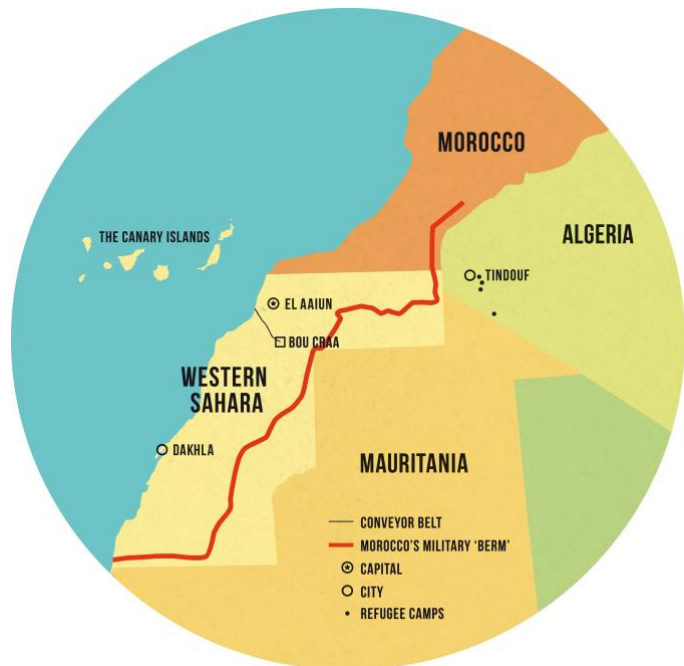
In addition to the harassment of the journalists' families and the targeting of their wedding, the singer who was supposed to attend the couple's celebrations was also targeted. On 20 November, the day before the wedding, he reported that a “huge number” of police and intelligence officers went to his house and surrounded him. According to the singer, the Moroccan forces called ordered him to leave his house. Upon entering the street, the police said: “If you go to that celebration; we will kill you directly”. Fearing for his life, the Sahrawi singer cancelled his performance at the wedding.

## The events of 22 November

On 22 November, news surfaced that Moroccan military were planting thousands of landmines around a newly built berm in Guergarat.

The “berm” refers to a wall built by Morocco during the first armed conflict from 1975 until 1991, with Morocco starting its construction in 1981. The berm divides the territory of Western Sahara in two with the aim of dividing the people living in the occupied territories from the people living in the Sahrawi refugee camps (see photo for illustration).

The berm is 1600 miles-long and is lined with what is thought to be the world's largest minefield. The landmines along the berm have caused many deaths and casualties among Sahrawi civilians, most of whom live in the Sahrawi refugee camps.



Following the recent escalation of the war, Morocco has extended the wall and constructed a sand berm in the Guergarat area.<sup>81</sup>

The news of newly planted landmines in the Guergarat area were confirmed in a statement issued by the Sahrawi Mine Action Coordination Office (SMACO) on 22 November.

The statement of SMACO read in full:

*“Communique*

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-morocco-westensahara-idUSKBN27X2MH>

*Based on reliable reports received by the Sahrawi Mine Action Coordination Office-SMACO from the Guergarat area in the southwest of Western Sahara, Moroccan occupation army has planted thousands of Anti-personal and anti-tank landmines around a 3 km long newly built berm.*

*SMACO strongly believes that this Moroccan step is not only a flagrant violation of military agreements 01 and 02, but an unjustified waste of the effort of many years of tireless mine action activities.*

*There is no doubt that the resulted contamination from the excessive use of mines and explosive ordnances will cause many civilian casualties and deepen the tragedy of the Sahrawi civilians who have been forced into displacement.*

*While tremendous humanitarian demining efforts have been exerted over 14 years achieving the release of 149.6 million square meters of contaminated areas in the liberated territories of the SADR, thanks to the collaborative work of the SADR government, UN and other internationals actors; the violation of the ceasefire by Morocco on August 13th in Guergarat will push back those efforts to the starting point and undermine the goal of a mine-free world by 2025.*

*SMACO strongly condemns the use of mines which is unjustified under any pretext or purpose. Therefore, we appeal to the international community and relevant international organizations to put pressure on the Moroccan state to stop using landmines and to realize that planting these internationally prohibited weapons will inevitably harm any efforts to bring peace, and will incite war and exhaust the efforts of donors.*

*The Kingdom of Morocco is still one of the few countries that have not signed the landmine and cluster munition ban treaties in complete contradiction to the various divine laws, the requirements of international law, international humanitarian law, and the agreements concluded between the two parties”.*<sup>82</sup>

## The events of 23 November

On 23 November, local activists reported that the siege imposed on the occupied territories continued, with still few if any activists daring to enter into the streets. Arbitrary use of violence against Sahrawi civilians was further reported.

