

17 October 2019

## **Western Sahara: Human rights defender Waleed Al-Batal physically abused in police custody and sentenced to six years in prison**

On 9 October 2019 the Criminal Court of First Instance of Laayoune sentenced human rights defender **Waleed Al-Batal** to six years in prison.

[Waleed Al-Batal](#) is a human rights defender and blogger who documents human rights violations in Western Sahara. He is member of the Sahrawi League for the Protection of Human Rights, and regularly works with Smara News, where he reports on human rights abuses by the Moroccan authorities, in Al-Samara (Samara) city in Western Sahara.

On 7 June 2019, Waleed Al-Batal was violently arrested by the Moroccan police while traveling in his car with a colleague in the city of Samara, on his way to participate and document the event celebrating the release of **Sahrawi Salah Lebsir** from prison. During his arrest he was violently beaten by the several police men and taken to a location that was not disclosed by the authorities for a number of hours. The human rights defender was interrogated over a period of 48 hours at a local police station in Samara. During the interrogation he was physically abused, ill-treated and prohibited from lawyer and family visits. After the interrogation, Waleed Al-Batal was transferred to Laayoune prison, 217 kilometers away from where he lives. Lawyer and family visits remained heavily restricted.

On 9 October 2019, after spending four months in preventive detention, the Criminal Court of First Instance of Laayoune sentenced Waleed Al-Batal to six years in prison on the charges of 'obstructing public order', 'insulting public employees' and 'disobedience'.

Human rights defender Waleed Al-Batal has been frequently harassed by the Moroccan authorities. In December 2016, he was sentenced to 16 months in prison, due to his participation in a peaceful demonstration calling for the right to self-determination in Western Sahara. After his release in September 2017, he was frequently threatened with re-arrest and torture by the authorities.

Front Line Defenders condemns the prison sentence of human rights defender Waleed Al-Batal, as it believes the sentence is solely motivated by his peaceful and legitimate human rights work promoting the right to self-determination of Western Sahara.

### **Front Line Defenders urge the Moroccan authorities to:**

1. Immediately release Waleed Al-Batal and quash his conviction as Front Line Defenders believes that he has been targeted solely as a result of his legitimate human rights work;
2. Ensure that the treatment of Waleed Al-Batal, 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;

3. Allow the Waleed El-Batal immediate and unfettered access to his family and lawyers;
4. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the physical attacks sustained by Waled Al-Batal while in police custody, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
5. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Westren Sahara are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.

Front Line Defenders respectfully reminds you that the United Nations Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, adopted by consensus by the UN General Assembly on 9 December 1998, recognises the legitimacy of the activities of human rights defenders, their right to freedom of association and to carry out their activities without fear of reprisals. We would particularly draw your attention to Article 5: *“For the purpose of promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, at the national and international levels: (a) To meet or assemble peacefully”* and to Article 12 (2): *“The State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the present declaration.”*

Please inform us of any actions that may be taken with regard to the above case.

Yours sincerely,



Andrew Anderson  
Executive Director