



**WESTERN
SAHARA
A DESERT FOR
JOURNALISTS**

**REPORTERS
WITHOUT BORDERS**
FOR FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

On 26 February 1976, after almost a century of colonization, Spain withdrew from Western Sahara, throwing the territory wide open for Moroccan civil and military occupation and abandoning tens of thousands Sahrawis to their fate. More than four decades later, the Western Sahara, officially the last territory in Africa that remains to be decolonized, is still trapped in political limbo, divided into three parts: the areas occupied by Morocco, those held by the Polisario Front, and the refugee camps in Tindouf (Algeria).

Journalism is one of the many victims of this conflict, which has been forgotten by the media spotlight and left as a virtual news "black hole". Morocco, ranked 135th in RSF's World Press Freedom Index, controls information in the territory with an iron fist, ruthlessly punishing the practice of local journalism and blocking foreign media access. Torture, arrests, physical abuse, persecution, intimidation, harassment, slander, defamation, technological sabotage, and lengthy prison sentences are daily fare for Sahrawi journalists.

Despite the severity of Morocco's repression and its policy of deporting foreign correspondents, and despite the silence on the conflict reigning in world media, Sahrawi reporters of a new generation are running extraordinary risks to keep the torch of journalism burning and to prevent Western Sahara from being buried under the sands of oblivion.





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THE LAST COLONY IN AFRICA: FOUR DECADES OF NEGLECT

1.1 THE END OF SPANISH ADMINISTRATION AND THE HAND-OVER TO MOROCCO

On 6 November 1975, when General Franco was in his last dying days, as were four decades of internal repression and a foreign policy detached from that of the international community, Moroccan troops “escorted” hundreds of thousands of the kingdom’s citizens onto Spanish soil in Western Sahara. That “Green March” prompted Spanish military and civil authorities to withdraw, a few months later, from what then was the last African territory yet to be decolonized ... and which today still is.

A couple of weeks earlier, on 24 October 1975, the first and last Spanish daily published in Western Sahara, *La Realidad* (Reality), edited by the journalist Pablo-Ignacio de Dalmases, had warned of the imminent Moroccan invasion and of Spain’s acquiescence to Rabat’s demands. That alarming lead story was the last that the newspaper was to publish. The Spanish authorities ordered it shut down. Dalmases was held in custody for some hours and then left Western Sahara.

Dalmases, who also ran Radio Sahara, the official Spanish broadcaster in Western Sahara, commented: “The best proof that *La Realidad* was founded with the aim of being a truthful and credible news source is that the newspaper was closed down ‘manu militari’ for having reported that Spain and Morocco were going to make a deal to hand the Sahara over to the Moroccan government, betraying Madrid’s repeated promises to the Sahrawi people and to the United Nations. The news of the planned hand-over, which was sent out by the Spanish state-owned wire news service EFE and which we picked up, unfortunately turned out to be true.”

With the Franco dictatorship still in place, although tottering, the fact that the daily *La Realidad*, although reporting from the official viewpoint, was offering a truthful account of events and was taking an editorial line that was close to the feelings of local residents contrasted with the line taken by other Spanish media, which were then still under the strict control of Franco’s “National Movement”. *La Realidad*, which came out for only four months (June to October of 1975) was published in both Spanish and Hassania, the two languages most used by the inhabitants of Western Sahara, a territory composed of Saguia-el-Hamra, in the North, and Río de Oro, in the South.

The fact that the front-page story in *La Realidad* caused the editor to be fired and the newspaper to be closed down seems, today more than ever, to confirm that the publication was true to its name. The “reality” of the developments that the Western Sahara was facing offended a Spanish government that, as the daily foresaw in its final issue, was willing to leave the Sahara in Moroccan hands, and abandon the local population to its fate, in exchange for retaining a share of the rights to the territory’s valuable natural resources, especially the phosphates in Boukraa and the still-rich fishing banks off the Saharan coast.

For Morocco, launching the “Green March” –which was facilitated by the imminence of General Franco’s death, the ineptitude of his last government, the world economic crisis, and the tense balance of power in the Cold War- was the culmination of years of intelligent and persistent strategy aimed at taking over Western Sahara, which it considered historically to be its own territory. The UN had long been calling on Spain to hold a self-determination referendum, as part of the completion of the decolonization process in Africa. In August of 1974 the Spanish government had yielded to pressure from the UN and announced its support for the referendum, which was to be held at the beginning of 1975. Morocco deployed its entire diplomatic arsenal in order to prevent that. Together with Mauritania, it forced a ruling on the matter by the International Court of Justice at The Hague, which upheld the UN’s position and rejected any historic Moroccan rights over Saharan territory. Morocco turned the Court’s ruling around, seizing on the mention of certain tribes with links between both peoples, and launched the invasion, having previously agreed to share some of the resulting territorial spoils with Mauritania.



←
The final issue of «La Realidad», announcing the hand-over of Western Sahara to Morocco.

The key role of Spanish media in the withdrawal

“The Spanish government’s initial intention was to hold the referendum,” Dalmases believes. “In fact, I was hired to run Radio Sahara, the official Spanish broadcaster in the territory, with two clear missions: to increase the airtime in Arabic, but above all to make the inhabitants aware of the referendum and the approach of independence”, he added, confirming the key role that the government in Madrid had conferred on Spanish media in the area.

“Spain’s colonization was completely atypical: unlike French colonization it was carried out without weapons, without soldiers, and without money. Spain’s tacit agreement with the Sahrawis was to come in as a colonial administration, but without

touching their religion, nor their social structure, nor any important aspect of their culture. For that matter, Spain didn't even touch slavery, which continued to be fully in force, while the Spaniards stuck their heads in the sand", Dalmeida said. "Until the rise of nationalistic fervor in the 70s, Western Sahara lived a golden age of peaceful coexistence, which even today the Sahrawis themselves remember. There were jobs, housing, schools for the children, and a local citizenry with full rights to Spanish citizenship. As extremely critical as I am of Spain's later cowardice, I must also say that there was very good coexistence".

King Hassan II's "Green March" achieved its intended effect of intimidating and disconcerting the Spaniards. On the 14 November 1975, one week before Franco died, the dictatorship's last government signed the "Tripartite Madrid Agreements" with Mauritania and Morocco, by which Spain ceded one third of the Western Sahara to former and two thirds to the latter. The Madrid Accords, which were never recognized by the international community (in which Spain then had scant weight), served only to allow Spain to go on record as stamping its seal on the abandonment of tens of thousands Sahrawis, who were handed over to Morocco with no guarantee whatsoever of their fundamental rights. On 26 February of 1976, after almost a century of domination, Spain definitively withdrew from the Sahara, leaving the last remaining territory in Africa that has yet to be decolonized in a shameful political limbo, where it remains to this day, 43 years later.

One of the saddest moments for Dalmeida in those turbulent times was the hand-over of Spain's Radio Sahara, which he ran, to Moroccan forces. "Fortunately, fate spared me that unpleasant task and someone else did it, but the radio station was given over intact", he recalled.

After the Spanish withdrawal, the Polisario Front (the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro), founded in 1973 with the goal of achieving independence, proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (RASD, in its Spanish initials), at midnight on the night of 27 February 1976. That signaled the beginning of a long period of armed clashes between the Polisario and the Mauritanian and Moroccan armies. The Mauritanian forces withdrew in 1979, but the Polisario and the Moroccans continued fighting until a ceasefire went into effect in 1991.

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Hoja del Lunes, August 1979.
Source: APM



1.2 THE ETERNAL PROMISE OF A REFERENDUM

Over the course of several years in the 1980s, Morocco constructed a 2,700 kilometer-long wall that successfully kept the Polisario at bay. Even today, this wall is the world's longest and holds the greatest concentration of landmines on the planet. Ever since the wall's construction, the Western Sahara has been divided into three zones: the territories occupied by Morocco, a strip of desert held by the Polisario, and the refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria. This geographic structure remains in place today. Of the more than half a million inhabitants of Western Sahara, about 175,000 live in the Tindouf camps and the rest in the Moroccan-occupied territories, especially in the major cities: Laayoune, Es Smara, Dakhla, and Boujdour. In the Moroccan-occupied areas the population has grown considerably in recent years. Most analysts attribute this to the "Moroccanization" policy carried out by successive governments in Rabat. The aim is to dilute the Sahrawi presence ahead of a hypothetical self-determination referendum, which is supported by all international bodies but has never been called. The referendum, which for the Polisario has always been a non-negotiable demand, was part of Spain's initial plans for Western Sahara, prior to the "Green March". It has repeatedly been backed by the UN in a series of resolutions, and it is at the core of the Polisario's and Morocco's acceptance in 1988 of the UN peace plan and of the consequent creation, in 1991, of the UN Mission for the Referendum in the Western Sahara (MINURSO). MINURSO, whose principal task is spelled out in its very name, initially planned to hold the referendum in January 1992, following the bilateral ceasefire. However, differences over the census and the voter registry that should be employed scuttled the UN's original mission and have prolonged the conflict right down to the present day.

While the Polisario, the only Sahrawi interlocutor recognized by the United Nations, clings to the Spanish colonial administration's census of 1974, which put the Sahrawi population at about 85,000, the Moroccans have always rejected that figure, demanding that other numbers be used which are much larger and favorable to their interests. Since the ceasefire, the differences over the census have left not the slightest trace of an agreement on the referendum and have raised doubts about the effectiveness of the role played by MINURSO, whose deployment on the ground now goes back almost three decades.



