

Report of Observation

Principal observations concerning abuses of Human Rights and lack of freedom

Mission of Solidarity with the Saharawi Political Prisoners and their families in the context of the campaign www.ecrireopourlesliberer.com

In Morocco and Western Sahara
07-20 July 2013

French – German – Australian Delegation of 14 people, members of the following organisations :

- Plateforme française pour la Solidarité avec le Peuple du Sahara Occidental
- Association des Amis de la République Arabe Sahraouie Démocratique (AARASD)
- Comité pour le REspect des Droits Humains et des Libertés au Sahara Occidental(CORELSO)
 - Freiheit fur die Westsahara e.V
 - Australia Western Sahara Association

Towns visited: Agadir - Ait Melloul - Tiznit - Sidi Ifni - Assa -Laksabi - Guelmim - TanTan - El Aaiun - Dakhla - El Aaiun - Smara - TanTan- Guelmim -Tighmert - Asrir - Agadir.

Aims of the study tour:

- In the context of the campaign « Write for their release » : to give mail to Saharawi political prisoners
- To visit the families of political prisoners to give them a copy of the letters
- To meet Moroccan and Saharawi Human Rights Organisations
- To visit Saharawi cultural sites
- To visit economic sites (fishing ports)

7 and 20 July 2013: Arrival and Departure from « El Massira » airport, Agadir

During baggage inspections and searches by Customs and the services of order, we observe that every document or item linked to Western Sahara that the agents find in our belongings makes them very nervous and aggressive and they refer to various other authorities, who appear, receiving or giving information by phone. There are intimidating and humiliating questions put to us. We feel as if we are being treated as dangerous people.

Observation:

- exaggerated searches and intimidation

8 July 2013 - Ait Melloul Prison

We ask to see the Director to give him letters for the prisoners.

After waiting two hours and several discussions with various officials, no result. Nobody wants to receive us or is authorised to take our letters. We leave them in the letter box of the prison..

Same day – Tiznit Prison

Same scenario. Nobody is empowered to receive us or take our letters.

Observation:

- Letters sent through the post do not reach the addressees in prison. It is not possible to deliver them in person to their director .

-The right of correspondence of the prisoners provided for in the international conventions ratified by Morocco **is not respected.**

8 July 2013 - Sidi Ifni

Visit to the family of a Political Prisoner, Mohamed Amzouz :

The family and the representatives of associations present, « Memory and Rights » and the AMDH-Sidi Ifni, inform us of continual deprivations of freedom, increased surveillance, lack of access to employment, of which they are the victims. They give us reports and DVDs.

We join a sit-in organised by families of the political prisoners in front of the Town Hall, to demand the release of the prisoners. We leave the town in the afternoon.

We learn the next day that the demonstrators were chased violently from the place and that the sister of Mohamed Amzouz was violently attacked as a reprisal for our visit.

We draw your attention to the specific case of Sidi Ifni whose inhabitants claim to be Saharawi and who have never been consulted on the status of their region when being returned to Morocco nor afterwards. They describe the economic and health decline that this town has suffered for over 40 years. They demand the independence of Western Sahara.

The activists Ennaidi Abidine, Abdallah Hihi, Mohamed Atamonde met in September 2012 the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture, Mr Mendes in El Aaiun, they gave him a report on the events of 2008 in Sidi Ifni. Following this visit these three persons were imprisoned for 8 months without trial.

Observation:

- Human rights activists suffer considerable reprisals when they meet international observers.

9 July 2013 – Assa

We wish to visit the prehistoric cultural site of stone engravings of Tuisgui-Rems in Jbel Ouarkiz on the road to Zag near Oued Tigsert a tributary of the Oued Draa. We are followed, then escorted by two vehicles : a 4x4 of the police and a 4x4 with one person in civilian dress.

At the turn-off to Tuisgui- Rems, the vehicles bar our route and forbid us to go any further.

