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Opening address for the international conference 'Hold the Western Sahara Referendum – NOW!' December 12th 2014

Your Excellencies, members of national parliaments and the European Parliament, representatives of non-government organisations and experts in the field, dear friends,

First and foremost, I would like to thank the 'Freedom for Western Sahara' association, represented by its chairwoman, Ms Tanja Brodtmann, and the Board of Trustees spokesman, Prof. Dr. Manfred Hinz, for taking the initiative and convening this international conference on Western Sahara.

As the patron of the Board of Trustees, I am deeply impressed not only by its expertise and objectivity, but also by its trust in the rule of law as opposed to the rule of the powerful. 130 years ago, here in Berlin, Africa was divided up among the colonial powers of Europe at the Congo Conference. Western Sahara was granted to Spain in 1885, but the United Nations has been exerting pressure since 1975 for the people of Western Sahara to be provided self-determination of their own future. Yet instead of the freedom yearned for so much, the region has been occupied by Morocco and Mauretania. A long war of liberation led by the Frente Polisario did not end until 1991, when a ceasefire was agreed upon after the UNO had promised to conduct a referendum. The Namibia referendum

that brought freedom to Africa's second-last colony on the 20th of March, 1990 served as a model for a similar referendum in Western Sahara. Since the late 1970s, Bremen has given humanitarian and political support to Africa's key liberation movements, such as SWAPO, ANC and the Frente Polisario, in their striving for self-determination, human rights and against apartheid, and has received broad support for such policies from its own population. The constructive pressure exerted by many NGOs has also made a deep impression on our parliament, and led, for example, to the renaming and redefinition of the former Colonial Monument dating from 1932, a 10-metre brick elephant in the inner city, as the Anti-Colonial Monument during the 1990 celebrations for the liberation of Namibia. In that connection, Bremen reaffirmed its willingness to continue the efforts of the UNO for a referendum in Africa's last remaining colony. Another important step in that direction was the conferring of the Bremen Solidarity Award on Aminatou Haidar in 2013. I am delighted that she is with us today and would like to extend my warmest welcome to her and the representatives of the Robert Kennedy Foundation. The Award was initiated by our parliament in 1987 and was first awarded to Winnie and Nelson Mandela in 1988, when Nelson Mandela was still in prison.

All of you here want to break the silence surrounding Africa's last colony being occupied militarily by its neighbour, Morocco; its raw materials being extracted on a huge scale and human rights in the occupied territories being brutally violated without any form of international monitoring. In the World Security Council, France has for many years prevented the inclusion of human rights monitoring in the MINURSO mandate. Europe is silent on this issue and is barely aware that Morocco has been isolated since its withdrawal from the African Union (AU) and that the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic has been recognized under international law by numerous African states (most recently South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria and Namibia). Even the appeal to reject the EU-

Morocco Fisheries Protocol, made to the European Parliament by the President of the Panafrikan Parliament in November last year, was not enough to prevent a majority of the European Parliament deciding in favour. This means that the EU will continue to pay millions of Euro to Morocco so that European fishing boats can also exploit the fishing grounds off the coast of Western Sahara. This is a blatant infringement of international law that I intervened against, unfortunately to no avail, in a letter I wrote to the President of the European Parliament and also to all the German MEPs. To my dismay, I discovered from many responses that there is considerable ignorance about the conflict and a definite lack of interest in any solution. Bishop Tutu was right when he said that "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor". Remaining silent makes one complicit. Germany is leaving the problem purportedly to France and Spain, namely to the strongest supporters and beneficiaries of Morocco's policy of occupation. Worse still, by signing the Declaration of Rabat, Germany is giving its support to German-Moroccan friendship without mentioning the conflict in Western Sahara.

I wish this conference a resounding echo and I hope it will adopt an action programme that is clear-cut and specific, so that the silence in Germany and Europe over the injustice of Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara, and the intolerable violations of human rights in the occupied territories and the frustrating hopelessness in the refugee camps can be overcome with a fair referendum.

I wish to pay my greatest tribute to your voluntary commitment and dedication over many years for the liberation of the last colony in Africa and I promise to continue supporting your work as best I can in the future.