1.3 FROM A PLAUSIBLE SOLUTION TO AN IMPASSE

In 1997, after the then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan appointed former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker as special envoy for Western Sahara, Morocco and the Polisario were able to bring their positions closer together in the so-called “Houston Accords”. But, once again, there was no agreement on the census. That led the special envoy to propose a settlement in the year 2000, later known as the “Baker Plan I”, which granted a great deal of regional autonomy to Western Sahara but kept it within Morocco. It was rejected by the Polisario.

In 2003, “Baker Plan II” emerged as the most plausible final solution to the Sahara conflict so far. It proposes two rounds of voting in the territory: the first would be elections to create a regional authority with broad powers and the second, within the following five years, for the independence referendum, on the basis of a voter registry perhaps closer to the numbers wanted by Morocco –which has filed more than 150,000 challenges to MINURSO’s census proposal. MINURSO’s census, to which the Polisario is more receptive, has been approved by the UN General Assembly but it has run up against Morocco’s opposition. Rabat insists on “Baker Plan I”, which is limited to the creation of a Sahrawi autonomous regional authority under Moroccan tutelage. James Baker resigned in 2004.

The Baker Plan was, without doubt, the closest that Western Sahara has come to taking a path leading to a definitive solution to the conflict. Since its failure, the talks between Morocco and the Polisario have become infrequent as well as unproductive. In 2007, a new UN resolution brought the two sides together in Manhasset (New York) for successive rounds of failed talks that led to another turn-over in the post of special envoy. In 2009, the United Nations passed a new resolution calling for dialogue and during the following two years 11 rounds of negotiations were held. All of them were completely fruitless, to the point that Morocco considers that negotiating process to have been exhausted. The UN, for its part, has gone 10 years without mentioning the term “self-determination” in its resolutions, on the apparent assumption that Morocco will never concede more than regional self-government.

In 2012, Moroccan and Polisario negotiators again met face to face, but those conversations also failed. For the following six years, the conflict remained at an impasse and was getting more deeply buried in collective oblivion, until the present UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, named a new special envoy for Western Sahara, former German president Horst Köhler, who launched separate rounds of contacts with each of the two sides, in Geneva, in December of 2018 and March of 2019, this time with Algeria and Mauritania as observers. Regrettably, on 23 May of this year Köhler announced his resignation for health reasons.

1.4 A WAY OUT OR A MIRAGE?

“What Köhler has held in the past year are contacts, they are not really negotiations”, according to a Sahrawi journalist based in Spain, Bachir Mohamed Lahsen. “It’s an effort to break the ice, given that the two sides have not sat down together since 2012 and their positions are so far apart that it is very difficult to make a proposal for negotiations,” said Lahsen, who contributes to such media as the BBC and Spanish National Radio (RNE), while also finishing his doctorate in Journalism at the University of Seville.

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*Horst Köhler, UN
special envoy for
Western Sahara*



“Since 2007, the positions of the two parties are clear: Morocco is willing to talk only about regional autonomy and the Polisario considers the self-determination referendum to be non-negotiable. The proposal that Köhler was suggesting before he resigned, to find some way to share the Western Sahara’s natural resources, seems to have come from an economic, more than political, perspective.... A novel path to dialogue might turn out to be his legacy, and remember that Horst Köhler is a man who comes from the world of economics,” said Lahsen, who heads an association of Sahrawi journalists in Spain, the Sahara Press League.

While Köhler, before resigning as special envoy, had considered calling a new round of contacts to be held throughout the course of 2019, the UN renewed the MINURSO’s mandate for only six months, rather than a full year as Morocco and France wanted. Many analysts attribute this maneuver to the long arm of the Trump administration, which they see as obsessed with reducing its financial contributions to the UN and with keeping a sharp eye on UN missions, which it considers, in many cases, to be inefficient and wasteful.

Among the Saharawis, in fact, there is a certain degree of optimism due to the hard line taken by John Bolton, the current National Security Adviser and a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Bolton was James Baker’s number two when Baker was the special envoy for Western Sahara. He has visited the camps and he has on various occasions declared that the MINURSO, whose mandate he helped design, should either complete its mission (by holding the referendum) or disband.

In a speech on Africa given last December, Bolton complained that many UN missions are ineffective and pointlessly self-perpetuating, citing Western Sahara as “my favorite example” of this tendency. “Unfortunately, all too often at the United Nations, establishing a peacekeeping force and deploying it is the end of creative thinking, and the mandate is renewed almost automatically”, he said. “Success is not simply continuing the mission ad infinitum. All we want to do is hold a referendum

for 70,000 voters. It's 27 years later.... How can you justify that?" Bolton's position, and his proximity to president Trump, make the Polisario feel that the current U.S. Administration provides it with its best chance in decades to make progress. One of the main historic demands, not only of the Sahrawis, but also of many NGOs and international observers, is that the MINURSO should cease to be the sole UN mission whose mandate does not include monitoring the respect for human rights. Could the moment be approaching when the United States pressures from within the UN for the MINURSO to cease to be a mission for holding a referendum that never gets held and instead to start watching over fundamental rights? Lahsen commented that "Morocco is afraid of that possibility, and although special envoy Horst Köhler may have made some progress in that direction, France is a (permanent) member of the Security Council, and as a faithful ally of Morocco it will be the main obstacle to that coming about". He added that "it cannot be forgotten that, despite renewing MINURSO's mandate for six months, the UN at the same time called for a solution to the Sahara conflict, adding the adjective 'realistic', which Morocco greatly appreciates as an opening for its regional autonomy proposal".

The secretary general of RSF-Spain and vice-president of RSF's International Council, Rosa Meneses, a reporter for the Spanish daily El Mundo specializing in the Middle East and the Maghreb, commented that "Morocco's strategy in the occupied territories is one of scorn, repression and poverty. It is that of a metropolis towards its colony, in which it takes no interest beyond exploiting it. If at any time Morocco had really considered holding the self-determination referendum it would have adopted other policies aimed at winning over the population so it would vote Morocco's way, implementing full-employment policies for the local residents and re-investing the profits from the rich natural resources in the Sahrawi population. Although Morocco once proposed autonomy for Western Sahara", she said, "it never made an effort to show the Sahrawis that they could live freely under a regional administration." Be that as it may, Western Sahara continues to be one of the world's few "non-autonomous territories" -the label the UN applies to regions still awaiting decolonization- and, according to the organization Freedom House, it has one of the lowest levels of quality of democracy on the planet, ranking alongside countries such as South Sudan or North Korea.

2 THE SAHARA: A LOW-INTENSITY CONFLICT ON THE GROUND AND IN THE MEDIA

The chronic nature of the conflict in Western Sahara, and its status as “a territory that is neither at war nor at peace”, in the words of a reporter for Spain's state-run television (TVE), Yolanda Sobero, has contributed to the evaporation of Western media coverage, in Europe in general and in Spain in particular. That media neglect is difficult to reverse. Given that Western Saharan was quite visible in the media during the 1970s and the early 80s, during the armed clashes between the Polisario and Morocco that broke out in the wake of the Spanish withdrawal, many young Sahrawis today wonder if they would not get more coverage through war than through a peaceful, diplomacy-based strategy. “One doesn't know how to answer that”, the Sahrawi journalist Bachir Mohamed Lahsen commented, a bit sadly.

Yolanda Sobero, author of the book *Sahara: memoria y olvido* (Sahara: remembering and forgetting), uses an eloquent image to convey the conflict's scant media presence: “the Western Sahara and the Sahrawis are hemmed in by two walls. One of them can be found on many maps and appears in satellite photographs. It is an armored wall dividing the North from the South. The other, less visible but deadly, is the wall of silence”.

Ignacio Cembrero, *El País* correspondent in the Middle East and Morocco for more than 35 years and one of Spain's top experts on the Maghreb, explained that “the general view of media editors is that this subject (the conflict in the Sahara) is at a dead end, that nothing ever happens, and that it is just the same news repeated over and over again”. Cembrero also pointed out that Spain's media have to get by with reduced resources these days, since the economic crisis. “The Spanish press is impoverished and Western Sahara hardly appears on its radar, but Morocco as well figures much less than before”, he said.

That view is shared by Rosa Meneses, the specialist in the region at *El Mundo*, who said that the media silence on Western Sahara “is in part related to the crisis the sector is going through, especially when it comes to foreign news, -which is disappearing from news budgets- and the ‘precarious’, unstable employment conditions affecting journalists, who find themselves stretched thinner and thinner, swamped by more work than they can handle”. As in the case of other “news black holes”, Meneses pointed to the replacement of foreign correspondents “by underpaid

contributors, as well as the decline of journalistic specialization in world affairs and in specific geographic regions and conflicts”, as key factors.

Sobero, the author and TVE reporter, noted that “Western Sahara has attracted the attention of the international press, and in particular the Spanish press, (only) during times of great crises and great events: the “Green March”, in October of 1975; the first years of the war; the ceasefire of 6 September 1991; and the Dignity Camp of Gdeim Izik in the autumn of 2010 [see section 4.1]. In between, there are scarcely a handful of articles and references.”

2.1 THE RESPONSIBILITY OF A FORGETFUL PRESS

While such factors as the decline of “on site” foreign news coverage or the trend towards “precarious” employment for journalists are cited by almost all the experts in the field, almost all also agree that the European press, and, much more concretely, the Spanish press, have a direct responsibility in the media spotlight being taken off Western Sahara.

“Portugal, with a much more modest press, has shown greater sensitivity towards former colonies like East Timor than the Spanish press has shown towards Western Sahara, which has been almost nil. The expulsions of activists and other violations of human rights should be given space in the media, but they are not,” complained Ignacio Cembrero, who is the author of a book on the troubled relations between the “estranged neighbors” Spain and Morocco (*Vecinos Alejados. Los secretos de la crisis entre España y Marruecos*, Galaxia Gutenberg, 2006).

