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DROP CHARGES AGAINST IBRAHIM AMRIKLI AND CEASE ARBITRARY ARRESTS OF JOURNALISTS AND ACTIVISTS IN WESTERN SAHARA

The Moroccan authorities must immediately drop the bogus charges against citizen-journalist Ibrahim Amrikli, said Amnesty International today ahead of his hearing before a Court in Laayoune, a city in northern Western Sahara on 28 September 2020.

On 17 May, the prosecutor of the Court of First Instance in Laayoune charged Ibrahim Amrikli with "breaking orders related to the health emergency status", based on the health emergency Decree law passed in March 2020, and with "offending public officials", based on article 263 of the penal code. At his first hearing, on 7 September, the Court of First Instance in Laayoune decided to postpone the trial to 28 September.

While the health emergency during COVID 19 might warrant state imposition of restrictive measures, the circumstances of Ibrahim Amrikli's arrest, interrogation and charges suggest that he was targeted for his work as a citizen-journalist and human rights activist.

Ibrahim Amrikli, 23, works for the Nushatta Foundation, a Sahrawi youth organization founded in 2013 which monitors the human rights situation in Western Sahara. He has been covering protests as well as working on documentaries such as a [report](#) on the Bou Craa phosphate mine in Western Sahara.

On 15 May, at 11 pm, four policemen arrested Ibrahim Amrikli, while he was heading to the pharmacy and detained him for around 48 hours during the COVID-19 lockdown. At the time of the arrest, he was carrying an authorization to circulate, which Amnesty International reviewed.

Police officers transferred him to the police station.

Speaking with Amnesty International, Ibrahim Amrikli recalled: "At the station, there were three police officers. One told me that I am accused of 'throwing stones' at police forces on 28 April 2020, when I was at my house all day. I was then held alone in a cell for several hours handcuffed. It was Ramadan, but no food or water was given to me before the beginning of the fasting. On the next day, I was interrogated between 11am and 2pm about my work with the foundation and about the accusation of "throwing stones". Two of the police officers insulted me and slapped me. After that, they presented me with the interrogation report for signature which I asked to read but I was told that I could not and that I only had to sign it. I refused. Then, for two hours, they slapped me and insulted me. They opened my phone and went through my pictures and pictures of my family and they laughed at them including a video from 2012 where I was holding the Sahrawi flag. The pressure was too high so I ended up signing the report without reading it."

On 17 May, police officers took Ibrahim Amrikli to the Court of First Instance in Laayoune where a judge told him he admitted in the interrogation statement to "throwing stones" and "offending public officials". The judge released him on bail (3,000 dirhams, or around 300 USD) that day.

Ibrahim Amrikli told Amnesty International that he was previously detained at least three times between 2017 and 2019 for periods of time between four days and two months on false charges of "committing violent acts", based on "confessions" signed under threat. Each time, he was arbitrarily arrested in the street next to his house or when going to get administrative papers.

In a similar case, on 1 July 2020, police officers in Laayoune arbitrarily detained Algargagrat media's founder Essabi Yahdih, 39, as he went into the police station to get an administrative certificate. He told Amnesty International that police interrogated him for at least 10 hours about the editorial line of his media, its staff and funding as well as his personal online posts and specifically about a post published on 28 June where he commented mockingly on a post by a Moroccan parliamentarian about King Mohamed VI.

Essabi Yahdih told Amnesty International that police had insulted and threatened him with "arrest, rape and murder" and prosecution for "offending" the King, a charge often used in Morocco/Western Sahara to prosecute activists and journalists who voice critical stances online. He was released without being prosecuted.

Background

Western Sahara is the subject of a territorial dispute between Morocco, which annexed the territory in 1975 and claims sovereignty there, and the Polisario Front, which calls for an independent state in the territory and has set up a self-proclaimed government-in-exile in the refugee camps in Tindouf, southwestern of Algeria. A UN settlement in 1991 which ended fighting between Morocco and the Polisario calls for the organization of a referendum for the people of Western Sahara to exercise their right to self-determination by choosing independence or integration into Morocco. The referendum has not been held amid ongoing disputes about the process of identifying who may vote in the referendum.

As of today, Morocco administers *de facto* the territory west of the Berm – a 2,700 km sand wall separating the Moroccan and Polisario-controlled areas of Western Sahara.