Our Saharawi guide indicates that the site of the rupestrian engravings is situated near a cemetery of 400 Moroccan soldiers who fell in a battle with the Polisario, as well as a dam (an economic and ecological disaster apparently),

We turn back towards the town where we go to a cross roads where Claude Mangin had seen in December 2012 two road signs from the Ministry of Tourism pointing to two prehistoric sites, one was Touigui 40 km away, the other Boutsarfine, 25 km distant, we find the very sign of the site we wished to visit, but it has been pulled down and put face down on the ground against the wall. The hole where it had been is completely visible, the hiding of it had just taken place. It is thus that they justify a posteriori that there are no rupestrian engravings at that place.

Following our visit the Director of the Lycée, on which the accommodation used by Mustapha Abdeddaim belongs, as a former general supervisor, former political prisoner, released in 2011 after 3 years of prison and prohibited from working for 10 years, was called in to the royal gendarmerie, they interrogated him very severely although the lodgings belong to a public institution. He replied that he has no authority over with Mustapha Abdeddaim and that the granting of this accommdation depends on the Ministry. They then changed their attitude, asking him why he had not intervened to put friendly pressure on him to persuade him not to receive foreigners, that he should have taken the initiative because this kind of demonstration harms the Moroccan establishment.

Furthermore, the owner of the guest house recently restored in the historic Ksar was also called in to be reproached for receiving foreigners complicit with « separatists ». He replied that to receive guests in Assa was very rare and that he could not afford to lose the booking for a night..

Observation :

- impeding free movement
- camouflage of signs to Saharawi cultural sites
- intimidation of Saharawis and Moroccans who received us or witnessed our welcome.

11 July 2013 – TAN TAN

We want to visit the families of the political prisoners.

But the evening before, on arrival, we are informed by the families and by AMDH in Tan Tan that the quarter of Aïn Amran, which is the quarter of Saharawi resistance is under heavy surveillance. Apparently the whole town is informed of our arrival and is on the qui-vive, according to the inhabitants and AMDH.

We meet with 5 members of AMDH.

They tell us of the pressure exerted by the security forces and the authorities on Moroccan and Saharawi human rights activists and their families.

At 11 am we decide to go and visit the families of the prisoners, despite the blockade of the area and the possible risks of provocation – notably that of Yahia El Hafed. They all live in the Aïn Amran. Quarter.

We set off on foot and are constantly followed, photographed and under surveillance.

We meet the family (father and mother) of Yahia El Hafed as well as other close relatives of the political prisoners. They testify to the conditions of detention of their relatives in prison : overcrowding in the cells, absence of care, very short and widely spaced visits (once a month), sending prisoners to distant prisons which make visits difficult and expensive for these families already deprived of their breadwinners. Claude Mangin is interviewed in the street by a so-called radio Maroc-Pluriel. The questions are provoking, we learn that the journalist is a member of the security services.

Further, during Ramadan the young people in these families organise an evening of football competitions dedicated to the Saharawi martyrs.

AMDH points out several days later that the goal posts have been removed by the Moroccan security forces.

Observations

- No respect for the rights of the prisoners
- Impeding free circulation
- Increased surveillance
- Intimidations
- Prevention of any activity linked to Western Sahara

12 and 13 July 2013 - El Aaiun

Arrival in El Aaiun in the evening, we are awaited at the check point at the entry to the town by the Pacha in person and six cars. He welcomes us in a very official fashion. He asks us to get out of our cars and informs us as follows : « We know your program, you can meet all the people that you wish to see in their houses, but no demonstrations in the street nor at the prison. »

We will be constantly followed and watched in all our deeds and acts.

At 12 noon, we go to the prison of El Aaiun. In order to show awareness of the Pacha's orders, only a small international delegation of 4 people goes to the door to ask for an interview with the Director in order to hand over the letters to the prisoners. This small delegation is welcomed by the Pacha and the sinister « Moustache » torturer of that place, always present for decades at every place of repression and a few other people. The Pacha appreciates that the delegation is small and sensible.

The Director of the prison does not agree to meet us, nor to take the letters, saying that he has no authority to do so.

We learn subsequently that the families of the political prisoners were waiting for us from 9.30am outside the prison to welcome us, but that they were chased away brutally outside the prison..