Sahrawi journalists living in Europe, always alert to news affecting their homeland, are highly critical of the role played by the media, which they accuse of having a large share of the responsibility for the fact that the conflict in Western Sahara has been forgotten, or even, in the view of some, “silenced”.

“When covering humanitarian projects in the (refugee) camps or ‘Vacations in Peace’ (a program which allows thousands of children from the Tindouf camps to spend summers in Spain), then a glimpse of the Sahara is seen”, said Ebabba Hameida, a reporter for Spanish National Radio (RNE) who comes from those camps and is a doctoral candidate at Madrid’s Complutense University. “But the media scarcely deals with the conflict and our responsibility as journalists is to contextualize. They have the idea that people know what happened in Western Sahara and that’s not true. The majority of the people don’t know what Spain’s historic responsibility is, nor the role in the conflict that Spain and other powers, such as France, have played and still play. To contextualize is an obligation and an excellent way to keep the flame of information alive”, added Hameida.

Another Sahrawi journalist living in Spain, Salamu Hamudi, agreed that “the Sahrawi issue once had a place in the media’s agenda, thanks to which it even figured in the programs of the political parties, but for quite some time now it hardly ever appears, and if it does, it is from a humanitarian perspective. But it should never be forgotten that there is a clear political aspect.” Hamudi added that “some media with correspondents in the region even adopt the Moroccan terminology, referring the Polisario as “separatists” or “militias”. While it is true that it is not easy to report on a conflict in which there are no new developments nor negotiations for long periods, it is also true that there are topics related

to Western Sahara which could be given more space in the Spanish and European media. Cembrero pointed out that “thanks to an offensive in the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) the Polisario has made great legal achievements, but they have gone virtually unnoticed”. Cembrero referred to the CJEU’s decision of December 2016 which established that the Association and Liberalization Agreements between Morocco and the European Union are not applicable to Western Sahara, because it is not a Moroccan sovereign territory. That position was reinforced by another ruling, in February of 2018, which excludes the waters off the coast of Western Sahara from the fisheries agreement between the EU and Morocco. In both cases Spain and France had backed the Moroccan position. If the notable precedents set by the two rulings from the CJEU made little impression on European media, even less was made by the European Parliament’s recent approval of the fisheries agreement, going against both of those Court decisions and, therefore, international law.

“Like France, Spain is being an obstacle to a resolution of the conflict, but that is not reflected in the majority of the Spanish media, which accept the Foreign Ministry’s assurances that it is assuming a neutral posture,” Hamaida complained. “The Sahrawis don’t need hand-outs. It is incongruous to sign fishing agreements that loot Western Sahara’s natural resources and at the same time send humanitarian aid to the Tindouf camps. That is what the media should be talking about.”

The fisheries issue is a perfect example of the need for the media to provide context. “Much of the Spanish press has focused on the benefits for the Spanish fishing industry, which is perfectly legitimate, or simply mentioned the contradiction with the CJEU rulings, but without explaining how this process arose nor what the Western Sahara conflict is about,” Hameida said. “Context must be provided, it’s a journalistic responsibility!”

2.2 MOROCCO’S LONG TENTACLES

The exploitation of Western Sahara’s natural resources (essentially phosphates and fisheries), the violation of human rights in the territory, and also the close and decisive political, economic and security ties between Spain and France, are topics whose absence from both countries’ media has been repeatedly denounced by Sahrawi journalists, and by Spanish journalists as well.

Sobero said that “it could be argued that the Sahara conflict is very drawn-out, without any signs of a solution on the horizon, and as such it is wearisome. But, most of all, it is a very uncomfortable conflict, one that draws criticism and creates problems with Morocco, our great neighbor to the South, who does not hesitate to cancel (journalists’) accreditations and puts up obstacles to prevent reporting on certain issues. One of those issues is Western Sahara, a territory awaiting decolonization according to the United Nations, but whose ‘Moroccaness’ is one of the kingdom’s untouchable pillars, along with Islam and the king. The foreign correspondents in Rabat and the special envoys are well aware of all this.” Cembrero, with many years of experience as a correspondent in Rabat for Spanish daily newspapers, corroborated that. “There are certain subjects that correspondents in Rabat don’t touch, that are taboo; for example, the king’s absences (from the country) or his divorce”, he said. “It’s not just the Spanish press that tiptoes around such matters, the French press also tends to ignore or ‘forget about’ certain subjects that are sensitive or delicate for Morocco. It took a long while for the French press to report the absences of the king, who spends a great deal of his time abroad, especially in France, while still exercising total power.”

Cembrero has been the target of Morocco’s reprisals, by being sued twice; the first time by the Rabat government, when he worked for El País, and the second time by a businessman with

close ties to the regime, when he worked for El Mundo. Neither lawsuit was upheld. Cembrero has always been considered a journalist who is “troublesome” for Morocco and for the Spanish foreign ministry, since he has uncovered news of great public interest such as the royal pardon of a Spanish pedophile or King Mohammed VI’s prolonged absences. Even today, Cembrero believes he has been blacklisted by certain circles in the Spanish foreign ministry.

Does the Moroccan regime exert influence over Spanish news media? “It should not be forgotten that the media belong to their owners”, Lahsen pointed out. “If a media owner has interests in Morocco, as often happens in Spain, I feel entitled to assume that that fact interferes with news stories that are sensitive for Morocco”.

Pablo-Ignacio de Dalmases, editor of the first and last Spanish daily in Western Sahara, noted that “Morocco holds the key to three issues that are absolutely strategic for Spain: immigration, fisheries, and pressure around Ceuta and Melilla”, two Spanish enclaves on Morocco’s Mediterranean coast. “Spain’s handling of the Sahara conflict since its withdrawal has been disastrous,” he said, “but it must be admitted that with these three instruments of Moroccan pressure, it is very difficult for Spain”.

2.3 THE POLISARIO’S PART IN THE MEDIA NEGLECT OF WESTERN SAHARA

Although the European press, especially the Spanish and French press, appear to play a crucial role in the media silence surrounding Western Sahara, some of the blame must also go to the organization that ever since its creation in 1973 has been in charge of communicating Sahrawi interests to the rest of the world: the Polisario Front.

The language employed by the Polisario, based on propagandistic phrases that have changed very little since the 1970s, seems to be found unattractive by media and social networks that more and more demand stories going beyond mere political slogans.

Sahrawi television and radio, RASD TV and RASD Radio, based in Tindouf, Algeria, may have once been sufficient in giving encouragement to an isolated and beleaguered population such as that which is living in the refugee camps, and in countering Morocco’s official news in the occupied territories, but the rise of Internet and of social networks have created new needs for the Sahrawi population itself, according to the Spanish National Radio (RNE) reporter Ebabba Hameida.

“RASD TV and RASD Radio provide a voice for the people in the camps, who have never known anything else. I realized that it is easy to talk when you are in Spain, and I fully understand the policy of not giving weapons to the enemy, but there is a limit to everything”, said Hameida. “We are a people like any other, there is no need to idealize the Sahrawis. We have corruption and mismanagement, women are not completely free ... These things should be told, there should be no problem with that. I often say to my colleagues who are back there: ‘tell a story on a Twitter thread and you’ll see how well it will work. Don’t always use the same old slogans, we can’t just follow Sahara Libre (the official Polisario website), because that won’t get headlines. We Sahrawis have to adapt to the changes that journalism has undergone.”

The news about Western Sahara that is offered to the rest of the world is basically published on pro-Polisario blogs that follow the same pattern: very long and detailed information about the conflict, mixed with images and slogans that confirm a clear bias and therefore reduce the acceptance of the blogs as objective sources. “The Sahrawis themselves are the most to blame for the lack of media coverage of Western Sahara”, Hameida admitted.

Hameida’s colleague, Salamu Hamudi, sees the lack of “an authorized voice” for the Sahrawis as part of the problem. “It’s a shame that the Sahrawis do not have an authorized source,” Hamudi said. Since the conflict broke out, the Polisario has never had a spokesperson capable of communicating with the media. Moreover, the Sahrawi Delegation in Spain could use a department of communication that could generate content, organize press conferences, and correct or refute ideas about the conflict.”

Aside from the lack of an “authorized voice”, Hamudi sees another failing. “Perhaps the main problem is the absence of a communications and news strategy, both for the Sahrawi authorities and for the humanitarian support bodies. Once the conflict took on a purely humanitarian aspect it became less appealing from the news standpoint,” Hamudi said. In fact, in Spain, messages of support for Western Saharan self-determination are mixed together with humanitarian messages, and can be found on the websites of the most activist left. Paradoxically, most Sahrawis feel that more has been done for them by Spain’s right-wing or conservative governments, including the Franco dictatorship, than has been done by socialist governments.

Hameida feels that “Sahrawi journalists have a big challenge ahead of them, without a doubt. I know that it is easy for me to say, since I work for an important Spanish news medium (RNE), but it is still true – the Sahrawi narrative is quite monolithic, it’s made up of declarations, it’s ideological and propagandistic and it is difficult to identify with that”.

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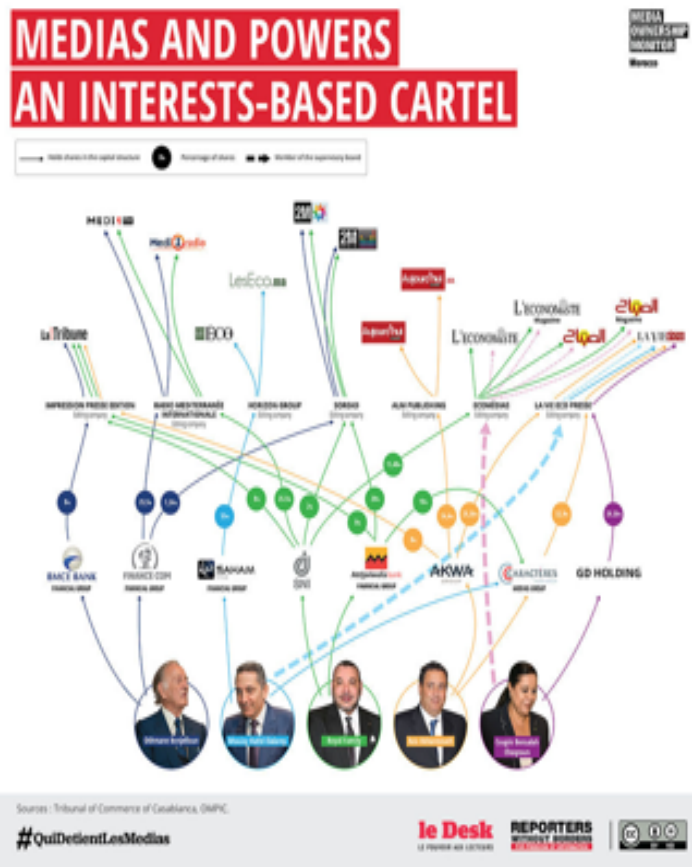
REPORTING FROM WESTERN SAHARA: THE IMPENETRABLE MORROCCAN WALL

3.1 THE OFFICIAL MEDIA UNIVERSE

There is no free press in Western Sahara. There are no independent media, nor are there Sahrawi journalists recognized as such by the Moroccan authorities. There is not even a school of journalism in Laayoune, because there are no universities in Western Sahara. Not all fields of study are open to Sahrawis, assuming they can afford to pay university fees in Morocco, because “there is always an invisible hand that denies your application or there are entrance requirements that exclude you, or someone tells you straight out that you shouldn’t even apply, you won’t be accepted,” says Ahmed Ettanji, the founder and president of a group of reporters and videoactivists called Équipe Média.

“Sahrawis are kept out of key professions, such as medicine or aeronautical engineering. In order to study journalism you have to go to far-off cities, which only a few can afford”, he adds.

Freedom of information is conspicuous by its absence in a country whose media are controlled, if not by the royal family then by businessmen close to the ruling circles (see diagram), as related in the Morocco Media Ownership Monitor published by RSF. Morocco ranks 135th in the list of 180 countries and territories that are analyzed in RSF’s World Press Freedom Index. This ranking, placing Morocco among the worst countries in the world for journalism, is in part due to the repression of journalists in “troublesome” territories, such as the Rif (where protests two years ago had horrible consequences for the local reporters who covered them) and Western Sahara.



The only news media that permanently and openly operate inside Western Sahara's occupied territories are from Moroccan state-run radio and television or from online media clearly following Rabat's official line. Western Sahara does not even exist as a term in Morocco's media nomenclature; instead the media refer to "the Southern provinces" or "the Moroccan Sahara". This was brought home to a journalist for the private television network MedilTV, Soumia Dghoughi, who in 2017 was fired on the spot for using the term "Western Sahara" when she was anchoring the program «Afrique Soir». In a press release, MedilTV declared that, "having recognized this professional error, the network has taken rigorous administrative measures and has decided to suspend the journalist immediately, pending an investigation into the circumstances surrounding this unacceptable act, and to take the legal measures that must be applied".

3.2 THE STRUGGLE FOR A FREE, ALTERNATIVE PRESS

Outside the territories under Moroccan occupation, in the Tindouf refugee camps, the Polisario Front's official RASD TV and RASD Radio freely broadcast news programming aimed against Morocco and in favor of self-determination for Western Sahara, of a clearly propagandistic nature. That said, it must be remembered that they have reported repressive measures Morocco has taken against Sahrawis which, until the growth of the internet and social networks, might not have otherwise been made known, since coverage would depend on the wavering interest of foreign media in sending reporters to the occupied territories.

Despite the difficulty of practicing a non-official journalism which explains the reality of Western Sahara to people inside and outside Morocco, some journalists skirt around Morocco's iron control and secretly manage to report what the government in Rabat does not want to be made known.

The strong Moroccan military presence in Western Sahara does not prevent the Sahrawi civilian population from holding frequent demonstrations, not only to call for self-determination but also to demand improved living conditions. Groups of reporters, in collectives such as Équipe Média or Smara News, run extraordinary risks every day in order to cover these issues. Secret meetings, video recordings made from the rooftops of the cities, and careful organization in order to publish their work on the Internet in Spanish, French, English, and Arabic have earned them harsh reprisals by the Moroccan authorities, including torture, imprisonment, and other punishment. But it has also won them the recognition of many media and international organizations, which use them as their main source of news about Western Sahara, especially concerning basic human rights.

"A new kind of journalism has been born in Western Sahara, whose tools are social networks and new technologies," says Spanish national television (TVE) reporter Yolanda Sobero. "That's how (these new journalists) expose the situation the Sahrawis are suffering. They are not activists. They practice journalism and, as serious professionals, they work hard to make us aware of the situation in their homeland. For doing that," Sobero charges, "they are harassed, arrested, tried, convicted, and, in any case, they are

ÉQUIPE MÉDIA: HIGH RISK JOURNALISM FROM UP ON THE ROOFTOPS

"In response to the lack of independent media in Western Sahara, several human rights activists decided in 2009 to create Équipe Média, with the aim of breaking the news blockade Morocco has imposed, making use of social networks in order to become a news source for foreign media and organizations that defend fundamental rights", explained Ahmed Ettanji, 31, a Laayoune-born journalist and one of the founders of Équipe Média.

"The creation of social networks opened up an enormous window of opportunity for us to generate and distribute news content. In Western Sahara there is no independent press. That fact, along with the constant entry bans and deportations of foreign journalists, has put our territory under a total news blockade," he added, in perfect Spanish.



Équipe Média's thirty-odd journalists worked in complete secrecy until 2011. Then, "some of us agreed to give interviews and today some of our faces are well-known, like mine", Ettanji joked. Équipe Média focuses its work on three main areas: "providing information and promoting awareness of Western Sahara from a pacifist perspective; refuting Moroccan propaganda, which claims that human rights are respected in Western Sahara, with our evidence; and working with international organizations and foreign media to make ourselves a reliable alternative source of information". Ettanji himself contributes to foreign media or works as "fixer" for them.

Although several members of Équipe Média have dared to come out in public, all the work done by this team of journalists is carried out in secrecy because it is permanently targeted by the Moroccan security forces. "When we take a camera out onto the street, we have to be incredibly clever about it, since the police is always after us and they would confiscate it on the spot", Ettanji said. "All our communications are encrypted and we hold

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The rooftops of Laayoune are the usual worksite for these journalists. Crouched up there, they can document the police repression of the frequent demonstrations in Western Sahara's capital city. "The first thing we do is design a security plan: where we have to go, what we have to film, from what angle. Then, we get in touch with the contact person, who shows us where to set up our cameras. All these steps can take us days", said Ettanji. "Once we have found the proper location, we might have to spend long hours waiting for what we want to film. We keep still some place where we can't be spotted and there is a support person doing counter-surveillance, going up and down the stairs and making sure that no curious passerby comes up or, worse yet, the police. When we leave our filming location, we always take out the memory card out of the camera. One journalist carries the camera while the other carries the card", Ettanji told RSF.

The dangerous and difficult work done by Équipe Média is the subject of the short documentary film "3 stolen cameras", coproduced by the Swedish production company R&FILM and by the Sahrawi team of journalists itself. The documentary has screened at numerous festivals worldwide and was nominated for the best short film category in some of them. Pressure from Morocco stopped the film from being screened at the Beirut Film Festival. That was not the only recognition given to the work being done by the Équipe Média, whose visual material and stories are news sources for many media outlets and human rights organizations. Recently in Spain, Équipe Média received the prestigious Julio Anguita Parrado International Journalism Prize, awarded by the Andalusia Journalists' Union.

4 JAIL AND REPRESSION: BEING A JOURNALIST IN WESTERN SAHARA

Being a journalist in Western Sahara is an act of heroism, and those who practice journalism there often pay for it with frequent arrests, the harassment of their families, defamation, slander, physical abuse, and torture, as well as lengthy and unjust jail sentences.

4.1 THE “CAMP DIGNITY” PROTESTS AT GDEIM IZIK

Gdeim Izik is a desert location just over 15 kilometers from Laayoune. On 10 October 2010, a group of Sahrawi citizens decided to camp there with their traditional tents to protest against the poor economic conditions that the inhabitants of Western Sahara live under and the negligible reinvestment in the region of the revenue generated by its natural resources. In just three days, about 7,000 residents of Laayoune had set up almost 500 tents to demand jobs and decent housing. The protest movement grew and began to spread to other places in Western Sahara. Three weeks later, the Gdeim Izik camp, also called “Camp Dignity”, held about 20,000 people and 8,000 tents.

After the first few days, Moroccan security forces surrounded the camp to make it difficult to bring in water, food, medicines, and other supplies, with the aim of dissuading the demonstrators. The number of protesters grew over the course of almost a month in proportion to the deployment of more and more members of the security forces. These forces gradually expelled all the international observers, including town council members, lawyers, journalists, members of Spain’s parliament, and Spanish members of the European parliament. Then, in the early-morning hours of 8 November, the Moroccan forces burst into the camp to break up the demonstration, which is now considered to have been a harbinger of the “Arab spring” movements.