On 23 November, Equipe Media reported on the slaughtering of camels by the Moroccan military forces, noting that the military had slaughtered a total of 21 camels affecting a total of 50 Sahrawi families:<sup>83</sup>

*“Moroccan war against shepherds and herds.*

*War between Morocco and the Sahrawi People’s Liberation Army resumed on 13th November, subsequent to Moroccan attack against Sahrawi civilians in Gargarat which invalidates the terms of the cease-fire signed in 1991. The attacks of the Sahrawi army have targeted different points of the Moroccan berm which divides Western Sahara in two and has allowed for decades the Moroccan plunder of natural resources of the territory under military occupation, West of the berm.*

*The Haouza area extends east and west of the wall. On the night of November 18 to 19, 2020, near the village of Haouza, in El Msamir, a special battalion of the Moroccan army with heavy weaponry attacked Sahrawi herds located east of the wall with rockets, in liberated territory. At least 21 camels died and 22 others are seriously injured. These are camels belonging to Sahrawis living in the Tindouf region. Driven by drought and aridity, they approach the berm to eat in the Moroccan army’s garbage cans.*

*On the morning of November 19, Moroccan soldiers ordered nomadic Sahrawi shepherds and their families in the Western area of Haouza to clear within 24 hours the region which they claim is a “war zone”, although the missiles of the Polisario target only military posts.*

*According to the shepherds, 50 families are affected, and the total herds number around 500 camels and 5,000 goats.*

*24 hours is not enough to round up the herds and leave. The order to evacuate the area was not accompanied by any indication of a fallback area or any offer of assistance.*

*On Friday 20th November, according to the testimony of a Bedouin Sahrawi, Moroccan forces killed 102 camels in the region of El Farsia between what is called the great berm and the small berm.*

<sup>82</sup> <http://spsrasd.info/news/en/articles/2020/11/22/28868.html>

<sup>83</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/EquipeMedia2010/posts/2097539297046439>



*In the same area, they forced 60 Sahrawi Bedouin families to leave the area immediately, under threat of being the target of their attacks, families and herds.*

*Équipe Média, El Aaiun, occupied Western Sahara  
23th November 2020"*

It should be noted that camels play a central role in Sahrawi life and identity. They are also a vital source of sustenance and transportation for Sahrawi nomads, and each animal is very expensive to purchase. The deliberate slaughter of so many camels amounts to a direct attack against Sahrawi cultural identity. In addition, it is also important to note that when Morocco invaded Western Sahara, and according to various sources, one of the main aims of the Moroccan military strategy was to exterminate Sahrawis through the poisoning of their wells and the slaughter of their cattle.

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On 23 November, Polisario confirmed in a statement that the "the Sahrawi people will continue the armed struggle until obtaining guarantees and operational measures for the organization of self-determination referendum".<sup>84</sup>

On the same day, the international human rights organization OXFAM, which provides humanitarian aid to the Sahrawi refugee camps, issued a statement declaring that the collapse of the Western Sahara ceasefire "threatens prospect of a peaceful solution to 45-yearlong conflict".<sup>85</sup>

## The events of 24 November

On 24 November, the spokesman for the United Nations Secretary General confirmed the continuation of hostilities in Western Sahara, calling for elimination of all obstacles to the resumption of the political process.

The spokesman reported that the United Nations "continue to receive reports of sporadic gunfire, and this along the northern and eastern parts of the Moroccan sand wall," and that "the Mission obviously continues to be in contact with all relevant stakeholders, and our message continues to make it clear that the parties must take all necessary measures to defuse tensions, eliminate all obstacles to the resumption of the political process".<sup>86</sup>

## The events of 25 November

On the 25 November, the Moroccan Court of Cassation issued its verdict in the case of the so-called Gdeim Izik prisoners, a group of Sahrawi human rights defenders, journalists and members of the Gdeim Izik dialogue committee who were arrested prior to and following the violent dismantlement in 2010 by Moroccan forces of the Gdeim Izik protest camp, considered a precursor to the Arab Spring.

On 25 November, the Moroccan Court of Cassation confirmed the decision rendered by the Court of Appeals in Salé in July 2019, thus upholding the lengthy prison sentences for the prisoners. The Moroccan Court of Cassation had already on 21 October announced the acceptance of the appeal submitted by the defence, with the hearing taking place on 4 November. With the confirmation of the verdict rendered by the appeals court, the Moroccan Court of Cassation announced its decision to uphold the sentences against the prominent Sahrawi political prisoners -- which range from 20 years to, 25 years, 30 years and life in prison. Human rights defenders believe that the decision of the Moroccan Court of Cassation is directly linked to the escalation of armed conflict between the two parties, with the Gdeim Izik prisoners serving as a negotiation card for Morocco in the peace talks.