Observations

- No respect for the rights of prisoners
- Violence to families of prisoners
- Increased surveillance of the international observers

14 and 15 July 2013 - Dakhla

We are welcomed at the police check point several kilometres from the entry to Dakhla about 8.30 pm by an impressive collection of over 25 people, all dressed in civilian clothes except for one police woman in uniform. They were waiting for us in the darknes, with legs apart, an evil look, several rows of them, one behind the other, outside the police check point to frighten us.

After the passport check, the search of the car begins, then the bags of each one and finally, they ask us to get all the bags down from the roof rack of one of the two cars which are each opened in front of its owner. The search lasts nearly two hours, the police are aggressive, insulting in their remarks : « You are from the Polisario, there are enough problems in France to come and bring problems here. Go to New York », When they find the report in Arabic given us by CODESA, the « bad guy » says « They are all my friends, then, I know Asfari well since 1990, he is a friend... », all this in a mean way. He is excited, nervy. They are constantly on the telephone, receiving orders from outside, sometimes contradictory ones.

They discover our documents on Western Sahara (review, reports, books), the dossier given us by the activists in Sidi Ifni, our notebooks.

They undertake to scan everything. They void the memory card of one of the delegation member's cameras.

They decide to keep most of our documents promising that they will be returned the next day.

They escort us to the hotel, where they keep watch over us day and night.

In Dakhla we are followed the whole time by around 5 vehicles.

The documents are given back the next day to the hotel, except for our business cards.

On the 15th in the morning, we are going to the prison, which is quite new at the entrance to the town. A little back from the road behind a holiday camp. An impressive welcoming committee greets is at the turn-off. One of the cars which has led the way for us since the morning and took us to the prison, Slimane, gestures to come on the road, at the end of which we see the prison, but an officer in uniform from the reception committee tells us : « It's me who decides here, you must have autorisation from the MInistry of the Interior ». We explain that for the other prisons we had been able to go to the door to speak with the guards. Then they tell us that they will call the Director who would actually come to us. Very friendly, he accepts to take the letters for the prisoners and even a few small gifts such as pens and notebooks... We ask questions on the activities of the prisoners : « Sport, library, but the prison is new and not yet fully equipped », he replies, which is questioned by the families. Claude Mangin-Asfari introduces herself, he says that he was deputy Director at the prison of Tiznit when Naâma Asfari and Mustapha Abdeddaim, among others, were there in 2009.

We visit some families of political prisoners. Two of the families are very far away from their prisoner in El Aaiun, which represents a double punishment.

The families of prisoners Atiq Barray and Abdelaziz Barray later tell us that after our visit they are threatened with withdrawal of the « promotion nationale » (allowance) if they receive foreigners again.

We leave to visit the fishing village (octopus) of Lassarga but the card which escort us inform the authorities and the intervention forces (GUS) in blue uniform and others in green military uniform install a road block on the road and block our route. We turn back. They must know that we are particularly interested in the illegal exploitation of fishing resources.

During our visit to the family of the prisoner Mohamed Manolo, we sense a lot of tension in his wife who replies : « I don't know » to every question, despite the explanations of our interpreters about our coming.

Observations :

- excessive and oppressive surveillance and control
- threats to the families of prisoners
- hindrance to free movement and arbitrary closure of sites

16 July 2013 – Departure from Dakhla

We leave the hotel at 5am as we have a long journey to El Aaiun and a meeting with MINURSO at 5pm.

At the police post at the exit to the town, the 7 cars which were following us, overtake us and park outside the post and wait for us.

Same scenario as the evening of the day before : they search all our bags, ask to bring down our luggage from the roof and search it all carefully.

The police, still in plain clothes, are very aggressive.

All this in an aggressive manner which is arbitrary, inconsistent, for example in the middle of all this violence, one of them called Slimane making a show of searching bags of some people said in a complicit tone to two people with a camera : « That's good, put it away » without searching it...