The Gdeim Izik camp before and after it was dismantled

The camp was forcibly cleared through the use of water cannon and firearms and by setting fire to the tents. Sahrawi activists claim that several people were murdered, among them the Spanish citizen Babi Hamday Buyema, better known as “Baby Gargar. Thousands of people were injured and hundreds of civilians were arrested, including several journalists. According to the Moroccan authorities, only two protesters were killed, while 11 members of the security forces lost their lives. The forcible eviction of the demonstrators set off clashes between the civilians and the security forces that spread to Laayoune.

The brutality of the dismantlement of Gdeim Izik's "Camp Dignity" was soon corroborated by many reports from NGOs, such as the one issued by Human Rights Watch. "Following the initial violent confrontations, Moroccan security forces participated with Moroccan civilians in retaliatory attacks on civilians and homes, and blocked wounded Sahrawis from seeking medical treatment," Human Rights Watch charged. "Such conduct, and the beating of persons in custody, cannot be viewed as force used legitimately to prevent or stop violent acts by some demonstrators, such as stone-throwing or arson." The report includes the testimony of many people who were arrested but later freed and who accused the authorities of physical abuse, torture, threats, and various kinds of mistreatment.

Human Rights Watch stresses that reporting on the events that took place in "Camp Dignity" was made difficult by the Moroccan authorities' exclusion of journalists and international observers. This complaint is supported by a European Parliament resolution of 25 November 2010 which condemns the Gdeim Izik repression and urges Morocco to respect human rights and to reinvest in Western Sahara monies generated by the natural resources which are being taken out of the region.

Yolanda Sobero, a reporter for the TVE program "En Portada" (Front Page), recalled that "in those days reporting was not easy for foreign journalists, especially the Spaniards. They were watched and harassed; some were arrested and expelled."

On 2 December 2010 the Spanish parliament unanimously adopted a motion condemning the violence in Gdeim Izik, along the lines of the one previously passed by the European parliament, but which avoided directly blaming the Moroccan government. Although the Spanish motion incorporated part of the content of the European parliament's resolution, the Spanish text refrained from holding the Moroccan authorities directly responsible.

4.2 MILITARY COURTS AND CONVICTIONS OBTAINED BY TORTURE

Of the some 200 persons arrested in the eviction of the Gdeim Izik demonstrators, according to the figures reported by various human rights organizations and news media, 25 were held in the Salé prison near Rabat until 2013, when they appeared before a court in one of the most controversial trials in Morocco's recent history. Among them were



the journalists El Bachir Khadda, Hassan Dah, Abdellahi Lakhfawni y Mohamed Lamin Haddi, who were reporters for the two main Sahrawi media: the Polisario's broadcasters RASD TV and RASD Radio (Hassan Dah and Mohamed Lamin Haddi), and the Équipe Média journalists' collective (El Bachir Khadda y Abdellahi Lakhfawni).

The Gdeim Izik "mega-trial", held in Rabat in November 2013, featured all the elements that negate guarantees of a fair trial and that identify a country as an enemy of fundamental human rights. The tribunal that tried these 25 civilian defendants for the murder of eleven members of the security forces was a military court, the evidence that the convictions were based on were confessions extracted by means of torture (according to international observers, NGOs and even some UN bodies), and the sentences were extremely harsh. Nine of the defendants were sentenced to life imprisonment, 14 others were given terms ranging from 20 to 30 years, and the remaining two were sentenced to just the time already served in pretrial detention. Almost all the sentences were later upheld by the Court of Appeals in Salé, including those of three of the four journalists. The fourth, Hassan Dah, later had his term reduced from 30 years to 25. The four journalists on trial had spent six months in solitary confinement, during which time, they said, they were taken out to the prison yard naked in the middle of the winter and doused with icy-cold water, beaten with clubs, and photographed and filmed in front of the prison warden. Their families had no word of their fate during the first two months.

After the sentences were handed down in February 2013, Human Rights Watch noted that "the court's verdict does not detail the evidentiary basis for finding all of the defendants guilty. Since it mentions no other significant incriminating evidence, the verdict appears to rest on the defendants' contested confessions to the police. The court rejected defense demands to investigate the defendants' allegations that police had tortured them and forced them to sign statements that they had not read. Instead, the court accepted the prosecutor's argument that the defendants had failed to request medical examinations when they first appeared before the investigating judge and that too much time had elapsed since then."

In a 2014 report on Morocco and Western Sahara, Amnesty International confirmed Morocco's use of torture after arrest as a means of obtaining confessions to be used as the basis of prosecutions, in violation of the Morocco' own constitution and its adherence to the UN Convention against Torture.

In the wake of the widespread criticism of the harshness of the Gdeim Izik “mega-trial” sentences, Morocco rewrote its laws in 2015 to rule out the trial of civilians by military courts. In 2017, Morocco's highest court, the Court of Cassation, turned the Gdeim Izik case over the Court of Appeals in Salé, which, after six months of proceedings, upheld the military court verdict and allowed the release of only those prisoners who had completed their sentences.

Amnesty International points out that during the civilian court proceedings the accusations of torture were not investigated. Following the ruling by the Court of Appeals in Salé, the Gdeim Izik prisoners were scattered among various prisons throughout Morocco. At the present, the case is back in the hands of the Court of Cassation and 19 of the 25 original defendants are still imprisoned, among them the four journalists cited previously: El Bachir Khadda (sentenced to 20 years), Hassan Dah (25 years), Abdellahi Lakhfawni (life imprisonment) and Mohamed Lamin Haddi (25 years). All were convicted of “belonging to an armed band, using violence against officials in the performance of their duties, causing the death of security force members through the use of violence, attacking the internal security of Morocco”, and, in some cases, “profaning a corpse”.

4.3 THE FOUR GDEIM IZIK JOURNALISTS

EL BACHIR KHADDA

On 2 November 2018, **El Bachir Khadda**, age 33, completed 43 days of a hunger strike in the Tiflet 2 prison, 1,200 kilometers from Laayoune. Refusing to eat has become one of the protest methods often used by Sahrawi prisoners and activists, and all four of the journalists have ended up making use of it. El Bachir Khadda, serving a 20-year term, is in very weakened health.



A founding member of the Équipe Média collective of journalists and video activists, Khadda was in charge of coordinating the group's video archives. In Gdeim Izik he recorded videos of the demonstrators' activities and the operations of the security forces. On 4 December 2010, almost a month after the camp was dismantled, he was arrested at a café in Laayoune along with a reporter for RASD TV, Hassan Dah, who was also to be convicted in the same military trial. In Khadda's testimony before the Court of Appeals, in July 2017, he declared that he had not been in the camp on 8 November 2010 and therefore he could not have played any part in the death there of any member of the security forces. He also said that the confession he made after his arrest was the result of torture and that his signature was forged.

In mid-September of last year, when Khadda decided to go on a hunger strike, his family issued a communiqué explaining that, “due to the degrading and inhuman conditions that he lives in, as well as the worsening of his health, and after many complaints to the Moroccan authorities and to the National Human Rights Council of Morocco made by his

family, his lawyer, and himself, El Bachir has decided to begin a hunger strike to demand immediate access to medical care, transfer to a prison in Western Sahara, closer to his family, and a ruling from the Court of Cassation within a reasonable period of time, given that the Gdeim Izik group has been in prison since 2010.”

According to the communiqué, Khadda had been in solitary confinement for 10 months. “Family visits are very difficult” to arrange, due to the long distances to be travelled. Moreover, “he is allowed only one five-minute telephone call per week and he is the constant victim of physical abuse, threats, and harassment” by the prison authorities. “We call on the international community to support El Bachir Khadda in these fair demands”, the family asked.

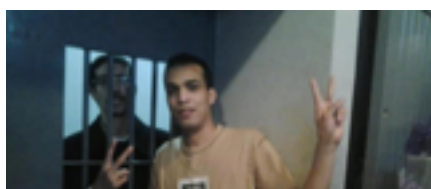
In this video prepared by Équipe Média at the beginning of the hunger strike, Khadda’s brother wondered aloud how it was possible that “someone is given a 20-year sentence just for carrying a camera” and asked if the same thing “could happen to any journalist”. In the same video, Khadda’s parents, who had not seen him in over a year and regretted that he was being held so far from home, expressed their anxiety over his limited chances of survival.

A Spanish member of the European parliament, Paloma Lopez Bermejo of the European United Left-Nordic Green Left group, raised the issue of Khadda and his hunger strike on 23 October 2018 in a written parliamentary question to the European Commission Vice-President/EU High Representative Federica Mogherini. Mogherini replied on 7 January 2019 by pointing out that Morocco’s association agreement with the European Union carries with it a commitment to respect human rights. She also recalled the EU’s “support to the United Nations Secretary-General’s efforts to achieve a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara in the context of arrangements consistent with the principles and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations”.

At present, Khadda’s health is extremely delicate. Family members report that he has to use a wheelchair to move from place to place, that he is quite isolated and he is the target of mistreatment. He continues to study law while in prison.

HASSAN DAH

Arrested by police wearing ski masks at a café in Laayoune in December 2010 along with El Bachir Khadda and another colleague, Hassan Dah is serving his 25-year sentence in the Kenitra jail, more than 1,200 kilometers from his hometown, Laayoune. Dah, 32 years old, has worked in the Polisario’s RASD TV and is also a well known human rights activist. He covered the Gdeim Izik demonstrations for Polisario radio and television. Before he



was imprisoned in 2010, Dah had already been arrested on many occasions because of his ties to the Sahrawi Human Rights Observatory. He has said that he was “used to being tortured”. Like his fellow journalists who were convicted in the same trial, he was charged with “creating a criminal gang, violence for the purpose of causing the death of members of the security forces in the performance of their duties, and the mutilation of corpses”. During the 2013 trial before a military court in Rabat, the fact that Dah had been covering the events at the Gdeim Izik as a reporter for RASD TV was considered to be an aggravating circumstance and he faced the added charge of “undermining state security”.

