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Your Excellency

You announced that the United Nations Security Council will be voting on 29 April on the mandate of its mission to Western Sahara, MINURSO. The Secretary General and his Personal Envoy for Western Sahara, Christopher Ross, have prepared a report with recommendations. Despite its absence in the published report, the Australia Western Sahara Association hopes that the Council will vote to include human rights monitoring within the mandate of MINURSO. It is the only UN mission not to have this responsibility.

We call on you to add your voice to the many supporting this move. The last time the Security Council considered the question only France used its veto to object to it.

Since last August the Moroccan authorities have greatly curtailed the human rights of Saharawis living in occupied Western Sahara. These include freedom of movement (refusal to travel abroad, even for medical reasons, confiscation of passports), freedom of expression (peaceful demonstrators have been attacked and brutally beaten and subjected to many abuses), freedom of association (international journalists have been stopped from visiting Saharawis). Human rights defenders have been particularly targeted, as was evident in the case of Aminatou Haidar in November-December, when she was expelled to the Spanish island of Lanzarote, but allowed eventually to return to her children and her home in El Aaiun, thanks to the intervention of the UN Secretary General, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights among others.

The case of the seven human rights defenders could be resolved with the help of the Security Council. They were seized on their return from a visit to the Saharawi refugee camps on 8 October and disappeared for 5 days, until the authorities notified family members that they were imprisoned in Salé prison near Rabat. Since then they have not been formally charged, although threatened with being tried by a military court. Their period of detention without trial was extended by two months in mid March. On 18 March five members of the group started an unlimited hunger strike and have been joined by others, now numbering 32 in various Moroccan penitentiary establishments. They call for their release if a trial is not held immediately. These individuals have been classified as prisoners of conscience by Amnesty International. Morocco's unacceptable treatment of them shows how far Morocco is out of line on human rights issues and how much the United Nations should be protecting the rights of Saharawis living under Moroccan rule. We ask the Security Council to join those calling for their release.

As you are aware, the United Nations also has a responsibility towards Western Sahara as a Non-Self-Governing Territory that is still on the UN agenda as a decolonisation. The

Secretary General and his Personal Envoy for Western Sahara have been careful to try to understand both sides of this conflict, but it is time for the Security Council to take the UN view, which is that a referendum of self-determination is the proper way to resolve the matter. They support the continuation and development of the program of "confidence building measures" which include family exchange visits between Saharawis on both sides of the military wall, namely those in occupied Western Sahara and those in the refugee camps in south west Algeria. It should be noted that the seven human rights defenders mentioned above, had taken exactly such an initiative in travelling to the refugee camps to generate links of the kind promoted by the UNHCR between the divided population.

As the UN Office for Human Rights mentioned in its report of 2006 (e g para 53) that the source of all the problems in Western Sahara is the lack of self-determination. The Security Council should pressure Morocco to abide by UN resolutions and allow without further delay the organisation of a free and fair referendum in Western Sahara to give its people a chance to decide their future in a democratic manner.

Saharawi political prisoners should be released and the basic freedoms of all Saharawis living under Moroccan rule restored. Please do what you can to ensure this and the inclusion of human rights monitoring in the MINURSO mandate.

Yours sincerely,

Lyn Allison  
President  
Australia Western Sahara Association

**working for justice for the Saharawi people**