

Recent debate in the UN Security Council regarding the inclusion of a human rights monitoring component in the mandate of the UN Mission for a Referendum in Western Sahara [MINURSO] has demonstrated the important role that human rights have taken in the conflict over the Western Sahara. Since the 1970s, the Moroccan security forces – which are tied closely to the Moroccan throne and run through the Ministry of Interior – have been accused of imprisoning, torturing, disappearing, and killing both Moroccans and Saharawis. Since the ascendance of King Mohammed VI to the throne, human rights protections have improved for Moroccans, though the same cannot be said for Saharawis living under de facto Moroccan control.

Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the European Parliament's Ad-Hoc Commission on the Western Sahara, and the U.S. Department of State have all extensively documented the abuses occurring in the Moroccan-controlled areas of Western Sahara. The year 2009 was marked by several high profile cases. First, in August, Moroccan police prevented a group of seven Moroccan students and six Saharawi students from traveling to London to participate in a symposium organized by the British NGO Talk Together. One of the female Saharawi students was allegedly beaten and raped after being apprehended and was told that if she did not renounce her political views on Western Saharan independence, the video of her rape would be published online. Another would-be participant claims that he was taken out into the desert, stripped, beaten, and abandoned.

Later, in October, a group of seven Saharawi human rights activists were detained upon returning to Morocco after a trip to the Tindouf refugee camps. Although the UN arranges trips for Saharawi families between the camps and Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, the seven were accused of conspiring with an enemy of the Moroccan state and slated to be tried before a military tribunal. Six of the imprisoned remain in jail and have engaged in numerous hunger strikes to protest the nature of their arrest and the alleged mental and physical torture to which they have claimed to be subjected.

Finally, in the most high-profile case to date, renowned Saharawi activist Aminetu Haidar was detained upon entering Laayoune – the capital of the Western Sahara – when she filled in “Western Sahara” as her country of origin on a Moroccan customs form. Ms. Haidar was returning from a trip to the U.S., where she was awarded her third major human rights award. Her passport was confiscated, and she was deported from the country. She immediately engaged in a 32-day hunger strike in the Lanzarote airport in the Canary Islands, and was eventually allowed to return home to her family after pressure was put on Moroccan authorities by both European governments and the U.S. Department of State.

In the Western Sahara the Saharawis are prevented from speaking out in favor of self-determination or independence. Suspicion of association with the Polisario Front is enough to land a Saharawi in prison, where he or she faces the prospect of being beaten, raped, tortured, or otherwise mistreated. Visits from international journalists, human rights lawyers, or tourists to

a Saharawi's home often have also caused troubles with the occupying Moroccan authorities. Saharawi NGOs – such as the Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations (ASVDH) and the Association for the Families of Saharawi Prisoners and the Disappeared (AFAPREDESA) – are dedicated to protecting and defending their fellow Saharawis. These organizations have relatively few members, however, and their ability to highlight alleged widespread human rights abuses is limited.

Lastly as a result of the enduring conflict, tens of thousands of Saharawis are forced to live in inhospitable refugee camps under difficult conditions, while Saharawi youth have little opportunity for a brighter future and the Saharawi people are deprived of their internationally-recognized right to self-determination and freedom.