Although he was initially sentenced to 30 years of prison, the Court of Appeals in Salé took five years off his term in July 2017. Hassan Dah is pursuing university studies from prison and hopes to finish a doctoral degree.

In the Gdeim Izik “mega-trial”, Dah testified that following his arrest in December 2010, he was blindfolded and taken to an unknown location, along with his companions, “and tortured by every means possible”. That included being kicked, being hung upside down for hours on end and beaten with a club, having urine poured on him, and being forced to sit on glass. When he was interrogated, he was asked not about his activities in “Camp Dignity”, but rather about a trip to Algeria he had made in order to attend an international conference on the right to self-determination, his human rights activism, and his relationship to the Polisario Front. Dah testified that the statements he purportedly made to the police were not in fact his; the police had written them beforehand and then forced him to sign them.

As in the case of his co-defendants, the only incriminating evidence against him was his own forced confession, obtained by torture. Dah testified during the trial that he was away from the camp when the eviction took place, in the early-morning hours of 8 November 2010, because he was covering the story of a convoy bringing medical supplies for the demonstrators that had been turned back by the security forces.

Last October, Dah began a hunger strike after he was arbitrarily put in solitary confinement following a visit from a family member. One of the most repeated complaints from the imprisoned journalists, along with the lack of medical care, is the arbitrariness with which the Moroccan authorities cancel or reschedule visits, knowing full well that the families must travel very long distances on very limited means.

ABDELLAHI LAKHFAWNI

Abdelahi Lakhfawni, 45, is a journalist who was working with the Équipe Média collective of reporters and video activists when, in October of 2010, he went to the Gdeim Izik camp to record the protests and the deployment of the security forces. He was arrested on 12 November of that year in Fom El Oued, about 25 kilometers from Laayoune. Following his arrest, he has said, he was subjected to aberrant abuse and various types of torture, sometimes so painful that it made him pass out. He testified that he was forced to strip naked then he was hung upside down and beaten with a club. He added that he was anally raped with a policeman's club, burnt by lit cigarettes, and subjected to simulated asphyxiation. All of this took place while he was blindfolded and deprived of food and water, he told the



court.

Lakhfawni was condemned to life imprisonment by the military court in Rabat, and that sentence was confirmed by the Court of Appeals in Salé in 2017. The harshness of the sentence could have been a consequence of his presence in the Gdeim Izik camp when the demonstrators refused to allow the governor of Laayoune to enter. Lakhfawni's conviction was based on no incriminating evidence except his confession, which in the trial he said was false and made under duress, after being tortured.

Lakhfawni's mother was able to visit her son in the Kenitra jail on 26 March 2018, along with the mother of another prisoner. Both women gave chilling descriptions of the conditions their sons were enduring. “They are kept in punishment cells, known as ‘coffin cells’, that are stuffy, filthy, and crawling with bugs and maggots. It is damp and cold and there is no room for them to move around, their whole bodies ache, they are nauseated and have vision problems”, Lakhfawni's mother said.

Last year Lakhfawni went on a hunger strike for over a month, until the penitentiary authorities accepted his demands for improved prison conditions, according to family members. Like all the journalists convicted in the Gdeim Izik case, he awaits a final decision by the Court of Cassation, Morocco's highest judicial body.

MOHAMED LAMIN HADDI



Mohamed Lamin Haddi, 35, is not only a human rights activist but also a contributor to the Polisario Front's RASD Radio. He was arrested by Morocco's secret services on 20 November 2010, two weeks after the Gdeim Izik protest camp was dismantled.

According to those close to him, his arrest was due to having worked with the Belgian doctors Marie-Jeanne Wuidat and Anne Collier, who were providing humanitarian aid to the civilian victims of the violence that accompanied the dispersal of the demonstrators. Morocco expelled both physicians. Haddi has said that, unlike his three colleagues, he was not tortured, but he alleged that following his arrest he was continually kept handcuffed and blindfolded, and denied food and water.

Haddi was sentenced to 25 years in prison by the Court of Appeals in Salé, which upheld the decision of the military court in Rabat. He was found guilty of "acts of violence against public officials in the performance of their duties, with the intent to kill". Just as with his three colleagues, Haddi denied the charges brought against him and argued that the only proof offered by the prosecution was his own confession and statements, which were false and obtained under duress. Also like his colleagues, Haddi has undertaken several hunger strikes over the almost nine years he has been jailed, in order to protest against the long periods of solitary confinement, the deplorable health and sanitary conditions in the cells, the harassment and abuses of the prison officials, the dispersion of the inmates to penal institutions far away from their families, and the lack of access to medical care.

Mohamed Lamin Haddi went into coma during his last hunger strike, between September and October 2018, at the Tiflet 2 prison.

4.4 THE "AL-BAMBARY CASE", THE UN RULES IN HIS FAVOR

On 26 September 2011, in the Saharan city of Dakhla (formerly Villa Cisneros), a soccer match between the local team, Mouloudiya Dakhla, and Casablanca's Chabab de Mohamedia set off a massive mêlée between the supporters of one club and those of the other, which developed into full-scale clashes between the town's two communities: on one hand the Sahrawis, and on the other the had emigrated to Rabat calls "the Sahrawi population one-third the size community. During of rioting and fighting seven people died, The Équipe Média al-Bambary was on video.



Moroccans who, since 1975, what the government in Southern provinces". The tion of Dakhla is now just of the Morocco immigrant the course of the two days ting sparked by the match, including two police officers. reporter Média Mohamed there recording the violence

Four years later, 26 August 2015, Al-Bambary was arrested on the charge of having taken part in the disturbances. The 48-year-old journalist's arrest took place arbitrarily, when he walked into a police station in order to renew his ID card. He was charged with "belonging to a criminal gang, taking part in a murder, contributing to a public disturbance, battery resulting in death, vandalism of public property, and assaulting officials in the performance of their duties". Prior to his arrest, Al-Bambary had received no notification whatsoever of these charges, which were based on purported confessions from former prisoners, none of whom later testified at his trial.

At the trial, held behind closed doors three months after his arrest, Al-Bambary was convicted and sentenced to 12 years, although in a re-trial in January 2016 his prison term was reduced to six years. After this second trial, Al-Bambary was transferred from the “Black Jail” in Laayoune to the Ait Melloul prison just outside Agadir, in Morocco. Since then, the journalist’s family members have to travel over a thousand kilometers from Dakhala, in the South of Western Sahara, in order to visit him.

Al-Bambary has said that during the first four days he was held in custody following his arrest, he was subjected to physical abuse to force him to make a false confession, an experience similar to that of all of the rest of the Sahrawi journalists being held as prisoners. Also like his imprisoned colleagues, he has gone on several hunger strikes. These hunger strikes, especially the most recent one, have considerably undermined his health.

The particularly arbitrary nature of the Al-Bambary case has led many NGOs and official international bodies to take an interest in his cause. In January 2016, a Spanish member of the European Parliament, Paloma López Bermejo of the United Left party, posed a parliamentary question about “the arbitrary detention of the journalist and political prisoner Mohamed al-Bambary” to the Vice-president of the European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini. (Several months later, the arrests of the *Équipe Média* journalists Said Amidan and Brahim Laajail, denounced by RSF and others, was to lead to another of López Bermejo’s questions for Mogherini on the subject of Morocco’s treatment of journalists covering Western Sahara.)

In March 2017, two U.S.-based human rights organizations, Freedom Now and Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, petitioned the UN Human Rights Council’s Working Group on Arbitrary Detentions to study the Al-Bambary case, which it did. In September 2018, the Working Group issued findings that included a scathing critique of the Moroccan authorities, confirming that Al-Bambary’s arrest and imprisonment constituted a “deprivation of liberty” that was “arbitrary” and violated both international law and his fundamental rights and freedoms. The Working Group’s “opinion” demanded that Al-Bambary be released immediately and receive financial compensation as well as medical care and a “guarantee of non-recurrence”. The Human Rights Council’s Working Group found no merit in the arguments put forward in the matter on the part of the Moroccan government, which denied that Al-Bambary was a journalist.

The Working Group pointed out that “the nature of the questions asked to Mr. Al-Bambary during his interrogation, which focused primarily on the identity of the persons who financed and published his work, would suggest that what really interested the Moroccan Government was the media coverage of the events (in Dakhla) as well as Mr. Al-Bambary’s work for *Équipe Média*. The Working Group considered that Mr. Al-Bambary’s activity (video recording the disturbances in Dakhla) had indeed been journalistic.”

It added that “it is not necessary to possess a press accreditation card or to be a member of a professional association to exercise such an activity, contrary to the Government’s arguments.” That statement refutes one of the classic excuses that authoritarian regimes use to deny that they are jailing journalists — not recognizing them as such.

The government of Rabat has thus far ignored the UN’s call, and Al-Bambary is still held prisoner.

4.5 REPORTING WHILE BEING IN AND OUT OF JAILS AND COURTROOMS

As the cases described above show, at any point in their careers Sahrawi journalists may have to face a lengthy prison sentence that will bring their professional and private lives to a halt. But they also have to live, on a daily basis, with visits to police stations and prisons for purported offences that are ever more “imaginative”. The aim is to deny journalists the slightest scrap of continuity and to lock them up for shorter or longer periods while keeping them tied up in courtrooms in between.



