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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 10

### 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.

[03 June 2020]

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

## **Human rights situation in Morocco, with special focus on the Hirak prisoners and the Western Sahara activists**

Looking at the human rights situation in Morocco, there are two important political movements, whose repression have to be closely followed. Firstly, the Government's repression against the protest movement called Hirak Al-Shaabi, which erupted in October 2016 after the death of Mohsin Ficri, a fishmonger located in Al-Hoceima the capital of the Rif-Region in Northern Morocco. The socio-economic protest movement demanded a better integration of the Rif-Region in the rest of Morocco, a better infrastructure, more job opportunities, and an end to the marginalization of the population of the region. The protest movement died down in June 2017 after a massive crackdown of the police on the protest movement with over 400 arrests. The alleged leaders of the movement were arrested and sentenced to draconian sentences up to 20 years in prison. Altogether, the AMDH (Moroccan Association for Human Rights) has documented more than 1,000 cases of political detention throughout the country since October 2016. Those detained include protesters, human rights activists, trade unionists, and university students.

### **Repression against Western Sahara activists**

Secondly, the repression against Saharawi Activists who fight for their right of self-determination needs to get attention. Western Sahara was once a Spanish colony, and when Spain withdrew from the region in 1975, Morocco claimed the sparsely populated but mineral-rich territory for itself. In 1976, the Polisario Frente, the Sahrawi independence movement, proclaimed the "Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic". The UN brokered a ceasefire with the condition that the Sahrawi people be allowed to vote on the status of their country. However, this independence referendum was never held. Sahrawis who insisted on their right to self-determination are oppressed and marginalized by the Moroccan authorities.

Moroccan authorities systematically prevent gatherings in Western Sahara supporting Sahrawi self-determination, obstruct the work of some local human rights Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), amongst others by blocking their legal registration, and occasionally beat activists and journalists in their custody and on the streets. Furthermore, there were many reports of torture against Sahrawi activists. A prominent example of this is Aminatou Haidar. As a young activist, she was held in a Moroccan prison and tortured for four years until she regained freedom. The famous human rights activist who fights peacefully for the right of the Sahrawis for self-determination was awarded the right livelihood award in 2019 (also known as the Alternative Nobel Prize).

### **Violations of human rights**

According to human rights reports, numerous convictions were based on confessions that were extracted under torture. To be abundantly clear, this does not only concern Hirak-Prisoners, but also Western Sahara Activists who fight for self-determination. Many political prisoners in Moroccan jails expressed allegations of torture, which were never taken into account at trials. There are currently 39 Saharawi political prisoners detained in Moroccan prisons. These prisoners have in common that they had been arbitrarily arrested in response to their support for the right to self-determination. In addition to arbitrary arrests, there are other human rights violations in Morocco: the obstruction to the right to inform the families of the arrest, hindrance in access to legal counsel, and prolonged solitary confinement in at least seven cases. A famous example of this treatment is Hamid Al Mahdaoui, a well-known Moroccan journalist who was held for 470 days in prolonged solitary confinement. Nasser Zefzafi, the leader of the Hirak, was also held in an isolation cell for more than three months besides being subjected to other forms of torture.

### **COVID-19 in Morocco's prisons**

With more than 6,000 cases and close to 200 deaths, Morocco is one African countries hardest-hit by the pandemic. Last week, Moroccan authorities confirmed 23 more Coronavirus cases at a jail in the Northwestern city of Tangier, bringing the total infections inside prison facilities to 341. With jails being chronically overpopulated, they are a possible petri dish, where the virus can spread unconditionally. The situation in prisons urged human rights activists to circulate a petition inviting the king to grant amnesty to prisoners of opinion, especially Hirak activists. The spread of COVID-19 hits all prisoners alike, whether they are Saharawi Activists or Hirak protesters. Many peaceful activists are in grave danger of contracting the virus as a result of their underlying health conditions resulting from the torture and hunger strike they have undergone as prisoners. Nabil Ahamjik and Nasser Zefzafi, who famously protested against these conditions with a hunger strike, which they had to stop in fear of the spreading of COVID-19, are a good example of this. In April 2020, the Government pardoned 5,654 prisoners, and it put forward procedures to protect inmates from the COVID-19 outbreak. However, with the total numbers of inmates exceeding 80,000 and with alone almost 5,500 new inmates between March 15 and April 21, according to prison service figures, this measure is not an adequate response.

**Society for Threatened Peoples therefore calls upon the UN Human Rights Council to urge the Government of the Kingdom of Morocco to:**

- stop discrimination of indigenous peoples,
- unconditionally release all those imprisoned for peacefully protesting or expressing their views including dozens of Hirak protesters, rappers, bloggers, and journalists,
- provide a standard of health that meets each person's remaining in prison individual needs and ensures the maximum possible protection against the spread of COVID-19,
- end pre-trial detention to empty the jails and protect inmates from the spread of COVID-19 (of the estimated 80,000 prisoners, more than 40 % have not been convicted yet but are in pre-trial detention.),
- 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 to all citizens at all times,
- end the marginalization against the Rif-Region in Morocco,
- grant the Sahrawi population in Western Sahara their right to self-determination.

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