<sup>84</sup> <http://spsrasd.info/news/en/articles/2020/11/23/28921.html>

<sup>85</sup> <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/collapse-western-sahara-cease-fire-threatens-prospect-peaceful-solution-45-year-long>

<sup>86</sup> <http://spsrasd.info/news/en/articles/2020/11/25/28990.html>

On 25 November, the Moroccan Court of Cassation upheld the judgement that had been rendered by the Court of Appeal in Salé on 19 July 2017 against the group of Sahrawi activists, thus upholding sentences ranging from 20 years to, 25 years, 30 years and life in prison

Prior to this on 21 October, The Moroccan Court of Cassation announced the acceptance of the appeal submitted by the defence attorneys on behalf of the Gdeim Izik prisoners around three years earlier, during the Fall of 2017.

The court's sudden acceptance of the case was at the time believed to be related to the start of the demonstrations in the Guergerat area by Sahrawi civilians, who blocked a strategic trade route from Morocco to Mauritania and beyond into Western Africa.

The hearing for the Gdeim Izik prisoners was held on 4 November. The defense lawyers argued for the annulment of the judgement due to its reliance on confessions signed under torture as the main evidence against the accused.

On 25 November, the decision by the Court of Cassation was made public. In its decision, the Court of Cassation confirmed the verdict rendered by the Appeals court, thus upholding the sentence rendered – ranging from 20 years to life in prison – against the Gdeim Izik prisoners, on the basis of confessions signed under torture. The decision rendered by the Court of Cassation is, according to Sahrawi news outlets and human rights defenders, directly related to the renewal of war between the Kingdom of Morocco and Polisario Front.

The arbitrary detainment of the Gdeim Izik prisoners was, amongst other, treated in a communication issued by the United Nations Special Procedures on 20 July 2017 (AL Mar 3/2017),<sup>87</sup> signed by the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, the Special Rapporteur on the Independence of Judges and Lawyers and the Special Rapporteur on Torture. The text stresses that the group of Sahrawi human rights defenders had been arrested and detained in response to their exercise of freedom of expression and freedom of assembly in the Gdeim Izik camp. **For more information about the Gdeim Izik prisoners, you may consult the articles written by Western Sahara Resource Watch detailing the case of each prisoner whilst providing a trial observation report from the proceeding held in front of the Court of Appeal in Salé.**<sup>88</sup>

On 25 November, there were reports of an attack on Sahrawi journalist Ibrahim Amrikli from Nushatta Foundation by Moroccan police and intelligence forces. According to local source, Ibrahim managed to escape from the police with help from family members. Ibrahim has been in hiding since the abduction attempt. Nushatta Foundation reported the following into the events of 25 November:<sup>89</sup>

“A short while ago, the Moroccan occupation police in occupied Laayoune attempted to kidnap the Sahrawi journalist Ibrahim, a member of Nushatta. The attempt by the Moroccan police was in front of his grandparents' house on Tantan Street near his family's house in Lahchisha neighbourhood. A group of Sahrawi citizens intervened and took him out in a car, fleeing from the executioners.

It should be noted that colleague Ibrahim Amricle is on temporary release in response to a cooked and fabricated file related to insulting an employee while performing his duties since last May, and he is also vulnerable to targeting and assault by the executioners of the political police.”

Ibrahim has been subjected to political prosecution ever since he was arbitrarily arrested on 15 May 2020 and was charged with violating orders related to the COVID-19 health emergency status and offending public officials.

<sup>87</sup>[https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=23226&fbclid=IwAR3oOa3ItmJlJ5MI14\\_-f\\_fZtbm6S6jijyxu7ok-9Cg5sXBvbm08mwUBPkA](https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gId=23226&fbclid=IwAR3oOa3ItmJlJ5MI14_-f_fZtbm6S6jijyxu7ok-9Cg5sXBvbm08mwUBPkA)

<sup>88</sup> <https://wsrw.org/a105x4753>

<sup>89</sup> <http://nushatta.com/2020/11/25/uiiov/>

Ibrahim is currently on temporary release and the criminal proceedings against him have been postponed on several occasions, with the latest postponement on 18 November 2020.<sup>90</sup> Both Amnesty International<sup>91</sup> and Front Line Defenders<sup>92</sup> have issued urgent appeals on Ibrahim's case, stating that the young Sahrawi journalist is subjected to political prosecution in response to his journalistic activities reporting on human rights violations in the occupied territories of Western Sahara.

On 25 November, the Sahrawi human rights organization CODESA also published the news of three Sahrawi civilians killed by the Moroccan military near the berm,<sup>93</sup> and stated that these killings should be classified as extrajudicial killings, constituting violations of both human rights law and humanitarian law.

