

18 November 2020

Western Sahara: whereabouts of imprisoned human rights defender Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza unknown

Since 13 October 2020, the whereabouts of human rights defender **Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza** remain unknown. Neither his family or lawyer have been able to locate or contact the imprisoned human rights defender and are deeply concerned regarding his well being and the health.

[Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza](#) is a Sahrawi human rights defender and co-founder of the Saharawi Collective of Human Rights Defenders (CODESA). He also served as president for the collective branch in Tan Tan province, where his work focused on the political rights of Sahrawi prisoners. Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza is known as the 'father' amongst political prisoners, for his work in supporting newly imprisoned activists and helping them survive prison conditions.

On 13 October 2020, human rights defender Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza was transferred from his cell in Bouzairkarn prison to an unknown location and has not been heard from him since. Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza reported that, on 9 October 2020, he was detained in a cell with a prisoner who tested positive of COVID-19. Both Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza's family and lawyer are deeply concerned about his whereabouts, health and well being.

In 2008, Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment for organising a demonstration in Tan Tan, during which a Moroccan policeman was killed. Even though the human rights defender was not present at this demonstration, he was subsequently convicted for organising it. According to his lawyer, the evidence used against Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza was obtained during his torture by the Moroccan police. He was also denied his right to due process, including his right to present evidence of his own innocence.

Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza has been detained in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions that do not adhere to international human rights standards. During his detention he has gone on several hunger strikes in protest against the inhuman conditions and the ill-treatment inside Bouzairkarn prison.

Sahrawi human rights defenders continue to face harassment by Moroccan authorities for their peaceful human rights work. On 16 November 2020, Moroccan Special forces stormed the houses of human rights defenders **Mohamed Hadi** and **Al-Sharif Khalail** in an attempt to detain them. The attempt failed as both of the human rights defenders were not home at the time. **Mohamed Hadi** and **Al-Sharif Khalail** work with the Nushatta Foundation for Media and Human Rights. During the raid on their homes, Moroccan special forces reportedly verbally abused the families of the human rights defenders and threatened to detain them.

Front Line Defenders believes that Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza is being held solely as a result of his legitimate and peaceful work in the defence of human rights. Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned regarding the well being and health condition of Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza and the precarious situation of the Sahrawi human rights defenders' who face continuous harassment from the Moroccan authorities.

Front Line Defenders urge the authorities in Morocco to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release human rights defender Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza, and quash his prison sentence;
2. Inform the family and lawyer of Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza of his whereabouts and allow them immediate and unfettered access to him;
3. Ensure that the treatment of Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza, while in detention, adheres to the conditions set out in the '*Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under Any Form of Detention or Imprisonment*', adopted by UN General Assembly resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988;
4. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in Western Sahara and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.

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