

26 February 2019

## **Western Sahara: Systematic harassment and intimidation of human rights defenders, journalists, and media activists**

On 17 February 2019, human rights defender **Bachir Dkhili** was stopped in El-Aaiún's eastern neighborhood of Alawda by the Directorate of Surveillance of the National Territory (DGST) and Moroccan police. He had just left a meeting at the Nushatta Foundation for Media and Human Rights.

[Bachir Dkhili](#) is a human rights defender and cameraman for the Western Sahara-based NGO, Nushatta Foundation for Media and Human Rights, which has been working in the field of media activism and human rights advocacy since it was established in 2013.

At midday on Sunday, 17 February 2019, plain-clothes intelligence officers and police officers in uniform jumped out of their vehicles, detained Bachir Dkhili and handcuffed him without presenting an arrest warrant. The authorities seized his equipment, which included a camera, a tripod, memory cards, and a microphone cable. Police then pushed Bachir Dkhili into one of their vehicles, before subsequently transferring him to another. He was taken to the police station, where he was interrogated about the activities of the Nushatta Foundation. He was beaten by police, sustaining injuries in his back, neck and head, and the police accused him of unlawful behavior in relation to his media and human rights activities. He was released without charges after 8 hours. In March 2017, Bachir Dkhili was arrested in El-Aaiún for participating in peaceful demonstrations in favour of Western Sahara's independence. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison, but served 4 months after appealing the sentence.

Bachir Dkhili is only one of many human rights defenders, journalists, and media activists to have been targeted by the Moroccan authorities in recent months. Human rights defender, **Hammoud Allili**, was detained on 4 February 2019, while woman human rights defender, **Nazha El Khalidi**, was detained on 4 December 2018.

Hammoud Allili is a human rights defender and journalist, who works for a television channel that is based in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria. He is also an observer for the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Violations of Human Rights Committed by the Moroccan State (Association Sahraouie des Victimes des Violations Graves des Droits Humains Commises par l'Etat Marocain – ASVDH). Nazha El Khalidi is a Sahrawi woman human rights defender and member of Equip Media, an organisation that been documenting and disseminating information about human rights violations in Western Sahara since 2009.

At around 6pm on 4 February 2019, Moroccan police agents in plain clothes detained Hammoud Allili while he was walking on a street in El-Aaiún. Hammoud Allili was detained for more than 4 hours, during which he was interrogated by Moroccan intelligence services. He was requested to unlock his phone and it was inspected during the interrogation. Police confiscated the human rights defender's two cameras without any legal document. He was released without charge.

In December 2018, Sahrawi woman human rights defender and member of Equip Media, Nazha El Khalidi, was live-streaming a police blockade of peaceful protesters in the centre of El-Aaiún via social media, when she caught the attention of the Moroccan police. The police started following the woman human rights defender when she started talking on the video. After few minutes, she was surrounded by police officers. They beat her on the street, before detaining her and taking her phone. She was interrogated and released after 4 hours and her phone was not returned. Although Nazha El Khalidi has not been charged, she believes she remains under threat of arrest.

On 11 February 2019, [Brahim Dihani](#), a human rights defender who works actively on the monitoring and documentation of peaceful protests within the ASVDH, was acquitted after being charged with “breaching the right to privacy” for documenting peaceful protests in the city of El-Aaiún.

At least a dozen human rights defenders, journalists, and media activists have been targeted by authorities in Western Sahara in the last few months, after videos showing Moroccan police using an inordinate level of violence against peaceful protesters in Western Sahara went viral on social media in 2018.

Front Line Defenders expresses serious concern at the ongoing harassment of the human rights defenders in Western Sahara and believes that the harassment is a direct consequence of their peaceful and legitimate work in defence of human rights.

**Front Line Defenders urge the authorities in Morocco to :**

1. Immediately cease targeting human rights defenders in Western Sahara as we believe that they have been targeted as a result of their legitimate and peaceful work in defense of human rights;
2. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Western Sahara are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions.