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Public Statement

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Morocco/Western Sahara: Amnesty International calls for release prisoners of conscience sentenced for “undermining the monarchy”

On the eve of the court hearing in which five members of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights are appealing against their conviction on charges of “undermining the monarchy”, Amnesty International is calling on the Moroccan authorities to quash the prison sentences and fines imposed on them and on others prosecuted on the same charges.

Eight men, all members of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (*Association Marocaine des Droits Humains*, AMDH), are currently serving prison sentences ranging from one to three years after being convicted on charges of “undermining the monarchy”; three others received suspended prison terms. All were also sentenced to heavy fines.

The men were apparently convicted for allegedly chanting slogans criticizing the monarchy during peaceful demonstrations and sit-ins. Amnesty International considers the eight imprisoned men to be prisoners of conscience, held solely for their participation in peaceful demonstrations during which opinions were expressed peacefully.

Amnesty International is further alarmed that sit-ins organized in solidarity with the detainees are not being allowed to proceed, in violation of the fundamental and universally recognized rights to freedom of expression and assembly.

On 15 June, the Moroccan Auxiliary forces, a law enforcement agency in charge of certain public order functions, violently dispersed a sit-in organized by the AMDH in solidarity with its detained members, in front of the Parliament in Rabat. Just before the start of the sit-in at 6pm, the Auxiliary Forces surrounded gathered participants and proceeded to beat them up with batons, without giving any warning or order of dispersal before resorting to the use of force. Some 30 participants were injured, including one whose wrist was broken and one who had his eardrum pierced.

On 10 July, the Auxiliary Forces and the police prevented people from joining sit-ins organised by the families of the detainees in Rabat. The security forces blocked access to a first sit-in at 11am in front of the Parliament and ordered participants to disperse. They also prevented people from accessing a second sit-in on the same day at 3pm in front of the Moroccan Human Rights Advisory Board (*Comité Consultatif des Droits de l'Homme*, CCDH), although some participants were later allowed to present their demands to a CCDH representative.

Amnesty International is urging the Moroccan authorities to open a full, independent and impartial investigation into the conduct of the Auxiliary Forces when dispersing the 15 June sit-in, in order to establish whether excessive force was used, and to make the full findings public. Such inquiry should make recommendations regarding appropriate disciplinary or other action to be taken against any officials found to have used excessive force or committed abuses, compensation for those injured and measures to prevent use of excessive force by the Auxiliary Forces.

Amnesty International further urges the Moroccan authorities to allow peaceful events intended as expressing solidarity with the eight prisoners of conscience, as these are a legitimate exercise of the fundamental rights to freedom of expression and assembly.

Background

Thami Khyati, Youssef Reggab, Oussama Ben Messaoud, Ahmed Al Kaateb and Rabii Raïssouni were arrested in Ksar El Kebir following their participation in peaceful demonstrations on 1 May 2007 and convicted to three years' imprisonment and heavy fines. Two other men, Mehdi Berbouchi and Abderrahim Karrad, were also arrested in Agadir on the same charges and had their two year prison sentences confirmed at the appeal stage on 26 June.

Four other men were convicted of "undermining the monarchy" after participating in a peaceful sit-in on 5 June in the city of Beni Mellal in solidarity with the men named above. Mohamed Boughrine, a 72-year-old activist, was sentenced to one year's imprisonment and three other men to suspended prison sentences.

All the AMDH members were convicted because slogans which criticized the monarchy in the country were chanted during these demonstrations. In recent years, several people, including journalists and political activists, have been prosecuted and in some cases sentenced to prison terms, after peacefully expressing views on the monarchy, still a "taboo" subject in many discussions.