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Western Sahara: Ongoing harassment and intimidation against Sahrawi human rights defenders

Front Line Defenders strongly condemns the increasing harassment by the Moroccan authorities against Sahrawi human rights defenders living in Western Sahara over the last few months which include physical surveillance on prominent human rights defenders, the use excessive force to disperse peaceful protests, the mistreatment of imprisoned human rights defenders and the imposition of arbitrary disciplinary measures against human rights defenders in their employment.

Woman human rights defender [Sultana Khaya](#) has been under house arrest for almost 11 weeks in her home in Boujdour, Western Sahara, a measure which was imposed without a court order or any legal basis. On 19 November 2020, several Moroccan police units imposed a siege around her house, during which the woman human rights defender was subjected to physical and verbal assaults. Police vehicles continue to block the entrance to the house. On several occasions, when trying to leave her house, the woman human rights defender said she was physically assaulted and forced to retreat back inside. On 13 February, Sultana Khaya was subjected to a physical assault after a member of the Moroccan police threw stones at her which left her face bleeding and badly bruised. The police would not allow her to be transferred to a hospital.

The Moroccan security forces continue to surround the house of human rights defender and president of the Sahrawi Association for the Protection and Dissemination of Sahrawi Culture and Heritage **Bachri Ben Talb** in Western Sahara. On several occasions in January and February 2021, the police blocked the entrance to the human rights defender's house and physically attacked and verbally insulted him and members of his family. Woman human rights defender [Mahfouda Bamba Lefkire](#) and her family are being subjected to continuous intimidation by the Moroccan police. On 25 January 2021, Mahfouda Bamba Lefkire's seventeen year old daughter was stopped by a plain clothed police man who proceeded to question her for approximately one hour until her mother intervened. The police officer threatened to detain the woman human rights defender for stepping in to help her daughter. On 28 November 2020, Moroccan security forces attacked the house of prominent human rights defender and co-founder and leading member CODESA **Ali Salem Tamek** in the city of Laayoune while he was hosting a traditional Sahrawi family event. Some members of the Moroccan security forces threw rocks at his house, terrifying his family and his guests.

After his election as the president of the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights defenders in Western Sahara (CODESA) on 28 September 2020, human rights defender **Babouzeid Mohamed Said Labbihi** has been banned from entering his workplace in the port in Dakhla, Western Sahara. According to Babouzeid Mohamed Said Labbihi, Moroccan authorities have threatened fishing companies operating in the port in order to prevent them from employing the human rights defender. Moreover, Babouzeid Mohamed Said Labbihi has reported being under physical surveillance since 22 December 2020. On 28 December 2020, woman human rights defender **Mbaraka Alina Baali** was arbitrarily transferred to another workplace administration in El Marsa, some 30 kilometres away from the neighbourhood where she had been working and living with her family since June 2013. The decision of her transfer was taken without her prior knowledge or approval. She also

reported that she has been under continuous physical surveillance since early February 2021. Furthermore, in October 2020, woman human rights defender **Naziha El Khalidi** was under police surveillance and house arrest for almost two weeks.

Imprisoned Sahrawi human rights defenders suffer from inhumane prison conditions. For example, human rights defender [Yahya Mohamed el Hafed Aaza](#) has been held in solitary confinement for almost twelve weeks since 13 October 2020, and his health has deteriorated rapidly as a result of the unsatisfactory conditions in which he is being detained. The human rights defender's asthma has been aggravated by unhygienic conditions and he also suffers from rheumatism and kidney disease for which he has not received appropriate treatment. The human rights defender is currently serving a fifteen-year prison sentence for allegedly 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 on charges related to 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.

Front Line Defenders reiterates its concern about the ongoing harassment of Sahrawi human rights defenders and their families in Western Sahara as it believes they are being targeted solely as a result of their peaceful and legitimate work in the defence of human rights. Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned about the continual harassment of Sahrawi human rights defenders and calls upon Moroccan authorities to 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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