



# Australia Western Sahara Association (AWSA)



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Date: 4 June 2007

## **Press Release: Support the UN: Western Sahara journalist asks Australia**

Malainin Lakhal, Secretary General of the Saharawi Writers' and Journalists' Union, is in Australia for a two month speaking tour. Malainin is seeking support for a long-promised United Nations' referendum of self-determination for Western Sahara, North Africa's last colony. He will also tell about Morocco's illegal and brutal occupation of Western Sahara for the past 30 years, since Malainin was a small boy.

"It is vitally important that the UN can do its job" said Malainin, "The people of Western Sahara must be able to exercise their right to self-determination and be safe from human rights abuses. These rights are critical for people of Western Sahara and I know they are recognised by Australians."

Malainin now lives in exile with 160,000 other refugees, having escaped Moroccan occupation by fleeing across the Sahara desert, a dangerous feat as it is strewn with Moroccan landmines, after ten years of warfare between the Malainin's people and the Moroccan invaders.

With right on their side determined by the International Court of Justice, the moderate Saharawi people laid down their arms in 1991, and committed to the UN process. However, they have fought on using the weapons of education, moderation and worldwide diplomacy.

Malainin has taken the message of justice and peace for Western Sahara to South Africa, Kenya and Spain. The Australia Western Sahara Association has brought Malainin to Australia assisted by Union Aid Abroad, Unions NSW, the ACTU and other union organizations. Speaking events have been arranged for Melbourne, Sydney, Perth and Canberra, where Malainin hopes to talk to parliamentarians about the importance of the UN referendum. He will also visit New Zealand.

For opportunities to hear Melainin see [www.awsa.org.au](http://www.awsa.org.au). To interview him contact the Australia Western Sahara Association, or email [awsamel@alphalink.com.au](mailto:awsamel@alphalink.com.au).

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Backgrounder follows

## **Backgrounder**

Africa's last colony: for 30 years the people of Western Sahara have been striving for self-determination. Morocco continues to block the decolonisation process, obstructing the UN referendum.

### **Profile**

Malainin Lakhel was born in 1971 four years before Morocco invaded his country, Western Sahara. The Spanish had left their colony before holding a referendum of self-determination. He lived through the ensuing war (1975-1991), the UN brokered cease-fire and preparations for a referendum of self-determination – which is still to happen. In 1999 the Moroccan occupying forces cracked down on a peaceful sit-in by Saharawis. Malainin, by then an English graduate of Agadir University, was sought by police as a suspected ring-leader of the Saharawi resistance. With previous experience of Moroccan prisons he decided that instead of living under cover, he would make a break for freedom. He escaped through the minefields and the military wall, which divides Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara from the territory held by the national independence movement, the Polisario Front. Since August 2000 he has been living in the Saharawi refugee camps near Tindouf in SW Algeria, working: as a teacher, a translator and a journalist bringing the Western Sahara situation to the attention of the world.

### **History of the conflict**

Morocco invaded Western Sahara, in north-west Africa in 1975, immediately upon the International Court of Justice issuing a verdict that Morocco had no rights over that Territory. This occurred at the same time as Spain's withdrawal from its occupation of Western Sahara. Tens of thousands of indigenous Saharawis fled their country, to escape Morocco's napalm and cluster bombs. Others remained trapped in the occupied territories where they have live today cut off from their families. During the 1980s the Moroccans built a fortified wall with minefields on each side dividing the country from north to south. It costs them over \$2 million a day to enforce their military occupation.

### **The UN Peace Plan 1991**

War raged between Morocco and the Western Saharan people for about 15 years. In 1988, Morocco and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (Polisario), the Saharawi independence movement, agreed to a cease-fire under the UN Settlement Plan. The 1991 Peace Plan provided for a UN brokered referendum enabling the Saharawi people to decide their sovereignty.

### **The referendum is obstructed**

Morocco obstructed the referendum for 15 years, with efforts to arrange it bogged down by Morocco's arguments over who is eligible to vote. When the UN issued a voter list in 2001, it became clear the likely outcome would favour independence. Since 2005 it has been open about its refusal of a referendum and is pressing for an "autonomy plan" under Moroccan sovereignty, which is totally unacceptable to the Saharawis.