

Saharawi Gandhi asks to go home to Western Sahara

On hunger strike since 16 November – her life is in danger

Human rights defender, Aminatou Haidar, now in her fifth week of hunger strike, is desperately hoping Morocco will respect its duties under international law and let her return to El Aaiun where she lives with her two teenage sons and mother.

Deported by the Moroccan authorities occupying Western Sahara, Aminatou was forced against her will to travel back to Lanzarote in the Canary Islands.

The bone of contention was the fact that Aminatou had stated Western Sahara as her country of residence on her landing card. This is correct in every part of the world except in Morocco whose claim to the territory is not recognised by any other country. The United Nations established a mission in 1991 to organise a referendum of self-determination, which has not yet been held.

As a human rights activist working to achieve independence for Western Sahara, Aminatou has always filled out her landing card this way without any problem.

Aminatou has remained in Lanzarote airport since 14 November, engaging in her hunger strike when Spain, in complicity with Morocco, refused to let her travel home without a passport.

Messages of support started arriving from all over the world for this widely recognised figure, winner of the Civil Courage Award (New York 2009), Robert Kennedy Peace Prize (Washington 2008), the Silver Rose award (European Union 2007). Friends wanting to help - from nurses to journalists and actors - formed a platform of support on the spot. Nobel prize-winners, Jose Saramago, Rigoberta Menchu, Jose Ramos Horta wrote along with human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the New York Bar Association, the African Union, the European Union and now the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki Moon. He is concerned that Morocco's action is jeopardising the United Nations negotiations aimed at resolving the 35 year-long conflict over Western Sahara.

The forced exile of Ms Haidar is the latest episode in Morocco's crackdown on Saharawi human rights activists. In October five prominent figures were refused permission to travel although in possession of correct travel documents. Another had her papers confiscated so she could not continue medical treatment in Spain on

the eye lost after being beaten in a police van. And seven other leading human rights defenders are presently in a military prison accused of treason. Ordinary Saharawis face daily harassment and journalists reporting these events have been expelled. Twenty members of various security forces broke up a meeting on 13 December between Rosa Diez, a Spanish MP, leader of the Progress and Democracy Party, and Djimi El-Ghalia, the vice-president of the ASVDH (Saharawi Association of Victims of Grave Violations of Human Rights), the president being one of the seven aforementioned. Rosa Diez was bringing a letter Aminatou wrote to her children. They too have been subject to attacks by the Moroccan police and security forces. Basic human rights are not being respected in the occupied territory of Western Sahara.

On 10 December, International Human Rights Day, Aminatou Haidar stated she wishes to return to her homeland "with or without a passport, alive or dead". She continued, "My demand is to return to Western Sahara, to hug my children and to live with them and my mother, but in dignity."

The Australia Western Sahara Association marvels at the steadfast courage and clarity of her demand. We support Aminatou Haidar's claim to dignity and we call for the respect of the human rights of all Saharawis, especially the most basic: to self-determination.

For further information:

<http://www.awsa.org.au/>

<http://saharaoccidental.blogspot.com/>