Testimony of Cate Lewis (Australia) : As we left Dakhla, after the police search, one plain clothes officer repeated to a colleague, rather shocked, that I had said that Morocco is the worst police state in the world. I assure him that I did not invent this, but it is said by university professors, lawyers, international organisations such as Freedom House, who call Morocco « the worst of the worst ». He protests that Morocco is a tolerant country with citizens of every religion : Jews, Christians, as well as Muslims. He assured me that the Sahara is really Moroccan. »

The search and checks lasted over two hours. The situation and the atmosphere were such that we thought it necessary to inform the French Embassy, the Consulate in Agadir and MINURSO, not knowing how it could end up.

On our arrival at the police post in the darkness, we had seen a young lad of 12 or 13 years being brought in from an unmarked vehicle, handcuffed and then taken out of our sight. This transfer, so early in the morning, in an ostentatious manner, looks like a « coup de théâtre ».

We point out also that during this trip to Dakhla, we were accompanied by Mr Nasser Essalmani, a Saharawi friend from El Aaiun, who was quoted by the defence in the Gdeim Izik trial, as a direct witness of the abduction of Ennaâma Asfari, on 7/11/2010 at his house in El Aaiun.

He underwent with us all the intimidations and in particular, on the morning of our departure, a thorough search of all his clothes, including the seams. He was felt from top to bottom and all his personal papers which he had on him were taken.

We deplore the following:

- Intimidations, insults
- Theft of personal papers (notes, letters, ...)
- Damage to documents (torn posters)

Observations

- Violation of private property : opening of computers, search of all our files, threats of reformatting computers to remove all data.
- Opening of photographic equipment, cameras and wiping several photos and memory cards.

16 July 2013 – El Aaiun

We arrive at MINURSO for our meeting arranged for 5pm. This meeting was confirmed 3 days earlier, following the request for a meeting by email by Axel Goldau from the German Association

« Freiheit für die Westsahara e.V. » which one of the participants of our delegation belongs to¹. To our great surprise on our arrival the guards say that Mr Alexander Ivanko, Senior Political Advisor, is in a meeting and is busy. We are disappointed and astonished not to have received prior warning of this cancellation, since the same morning it had been confirmed by Mr Magnani when we called during the heavy search in Dakhla.

¹ See copies of email correspondence.

As we left El Aaiun, a deployment of soldiers is waiting, an officer gives us a lesson in impeccable French after introducing himself : « *I am lieutenant, (Harrach we read on his uniform name tag), I have done the equivalent of St Cyr and am part of the parachute corps ; I am the head of the military Region. I ask you not to stop until the crossroads where there is an inn about 100 km from here.* »

It is because we are near the forbidden territory of the site of the Gdeim Izik camp where, since the dismantling of it, there has been a permanent military post which we see from the road.

17-18 July 2013 – Smara

We will be constantly followed and watched during our visit to Smara. The cultural and historic sites (example of rupestrian engravings and the zaouia of Cheikh Malaainin) were closed to visitors.

19 July 2013 – Guelmim, Tighmert et Asrir

Again we are constantly followed and watched.

At Tighmert, we take part in a protest sit-in of women and young men principally who call for their socio-economic rights and draw our attention to a project financed by UNDP : project « Cactopole of Ouaâroune-Guelmim : a regional deposit, national competences, a pole of international excellence » which promotes the prickly pear and the region through tourism. This project according to the local witnesses has no spin-off for the local population and has stopped.

We later learn that Krideche Djamel, a human rights activist and journalist who welcomed us in Tighmert, was arrested on Sunday evening, 23 July at the wheel of his car with his mother and two sisters on the pretext of a minor traffic offence. 5 police cars and one of the general services encircled him and took him to the Criminal Investigation Department. He was released several hours later after being interrogated by senior security officials. His car, his telephone and his digital camera were confiscated.

Observation:

- Human rights activists suffer serious reprisals when they meet international observers.

20 July 2013 – Agadir

The return to Agadir takes place without any obstacle. We are still followed and watched, but more discreetly. At the airport some of us are again subjected to intimidating and exaggerated searches.