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Morocco/Western Sahara: Convicted Sahrawis must receive fair trials in civilian courts



Violence broke out as security forces forcibly dismantled the Gdim Izik protest camp east of Laayoune(© AFP/Getty Images)

„It is disturbing that the authorities have also ignored the Sahrawi defendants’ allegations of torture and coerced confessions. Ann Harrison, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa « Mon, 18/02/2013

The Moroccan authorities must use civilian courts to give fair retrials to 25 Sahrawis and fully investigate their allegations of torture, Amnesty International said today after a military court handed them long prison sentences.

On Sunday, the Military Court of Rabat handed down nine life sentences and sentenced 14 other defendants to between 20-30 years imprisonment each. Two other defendants were released having served their two-year sentences in pre-trial detention.

The convictions relate to violence during and after the Moroccan security forces’ dismantling of the Gdim Izik protest camp in November 2010, during which 11 members of the security forces and two Sahrawis were killed.

“The Moroccan authorities have ignored calls to try the defendants in an independent,

impartial civilian court. Instead they have opted for a military court where civilians can never receive a fair trial.” said Ann Harrison, Deputy Middle East and North Africa Programme Director at Amnesty International.

“It is disturbing that the authorities have also ignored the Sahrawi defendants’ allegations of torture and coerced confessions.”

“The use of military courts, compounded by the fact that torture allegations have not been investigated, casts a serious doubt on the Moroccan authorities’ intention and whether they were more concerned with securing a guilty verdict than justice”.

The defendants have repeatedly said they were tortured and otherwise ill-treated in detention, and coerced into signing statements, but there have been no reports of any official investigation into the allegations.

Amnesty International is calling for an independent investigation into the torture allegations, and for any evidence obtained under torture or coercion to be rejected by the court.

The lawyers of the detainees said they will challenge the verdicts before the Court of Cassation.

Amongst the charges against the defendants – who include members of Sahrawi civil society organizations and Sahrawi political activists – were belonging to a criminal organization, violence against a public official and the desecration of a corpse.

On 8 November 2010, violence broke out when Moroccan security forces tried forcibly to remove people from and dismantle the Gdim Izik protest camp a few kilometres east of the town of Laayoune, in the Moroccan-administered Western Sahara.

The camp had been set up in early October that year by Sahrawis protesting against what they describe as their marginalization and demanding jobs and adequate housing.

During and after the violence, the security forces arrested some 200 Sahrawis. Further arrests were also made in December 2010.

More than two years later, and despite persistent calls by Amnesty International and others, the Moroccan authorities have yet to conduct an independent and impartial investigation into the human rights abuses committed in connection with the 8 November 2010 events.