

**Her Excellency
Madam Michelle Bachelet
UN High Commissioner for Human Rights**

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Madam High Commissioner,

The 286 undersigning organisations wish to draw your attention to the latest crackdown witnessed in the occupied territories of Western Sahara targeting Saharawi human rights defenders advocating for the right to self-determination for the people of Western Sahara.

The undersigned organizations urge you to take urgent public action to denounce the latest crackdown witnessed in the occupied territory of Western Sahara.

The Moroccan government's crackdown on Sahrawi human rights defenders relates to a series of events that have taken place in the early weeks of May 2021. The crackdown is believed to be closely linked to the resumption of hostilities between the POLISARIO Front and the Kingdom of Morocco, the situation of Sultana Khaya and her family including the mother (84 years old) and the kids (the youngest is Idrisse Khaya 2 years old), who has remained under house arrest since November 2020, accompanied with daily harassments, torture and attacks on their house and to a campaign launched by the recently created organization Saharawi Organ against Moroccan Occupation (ISACOM), inspired by Sultana's months-long resistance, called "My flag is on my rooftop".

Since early May, Moroccan agents have laid siege to, raided and rampaged through homes, beaten and tortured activists, raped two of the female human rights defenders, shut off electricity and water, hurled noxious substances into houses, kept activists from leaving their homes and prohibited them from having visits, prevented access to food, medicine and medical treatment for injuries caused by the authorities, issued death threats against them and family members, and carried out defamation campaigns, often in ways that incite hatred and encourage violence against them.

The latest developments are alarming and we fear that the situation will escalate if the international community fails to denounce the situation and to hold the Kingdom of Morocco to account for its gross violations of human rights and humanitarian law. We believe that by carrying out a systematic campaign of harassment and terror against nonviolent Saharawi activists, including the use of rape and sexual violence as a weapon, the Kingdom of Morocco is attempting to shut down protests in Western Sahara and silence the voice of the Sahrawi people.

The situation of Saharawi human rights defender **Sultana Khaya** and her family is particularly extreme. Since 19 of November 2020, Khaya and some of her family members have been held under arbitrary house arrest and subjected to severe physical and psychological violence -- much of it directed towards the two sisters, Sultana and **Laura Khaya**. For six months the home has been surrounded by military and police agents and vehicles, who have prevented Sultana from advancing more than a block from the entrance -- often physically carrying her and her sister back into the house -- and stopped and beaten numerous Sahrawis, including family, friends and supporters, who try to visit.

The situation has been documented by among others Human Rights Watch¹, Amnesty International² and Front Line Defenders³.

On 10 May and again on 12 May, the situation escalated when dozens of hooded agents broke into the Khaya home before dawn, as the family slept. In the first raid they rampaged through the home and arrested **Babuizid Mohammed Saaed Labhi** (President of the Collective of the Saharawi Human Rights Defenders – CODESA), **Salek Baber and Khaled Boufraya** who were living there to support the family. Moroccan agents beat two family members, destroyed furniture and other objects and stole documents, money, computers and other valuables. The three arrested activists were tortured for hours, driven to a remote part of the desert and dumped there, many kilometres from Boujdour and El Aaiún.

In the second raid of 12 May, the police raiding the home raped Sultana and Laura with sticks and poles, assaulted their brother and poured a foul-smelling, noxious liquid all over the house, furniture and clothes making the home almost uninhabitable. Audio of the assault was secretly recorded by the family, later published by Nushatta Foundation, and videos taken moments afterwards show the terror and the destruction the raid left behind, later reported also by Democracy Now. Now, both sisters fear that if the international community does not act quickly the Moroccan police will carry out their death threats or yet again use rape as a weapon of terror against them, targeting them as female human rights defenders. The latest raids have been denounced by amongst other Front Line Defenders and Sultana's international defense team⁴.

Prominent Saharawi activist **Mina Baali**, a founding member of ISACOM, has also been under house arrest since the 8 May. On the 9 May, after a peaceful rooftop protest in which Baali exhibited the banned Sahrawi flag, over 50 masked Moroccan agents raided her home, tortured her and a friend, destroyed belongings and stole electronic equipment, money and food, and shut off the electricity, all in front of her 12-year-old son, whom police threatened on subsequent days. Moroccan agents again raided on 12 May when she was under house arrest with her young son, and agents physically and verbally assaulted her and stole her Sahrawi flags and other items.

In a related incident and due to her support to Mina Baali, Saharawi journalist **Salha Boutinguiza** also had her family home raided by the Moroccan occupation forces, who sabotaged the electricity meter and cut off energy to the house, where she lives with her sick, elderly parents. **Lahcen Dalil**, member of ISACOM, was also assaulted when he went to visit his friend and colleague Mina Baali after the first raid. About ten Moroccan police officers entered the house and tortured Dalil before they took him to the outskirts of the city of El Aaiun, where they continued to torture him. After hours, they left him lying barefoot and he was forced to walk back to the city. Two other ISACOM members, **Laaroussi Taglabout** and **Ambairkat Abdelkrem**, were also beaten by around 40 agents on 10 May when they tried to visit Mina Baali's house after the raid. Also on 10 May, Moroccan agents physically assaulted and sexually harassed ISACOM member and prominent Saharawi activist **Elghalia Djimi** when she was attempting to visit Mina Baali.

¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/05/western-sahara-harassment-independence-activist>

² <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE2938152021ENGLISH.pdf>

³ <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/woman-human-rights-defender-sultana-khaya-was-sexually-assaulted>

⁴ <https://mailchi.mp/41e6821eebce/moroccowestern-sahara-jared-genser-joins-defense-for-sahrawi-activist-sultana-khaya-condemns-torture-and-sexual-assault-8673765?e=ccc7334931&fbclid=IwAR1qdPUgqyB6eWIlgkmcTY0gn7Abviug8cUAGKcgWs6sfmvwS37IzMPIVme>

On 8 May, Moroccan police officers arbitrarily attacked the Saharawi human rights defender **Hassanna Abba** while walking home from visiting his brother. They insulted him and hit him in the head, feet and hands before leaving him in street in a state of shock. He was later treated by his relatives for fear of being arrested had he gone to the hospital. Such arbitrary violence was also documented against Saharawi activists **Hammad Hammad** on 9 May, when police attacked him while he was visiting a colleague. Moroccan agents dragged him from the house, beat and insulted him and informed him that he could not visit anyone or receive any visits without police permission.

The recent crackdown marks an intense and highly concerning escalation in Moroccan authorities' maltreatment and abuse of Saharawi human rights defenders, accompanying the deteriorating human rights situation in occupied Western Sahara ever since the end of the ceasefire on 13 November 2020. The widespread crackdown has been closely monitored by Human Rights Watch⁵, Amnesty International and Front Line Defenders⁶, which have documented the intensification of reprisals against Saharawi human rights defenders by the Moroccan security forces. According to ACAT⁷, the level of violence and repression currently witnessed is similar to the repression witnessed following the Saharawi Intifada of 2005 and following the violent dismantlement of the Gdeim Izik camp in 2010.

We look forward to your statement and further action in the face of the currently aggravated persecution of Saharawi activists and human rights defenders. In the meantime, please accept, Madam High-Commissioner, the expression of our highest consideration.

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⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/12/18/western-sahara-morocco-cracks-down-activists>

⁶ <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/western-sahara-ongoing-harassment-and-intimidation-against-sahrawi-human-rights>

⁷ <https://www.acatfrance.fr/appel-urgent/le-defenseur-hassan-abba-agresse-par-la-police-marocaine>

SIGNATORIES:

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Trabajadores de Chile, Centro Brasileiro de Solidaridad con los Pueblos y Lucha por la Paz, CEBRAPAZ, Centro de Documentación en Derechos Humanos “Segundo Montes Mozo S.J.” (CSMM), Centro Saharaui por la Salvaguardia de la Memoria, Colectivo Saharaui en Estepona, Colectivo Saharaui en Gipuzkoa, Colectivo Saharaui en Jaén, Colectivo Saharaui en Lanzarote, Comisión Ecueménica de Derechos Humanos de Ecuador (CEDHU), Comisión General Justicia y Paz, Comisión Media Independientes, Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos de la República Dominicana (CNDH-RD), Comisión Nacional Saharaui por los Derechos Humanos (CONASADH), Comitato “Selma2.0”-odv, Comité d’Action et de Réflexion pour l’Avenir du Sahara Occidental, Comité de Amistad con el pueblo Saharaui – Argentina, Comité de Apoyo por el Plano de Paz y la Protección de los Recursos Naturales en el Sáhara Occidental, Comité Belge de soutien au Peuple Sahraoui, Comité de Defensa del Derecho de Autodeterminación (CODAPSO), Comité de Familiares de los 15 Jóvenes Secuestrados, Comité de Familiares de Mártires y Desaparecidos, Comité de Familiares de los Presos Políticos Saharais, Comité de Jumelage et d’Echange Internationaux / Gonfreville l’Orcher, Comité de Protección de los Defensores Saharais – Freedom Sun, Comité de Protección de los Recursos Naturales, Comité Saharaui de Defensa de Derechos Humanos (Glaimim), Comité Saharaui de Defensa de Derechos Humanos (Smara), Comité Saharaui de Defensa de Derechos Humanos (Zag), Comité Saharaui por el Monitoreo de los Derechos Humanos (Assa), Comité de Solidaridad Oscar Romero, Comité Suisse de soutien au Peuple Sahraoui, Comité de Víctimas de Agdaz y Magouna, Comunidad Saharaui en Aragón, Comunidad Saharaui en Asturias, Comunidad Saharaui en Balmaseda, Comunidad Saharaui en Cantabria, Comunidad Saharaui en Castilla y León, Comunidad Saharaui en Castilla la Mancha, Comunidad Saharaui en Catalunya, Comunidad Saharaui en Cordoba, Comunidad Saharaui en Jerez y Cadiz, Comunidad Saharaui en La Rioja, Comunidad Saharaui en Las Palmas, Comunidad Saharaui en Madrid, Comunidad Saharaui en Murcia, Comunidad Saharaui en Navarra, Coordinadora de Asociaciones de Solidaridad con el Pueblo Saharaui de la Provincia de Alicante, Coordinadora Estatal de Asociaciones Solidarias con el Sáhara (CEAS – Sáhara), Coordinadora de Gdeim Izik para un Movimiento Pacífico, Coordinadora de los Graduados Saharais Desempleados, Coordinadora d’Organizacions No-Governamentals de Cooperació al Desenvolupament (CONGDIB), Coordinadora de las ONGs en Aaiún, Coordinadora Saharaui de Derechos Humanos de Tantan, Cultures of Resistance Network; 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*** NGOs enjoying UN-ECOSOC status**