A clear example of this tactic is the case of the correspondent for the Polisario's RASD TV, **Mahmoud al-Haissan**. On 30 June 2014, despite losing 2-1, Algeria played a good World Cup match in Brazil against Germany. Given the Sahrawis' close ties with the Algerian people, stemming from the Algerian government's long-standing support for the Polisario Front, the match result was celebrated in the streets of Laayoune, where shouts of jubilation soon became mixed with calls for the independence of Western

Sahara, giving the celebration a political tone. The Moroccan security forces charged the crowds and Al-Haissan recorded the disturbances on video for the report he filed, which was later broadcast by RASD TV.

A few days later, Al-Haissan was arrested at his home for having reported on the use of force by the police. For 48 hours, his friends and colleagues knew nothing of his whereabouts, until he was taken to the Laayoune Civil Prison, still today better known by its old Spanish name, “Black Jail”. He was accused of “belonging to an armed band, obstructing a public thoroughfare, assaulting public officials in the performance of their duties, and destruction of public property”.

Al-Haissan was physically abused by the police, who threatened him and warned him to stop reporting, according to his lawyer, who was able to speak to him not long after his arrest. Reporters Without Borders publicized the case, in which the journalist was sentenced to 18 months in prison after an unjustified period of pretrial detention. In a letter from the Black Jail that he was able to make public, Al-Haissan issued a call for “breaking the news blockade imposed on Western Sahara, which is preventing journalists from exercising their right to free expression”. The RASD TV correspondent argued that his prison sentence was “a reprisal for trying to do practical journalism, which allows us to show the world a true picture of what is happening in the occupied territories of Western Sahara”. Al-Haissan is now at liberty.



That is not the case for another RASD TV journalist, **Salah Labsir**, who was arrested by Moroccan police on 6 June 2015. The arrest warrant for Labsir had been out for two years. He had been arrested previously, in April 2013, along with three other young people, while demonstrating in favor of self-determination in the city of Smara. All four were charged with “organizing a criminal gang, arson, obstruction of a public thoroughfare, and destruction of public property”. Denying the charges but not wanting to face the reprisals of the Moroccan authorities, Labsir fled to the

refugee camps in Tindouf (Algeria), where he was taken in by relatives and was able to get an Algerian passport. From Tindouf, knowing he was being sought by the Moroccan police, he recorded a video in which he announced his decision to return to the occupied territories, despite being worried about his physical safety.

This is how he explained his flight and his decision to return: “The Moroccan security forces came into my home several times. I grabbed my ID card and a few belongings and I went off to the refugee camps. Not because I was afraid, just because I knew I would be safer there. Now, after two years in exile, I want to see my mother and the rest of my family again, even though I know what the consequences might be, because of the brutality of the Moroccan security forces”, Labsir said, in what would be his last video recording before he turned himself in and was sent to the Ait Melloul prison. The latest news about Labsir, whose release is expected soon, is that he was put into solitary confinement as punishment for having spoken in Hassanía during a telephone call to Algeria. Hassanía is the Sahrawi language, which the Moroccan prison guards who listen in on the inmates’ telephone calls cannot understand.

Smara is an inland town in the occupied territories that is home to another small group of journalists who come together to carry out their work while trying to dodge Moroccan surveillance. The group here is called “Smara News”, three of whose members have recently been in jail or are currently involved in court proceedings that could cost them their freedom.

One of them is 24-year-old **Walid el Batal**, who sentenced on 5 December 2016 to 14 months in for taking part in a demonstration in Smara’s neighbourhood. He was convicted of “obstructing thoroughfare and assaulting a public official in the mance of duty”. The same day that Walid received sentence, his father, Salek Batal, was facing trial, participating in demonstrations. “We journalists are constant attack. We are insulted, tortured, beaten, and imprisoned, as well as getting death threats from the Moroccan authorities. All this repression has one sole purpose: to stop Sahrawi journalists from gathering information about human rights abuses in Western Sahara”, El Batal told Reporters Without Borders.



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The photographer **Mohamed Aljomayyai**, together with another member of Smara News, Mohamed Salem Mayara, was arrested in a café on 27 March 2018, one day after a documentary of theirs was televised. Their report showed Moroccan civilians attacking Sahrawi demonstrators who were protesting the lack of employment. It also showed how injured protesters were denied treatment at the local hospital. In September of last year, Mayara and Aljomayyai were sentenced to two years in prison for “the attempted murder of a police officer, setting up barricades, and humiliating public officials in the performance of duty”.

Smara News issued a statement rejecting these “false” accusations and declaring that that the two journalists were arrested only in order to “take them off the media stage”.

The Spanish lawyer Inés Miranda, a member of the Spanish Council of Lawyers and a regular observer of prosecutions of Sahrawis, attended the trial of the two journalists, which she criticized on the grounds that the only evidence presented against the defendants was the police report. Mayara and Aljomayyai are currently free while awaiting a decision from the Court of Appeals.

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4.6 SILENT REPRESSION: THE DAILY HOUNDING OF JOURNALISTS AND THOSE AROUND THEM

Extremely severe sentences, torture, beatings, and periods of solitary confinement are not the sole weapons used by the Moroccan authorities in their efforts to silence the slightest signs of free reporting in Western Sahara. The continual harassment and hounding to which Sahrawi reporters are subjected for daring to convey the reality of this territory to the rest of the world are other weapons that are systematically wielded against them to wear them down, with a serious impact on their lives.

Mohamed Mayara is one of the founders of Équipe Média and also a human rights lawyer. On 13 January 2019, he was stopped by a group of eight policemen at the Laayoune airport. He was then held and beaten with no explanation. He was returning from visiting several refugee camps together with the popular activist Aminatu Haidar, who became famous back in 2009 after she went on a hunger strike at the Lanzarote airport, in Spain's Canary Islands, to protest her expulsion by the Moroccan authorities in Laayoune. She was finally allowed to return.



Mayara, after being interrogated about his visit to the refugee camps and his work at Équipe Média, left the airport without any charge made against him, but with a bruise on his face as evidence of his arbitrary detention and beating. It was not the first time this journalist was a victim of harassment by Moroccan authorities; he has been subjected to it for much of his life. Just a few months before this incident at the airport, Moroccan

Army soldiers raided his home and interrogated him and his family about their human rights activism and their source of income. It was not by chance that the soldiers questioned them about their economic resources: Mayara had been fired from his job as an official working for the Laayoune City Council back in 2007, on his return from a human rights conference at the United Nations in Geneva. He managed to get a job as a high-school teacher four years later, but he was once again fired in 2015. That same year, his wife also lost her job. It is therefore not surprising that the Moroccan Army was curious about how Mayara and his wife supported themselves since they had both “coincidentally” lost their jobs, leaving the family without any income.

Sahrawi journalists are constantly followed, their telephone calls are tapped, they are held at police stations for hours or days, their relatives are intimidated, their computers are hacked into, and they are threatened. Doing their jobs as journalists involves a continual effort to overcome the obstacles the Moroccan authorities put in their paths in order to wear them down.

The dual vulnerability of being a woman and a journalist: the case of Nazha el Khalidi

One of the best-known female faces in Sahrawi journalism is that of 26-year-old **Nazha el Khalidi**. That's because she was one of the first in Western Sahara to show her face in public and to do her work openly. She's a reporter and correspondent for Équipe Média and RASD TV, and also a human rights and women's rights activist. El Khalidi was arrested on 4 December 2018 when she was live-covering a demonstration in Laayoune calling for new talks in Geneva between the Kingdom of Morocco and the Polisario Front. As can be seen in the video that she was streaming live to social networks, policemen chased her and tried to take her cell phone, which was confiscated once she was in custody.



The journalist was taken to a police station where she was interrogated and mistreated for four hours, with no regard for her legal rights. She was then released without any charges being brought forth, but she was questioned again three months later. This time she was accused of a crime that the Moroccan authorities had not previously used against journalists: “claiming or usurping a title related to a profession regulated by law without meeting the necessary qualifications for holding that title”. In other words, she was charged with practicing journalism without a journalism degree or a press card. This is a justification that authoritarian governments that imprison journalists often use in order to deny that the prisoners are media professionals. The argument, commonly made by such regimes as that of Erdogan in Turkey, is that “a person who is not accredited as a journalist is not a journalist and we can therefore say that there are no journalists in prison”. In a recent statement, Human Rights Watch condemned the Moroccan authorities’ misuse of a law designed to keep imposters from practicing professions requiring a license, such as that of medical doctor, in order to silence journalists.

Under Article 381 of Morocco’s Penal Code, the use of a title associated with a profession regulated by law without having the necessary qualifications is an offense punishable by two to three years in prison. Human Rights Watch said that “Article 381, when it is used to restrict journalism, is incompatible with Morocco’s obligations under international human rights law to respect the right to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas”.

“People had come out on to the streets to support talks in Geneva to settle the conflict,” El Khalidi told RSF. “I was streaming on Smara Avenue but I hadn’t been there even four minutes when they arrested me, hit me, and forced me into a police car. I was at the police station for hours, being mistreated and interrogated.”

“We try to publicize the violations of human rights in Western Sahara and that poses a huge risk for our security,” she added. “We are arrested and tortured. Our families are threatened and coerced. My only crime was to film the police charges against the Sahrawi demonstrators and now I might have to serve months or years in jail for that.”

On 20 May, El Khalidi’s trial was postponed until 24 June. The five Spanish lawyers who had travelled to Laayoune to attend the trial, together with two observers sent by a Norwegian NGO, were all expelled by the Moroccan authorities.

El Khalidi had previously been arrested on 21 August 2016, when she was covering a women’s demonstration. The Moroccan police confiscated her camera and she had to spend the night at the police station, where she underwent hours of interrogation and mistreatment before being released without charges.

