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Technical assistance and capacity-building

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[04 June 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

Crackdown on political activists in Algeria while COVID-19 is spreading rapidly, threatening especially prisoners

Protests in Algeria erupted in February 2019 after the former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced that he would run for office a fifth time. Since then these unprecedented and peaceful protests continued for more than a year with people protesting against corruption, clientelist networks, and the strong grip of the army. The protesters are committed to forging a more just Algeria in the future and fight for democratic reforms. Even though the Algerian Government welcomed the peaceful protests in the beginning, the approach has now changed.

During the worst pandemic in modern history, the Algerian Government cracked down on activists and sentenced participants to jail. The Algerian Government targeted some of the alleged leaders of the protests and took them into custody. Furthermore, the government banned some independent radio stations and websites.

Many prominent figures of the *hirak* urged their fellow protesters to stop the weekly protests to contain the contagion of the coronavirus. However, while Algerians stayed at home, authorities have extended the imprisonment of opposition leaders (for example Karim Tabbou), arrested prominent journalists (like Khaled Drareni), and summoned dozens of political activists for questioning.

Said Salhi, the vice-president of the Algerian League of Human Rights (LADDH) pointed out in a statement: "This really is an escalation of incomprehensible repression at a time when we need to empty prisons confronting the contagion of the Coronavirus." Society for Threatened Peoples is deeply concerned about the spread of COVID-19 in Algeria in general and in particular in the overpopulated prisons around the country. Algeria, being the hardest hit African country by COVID-19, will have to take severe measures to stop a disaster from happening. The Algerian President Abdelmajid Tebboune pardoned more than 5000 prisoners in order to stop the virus from spreading. However, even though this measure might be helpful it excluded political prisoners, showing that there is no equal treatment before the law in Algeria right now.

During the protests, one could often find the Amazigh flag side by side the national flag of Algeria. The now-deceased Army Chief Gaid Salah banned protesters from publicly waving the Amazigh flag in June 2019. Many protesters defied the ban, arguing that the flag is a symbol for their identity, which is based on their Amazighness as an integral part of being Algerian. As a follow-up, dozens of people were arrested and sentenced to up to a year in jail for carrying the flag or simply having it in possession.

Magdalena Mughrabi from Amnesty International called these arrests a "blatant attack on the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly of the Amazigh community."

With around 30 percent of the Algerian population and Amazighness being a distinct part of the Algerian identity, as it is stated in the constitution, these harsh repressions against these peaceful protesters are outraging Algerians, who marched in main cities, including Algiers, have tolerated the presence of protesters holding up Amazigh flags as a symbol of the struggle of Tamazight-speakers for the respect and recognition of their culture, home tongue, and identity. No political leader or leading activist had expressed reservations about flying the Amazigh symbol since the beginning of the protests.

Society for Threatened Peoples therefore calls upon the UN Human Rights Council to urge the Government of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria to:

- end the harassment against political activists who exercise their freedom of speech,
- stop the repression against journalists and ensure that fundamental rights, for example the freedom of the press, are granted for all citizens at all times,
- refrain from interfering with the independence of the Justice, enabling them to work properly according to the constitution,
- stop the repression against the Amazigh-Community and the pressure on Amazigh people for carrying their emblem,
- stop the discrimination against Tamazight-Speakers, accept Tamazight as an officially recognized language in Algeria, and stop the cultural marginalization of Tamazight-speakers,
- immediately and unconditionally release the 50 protesters who remain in detention and to respect and protect the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly.