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Morocco – Western Sahara

Moroccan authorities must respect freedom of assembly

The forcible dispersal of a demonstration and the assault on protesters in Western Sahara by Moroccan security forces around the visit of Christopher Ross, the UN Personal Envoy to the Secretary General for Western Sahara, highlight the need for human rights monitoring by the MINURSO, said Amnesty International ahead of Security Council decision on the extension of the peacekeeping operation's mandate this month.

Amnesty international also calls on the Moroccan authorities to uphold protesters' rights to express their views peacefully and to fully and impartially investigate the events in which at least a dozen protesters were reportedly injured, and hold to account those found responsible.

Saturday 23 March at 5pm, plainclothes Moroccan security forces violently dispersed a peaceful gathering on Smara road, the main artery in Laayoune, the main city in Western Sahara. A collective of Sahrawi organizations including the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Human Rights Violations (ASVDH) and the Committee for the Defence of Self-Determination in Western Sahara (CODAPSO) had organised the protest gathering to call for the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) to include a human rights monitoring component, on the occasion of UN Envoy to Western Sahara Christopher Ross's visit in Laayoune.

Protesters had barely managed to assemble when several of them were reportedly assaulted by plainclothes security officers who pushed them to the ground, beat them with batons and sticks and kicked them, incidents captured on video footage.

Other protesters reported that plainclothes security officers threw rocks at them, resulting in one woman's nose being fractured, and another woman having her teeth broken. Several protesters reported being taken in unmarked police vehicles where plainclothes security officers subjected them to renewed beatings, intimidation, threats of rape and sexual assaults before being released outside the city.

Upon seeking medical care at Hassan Ben Mehdi hospital on the same day, injured protesters reported that police officers attempted to bar them from entering the hospital. Security forces also allegedly instructed medical staff not to treat the protesters. Finally, a doctor and member of the National Council for Human Rights (CNDH), a body recently established by the Moroccan government, was allowed to enter the hospital with injured protesters, and attended to their wounds.

Amnesty International is concerned that human rights violations are continuing to take place in Western Sahara, particularly in relation to freedom of expression, association and assembly. In recent years, Sahrawi human rights activists have faced restrictions on their work, including harassment, surveillance by the security forces, limitations to their freedom of movement, and in some cases prosecution on grounds of threatening Morocco's "internal" and "external" security. They have also been unable to obtain legal registration for their organizations, apparently due to politically-motivated administrative obstacles.

Meanwhile, Sahrawi pro-independence activists have been imprisoned following demonstrations calling for the right to self-determination for the people of Western Sahara, and some have reportedly been tortured or otherwise ill-treated during questioning by Moroccan law enforcement officials, allegations which have not been properly investigated.

The repression of a peaceful gathering on Saturday 23 March in Laayoune is an indication that Western Sahara continue to be a “red line” for Moroccan authorities, and that peaceful expression by Sahrawis of views contrary to the official Moroccan position on Western Sahara is repressed.

Amnesty International urges the Security Council to include a human rights monitoring component in the MINURSO’s mandate when renewing it this month. MINURSO is one of the few missions established under the authority of the UN Security Council that does not include a human rights component. Neither is this vital role played by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), which does not have a presence in the area. A United Nations human rights monitoring mechanism, with the power to look at both Western Sahara and the Tindouf camps, would provide independent and impartial reporting on the current human rights situation.