After journalists have been held at a police station, the police often leak selected content from their cell phones in an effort to discredit them. In El Khalidi’s case, she is doubly vulnerable, as a woman as well as a journalist. Several websites and social media accounts have put out libelous, sexist stories about her private life, denigrating her in an attempt to stigmatize her in the eyes of her own community, not so much professionally but as “a loose woman”.

“Although you know what you’re risking and you try not to feel affected by it, rumors spread and it’s inevitable that you feel shame, although you’re not to blame for having your private photos exposed all over the Internet with false and degrading comments”, El Khalidi said.

The social media accounts used by Sahrawi journalists and bloggers as their only channel for reporting to the rest of the world are frequently hacked. “Our Facebook page is under constant cyberattacks”, said Ahmed Ettanji, founding member of the *Équipe Média* journalists’ group.

Note: Reporters Without Borders has asked several Moroccan government bodies about the status of imprisoned journalists and about freedom of information in Western Sahara, but has received no response.

5 THE DEPORTATION OF FOREIGN JOURNALISTS: THE OTHER AXIS OF THE NEWS BLOCKADE

The fact that Western Sahara has become a news “black hole” cannot be explained solely by the Moroccan regime’s constant repression of local journalism; it is also due to the increasingly systematic policy of denying entry to foreign journalists and deporting those who manage to get into the territory. By this means, Morocco tries to ensure that news neither gets out nor comes in.

The regime’s treatment of foreign reporters living in Morocco or making occasional working visits there to report on the situation has become increasingly harsh in the last few years, according to journalists in the area. “There was a time of greater leniency, in the years immediately after Mohammed VI came to the throne, which benefitted not just the foreign press, but also the Moroccan journalists. It was a time when one could work at ease in Morocco. But bit by bit the country has been tightening up control since then; just look at the problems the foreign press had in covering the recent revolts in the Rif”, said Ignacio Cembrero, the Middle East and Morocco correspondent for *El País* for 35 years.

It is not just the coverage of the Rif protests that has confirmed how little Morocco hesitates to deport journalists – RSF reported the deportation in 2017 of two Spanish reporters, one of whom had been a resident in Morocco for 17 years. The immigration issue was behind some more recent deportations, like that of the France Inter journalist, Sébastien Sabiron, less than a year ago, or that of Gerbert van der Aa, a Dutch national who was deported last February. This proves that the country has changed and “now it looks more like a dictatorship”, Cabrero said.

The biggest wave of deportations of Spanish and other foreign journalists from Western Sahara took place, without a doubt, after the dismantling of the Gdeim Izuk camp in November 2010. The whole team of reporters sent by Spain’s Cadena Ser radio station, including renowned journalist Àngels Barceló, was deported to the Canary Islands in a plane that included several other deported journalists: two TVE reporters, one from Onda Cero radio station, two from Antena 3 TV, one from the French agency AFP, one from *Publico* newspaper and two journalists working for EFE, the Spanish news agency.

In the wake of the incidents at Gdeim Izik, few media outlets tried to return to Western Sahara.

Those reporters that do are usually denied entry, put under surveillance or are promptly deported. In September 2015, Gervasio Sánchez, an award-winning photojournalist for *Heraldo de Aragón* newspaper and a member of the RSF’s Board of Directors, witnessed his friend and lawyer, Luís Mangrané, being denied entry into Morocco. Mangrané was going to be an observer in a trial in Laayoune as a member of the Aragón Observatory for Western Sahara group, of which Sánchez is also a member. Sánchez and Mangrané took a Royal Air Maroc flight from Madrid to Laayoune, but at a stopover in Casablanca, the lawyer was forced by the Moroccan police to leave the plane and told to take the next flight back to Madrid. Sánchez got off with him. Both returned to Spain the next day. (Mangrané was once again deported last February).

Also in 2015, as part of the celebrations of the 40th Anniversary of the “Green March”, Nicolás Castellano, a radio journalist working for Cadena Ser, had travelled to Laayoune in order to cover the festivities, but was denied entry. Several police officers as well as the deputy mayor of Laayoune himself stopped him from disembarking, alleging it was “an undesirable visit”.

2016 was a year characterized by many deportations. In May, Polish journalists Dominik Sipinski and Anna Suzanna Oleak were deported from Laayoune. In July, the German photojournalist Axel Javier Sulzbacher was intercepted by the police in the Sahrawi capital and sent to Agadir by taxi, a common deportation practice in the territory. Three months later, French freelance journalist Camille Lavoix was expelled from the city of Dajla where she was writing an article that was later published in “M” magazine for Le Monde and in the Swiss daily Le Courrier Suisse.

In January 2017, Roger McShane, The Economist correspondent in Egypt, was forced to go to Casablanca from Laayoune after he interviewed Mohamed Dahani, a political prisoner under house arrest.

In February 2017, Catalan photojournalist Bernat Millet was brusquely deported. He was spending the afternoon in Laayoune at the home of Équipe Média’s journalist Ahmed Ettanji, who warned him that they were being monitored by the Moroccan secret services. Around midnight, Millet, Ettanji and other colleagues from Équipe Média decided to leave the building and go elsewhere by car.

As Millet himself recounted in a video recorded the day after the incident took place, police officers stopped the car and made the five journalists get out, with a great deal of shouting and shoving. Then “somebody threw a rock at the police car, two riot vehicles arrived at the scene and the police began berating us and treating us like we were terrorists. I was forced into the police car, separating me from my four Sahrawi colleagues, and I was taken to a police checkpoint where I was kept for more than three hours; I had my cameras inspected, they made me erase ‘incriminating’ photographs and I was told that Ahmed Ettanji was a bad person who was against Morocco.” Surrounded by ten policemen, Millet had his cell phone confiscated and inspected before he was finally deported. “I was forced to get into a taxi that would take me to Agadir and I was told that I was not welcome in Western Sahara”, said the photojournalist.

The police also arrested the four members of Équipe Média that were with him that night: Ahmed Ettanji, Brahim Laajil, Mohamed Saleh Zaroualo and Bachar Mohamed Hamadi. After several hours in custody, they were all released.

In a similar manner, Ana Cortés, a journalist working for Valencia Plaza, was expelled from Western Sahara on 16 February 2019. She was with an Italian colleague at a Sahrawi activist’s home in Laayoune. They were meeting with members of Al Kássam, a collective of unemployed people, when the police suddenly burst in, interrogated the journalists and proceeded to deport them to Agadir. This is the most recent expulsion of foreign journalists from Western Sahara that has been reported.

Given the tightening pressure that Morocco is applying against the foreign press, Reporters Without Borders has avoided the participation of any currently active correspondents in Morocco in order to spare them possible reprisals by the Moroccan authorities.

“A foreign correspondent knows that there are certain red lines that should be respected because of the risk of being deported,” Ignacio Cembrero said. A measure less drastic than deportation that is often used by Moroccan authorities is to simply take away a reporter’s press card. “The press card is withdrawn, but the journalist is not expelled. As a result, we cannot say that there has been a deportation, but de facto the journalist is unable to work because without accreditation it is practically impossible to do your job as a reporter in Morocco,” he added.

As a result, in order to be a correspondent in Morocco, is there self-censorship with regard to certain subjects? Ignacio Cembrero is categorical: “Yes. Essentially, any issue related to the Head of State”.

If Morocco continues its harsh treatment of correspondents and if the media, swamped by important international news stories and faced with diminishing resources, stops going to Western Sahara, what future is there for news coverage in the territory?

According to the Sahrawi journalist Bachir Mohamed Lahsen, “this issue is closely linked to the future of Western Sahara itself and the most worrying question hanging in the air right now: Until when? Until when are we going to have to endure this situation?”

The Spanish television reporter Yolanda Sobero asks the same question, although she sees a glimmer of hope for the Sahrawi people through journalism: “When one goes back to the Tindouf refugee camps and sees how the tents are gradually becoming adobe huts, one understands that the Saharawi people are accepting that as their future and it’s heart-breaking. But, at the same time, it is very encouraging to know that there is a new generation of journalists in Western Sahara that has managed to open a window to let us see what lies on the other side of the wall that separates us.” “They have managed to break the silence”.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reporters Without Borders calls on the government of Morocco to guarantee all the imprisoned journalists from Western Sahara fair judicial proceedings at all levels and with all guarantees, and to facilitate access for international observers who can attest to that being the case.
- Reporters Without Borders urges the government of Morocco to comply with all UN demands regarding the freeing of jailed Sahrawi journalists.
-Reporters Without Borders asks the government of Morocco to comply with the United Nations Convention against Torture and to respect at all times the physical and psychological integrity of Sahrawi journalists.
- Reporters Without Borders demands that the government of Morocco lift all restrictions on the entry of journalists into Western Sahara, respect the freedom of movement of the press in that territory, and put an end to the expulsion and deportation of journalists.
- Reporters Without Borders asks Morocco to respect fundamental rights in Western Sahara, among them the freedoms of expression and information, which guarantee not only the right of Sahrawi journalists to freely practice journalism, but also the right of Sahrawi citizens to plural and truthful information.
- Reporters Without Borders calls on the European Union, and very particularly the governments of Spain and France, to break their habitual silence of complicity with Morocco and to condemn the repression of Sahrawi journalists.

REPORTERS WITHOUT BORDERS promotes and defends the freedom to receive and impart information worldwide. Based in Paris, it has fourteen international bureaux (Berlin, Brussels, Dakar, Geneva, Helsinki, London, Madrid, Rio de Janeiro, Stockholm, San Francisco, Taipei, Tunis, Vienna and Washington, D.C.) and has more than 150 correspondents in all five continents.

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