## The events of 26 November

According to local activists, the siege imposed on the occupied territories of Western Sahara was still in effect. It was also reported that there was an alarming rise in COVID-19 cases and deaths in the territory. The numbers reported are cause for great concern in light of systematic medical negligence against Sahrawi activists and civilians by Morocco-run medical facilities.

In light of the alarming persecution of Sahrawi journalists, Nushatta Foundation also issued a statement on 26 November condemning the attack against its journalists and the persecution of Sahrawi journalists belonging to Equipe Media. The statement said that following the return to armed struggle, journalists have witnessed fierce repression with mass arrests and collective violence, with three of Nushatta's members suffering attempted abduction in response to their continued work as journalists reporting on the situation in the occupied territories.<sup>94</sup>

## The events of 27 November

On 27 November, news surfaced that a young Sahrawi woman had been subjected to discriminatory practices by the Moroccan authorities after which she had applied for a job in nursing. The reports state that the Sahrawi woman had applied for a job after passing the first two exams and that she had been arbitrarily removed from the list of applicants. The young woman is the niece of the prominent Sahrawi female activist Mina Baali, one of the co-founders of ISACOM and one of the most targeted activists in the territory. The family believes that her relation to Mina Baali is the reason for the discriminatory practice against her, and the arbitrary denial to her of a job as a nurse.<sup>95</sup>

## The events of 28 November

On the 28 of November, the home of former political prisoner and prominent Sahrawi human rights defender and member of the human rights organization CODESA's executive committee, Ali Salem Tamek, was attacked by Moroccan occupying forces. The attack is believed to be related to CODESA's continued monitoring of the situation with the establishment of a committee concerned with regulating the situation both under human rights law and humanitarian law. CODESA reported the following into the attack whilst also providing footage:<sup>96</sup>

*"The Moroccan occupation force, at (21:30) p.m. today, Saturday, November 28, 2020, attacked the house of the desert human rights defender Ali Salem Mohammed Salem Almami Tamamik Member of the Executive Office of the CODESA, located in the " future " neighborhood in the Occupied City of El Aain / Western Sahara*

<sup>90</sup> <http://nushatta.com/2020/11/18/jh/>

<sup>91</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2931112020ENGLISH.pdf>

<sup>92</sup> <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/arbitrary-detention-human-rights-defender-ibrahim-mrikli>

<sup>93</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/CODESA.SO/posts/4122155287798787>

<sup>94</sup> <http://nushatta.com/2020/11/26/%d8%a8%od9%8a%od8%a7%od9%86-%od9%85%od8%aa4%od8%b3%od8%b3%od8%a9-%od9%86%od8%b4%od8%b7%od8%a7%od8%a1-%od9%84%od9%84%od8%a5%od8%b9%od9%84%od8%a7%od9%85-%od9%88-%od8%ad%od9%82%od9%88%od9%82-%od8%a7%od9%84%od8%a5%od9%86%od8%b3%od8%a7/>

<sup>95</sup> <https://www.ecsaharai.com/2020/11/las-autoridades-de-ocupacion-marroquies.html?m=1&fbclid=IwAR1m5-D0z9mC0Vokp3qLAZrQC4AH1ulmrbo4if5fyPgTE9JajhBUxSA1nBI>

<sup>96</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=834788837330932>

*The attack on the house of Sahrawi civilians came while they were organizing a small family concert with some of the revolutionary Sahrawi songs, where a police force of the Moroccan occupation attacked the house with stones and insulted women at the said house in addition to a member of the Moroccan occupation police, taking off his pants and making sexual revelations.*

*The attack resulted in the injury of a Sahrawi human right defender, "Jamila Al-Hussein Al-Mujahid" (24) years old, at the right hand level, with a stone being thrown by the Moroccan occupation forces, thus violating the first article from the Fourth Geneva Convention relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons.*

*For reference, Ali Salem Mohammed Salem Altam's house have known observation since before the resumption of war between the Moroccan occupation force and the Frente POLISARIO on 13 November 2020."*

On 18 November, CODESA issued a statement declaring the establishment of "the committee for the protection of Sahrawi civilians" intended to monitor "the war crimes and human rights violations committed by the Moroccan occupying forces", while noting that the Executive office and the administrative committee of CODESA will dedicate their efforts to data collection, follow-up and reporting on all confirmed cases of crimes and violations. CODESA has since issued several reports on the latest developments in the occupied territories of Western Sahara that serve as crucial documentation of violations of international law. CODESA's work is believed to be the reason for the attack on the family home of Ali Salem Tamek.

On 28 November, reports informed on the continued surveillance of prominent Sahrawi human rights defender Sultana Khaya and a siege placed on the home by the Moroccan military. Videos provided by Sultana show military personnel patrolling the house and bars outside of her window, preventing movement by the family and anyone wishing to enter. The images appear to show the military intimidating the family and effectively placing them under a house arrest.