

"Death was better than being raped!!!"



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The testimony of

The Saharawi human rights activist, the ex-kidnapped and member of the 'Colectif Sahraoui des Defenseur des Droits de l'Homme' (CODESA),

Mrs. Fatma Aayache

"Once out of jail, being able to coexist with the society, maintaining your principles, faith and the cause you are struggling for is a more difficult experience than prison itself." An Arab writer said.

My name is **Fatma M'barek Mohamed Aayache**, born in 1968 in El Ayun, Western Sahara [W.S.], mother of Lhalla Charafi, 19 years old, and Abdelaziz Elbachraoui, 7 years old. I belong to a Saharawi family whose most members suffered from flagrant violations of human rights for long periods, committed by different Moroccan security torturers.

I was subject to kidnapping, forcible disappearance and systematic torture among hundreds of the Saharawis who were preparing for peaceful demonstrations in El Ayun, Western Sahara. The demonstrations were intended to call for self-determination to the Saharawi people at the arrival of a UN technical committee paying a visit to the Western Sahara in 1987.

On November 20th, 1987 at about 01:00 my family's house, on "Alhizam Street" in El Ayun, W.S., was broken into by more than 07 Moroccan police agents in civil clothes. They destroyed everything, violently treated my family who were asleep, especially my mother, Salka Abdelfattah Elwali, 50 years old. This caused a great fright to all my family members.

I was dragged from my bedroom, facing insult, beating and kicking. You can imagine how a person would be when they were asleep to wake up and find oneself in these contradictory noises. I could not understand what was happening...I found myself obliged to lean on my knees among the boots of the torturers in a Landrover. They drove me in the city streets and roads for a long period under insult, beating and verbal abuse.

When the car stopped I thought that the suffering stopped too, but it did not. A new journey of harder and more ferocious torture just started. It was the beginning of the interrogation. That was the welcome of those who have no mercy.... Sadism in everything, selecting the most humiliating words and the nonstop insults and painful beating on different parts of the body, the objective of which was to minimize any feeling of dignity or of being a human.

For more than 30 hours, I felt that time had stopped...I was conscious of nothing except the successive claps on my face, the pouring of dirty water on my head and body. That was their hospitality. As I got back to consciousness, I noticed some cries and groaning; those were my fellow citizens' cries, who were being tortured, I knew later.

Their only concern was to get confessions from me concerning what we were planning to do and demonstrate for. I was handcuffed to the back, eyes blindfold, suffering the pain everywhere in my body. Worse than this, I was repeatedly threatened by rape. All the suffering may be endured but rape! Death was better for me than being raped!!!

Even worse, I discovered after a long period of different types of torture that five of my family members were exposed to the same suffering. Yes, those who had been teaching me the principles of good discipline and virtuousness.

What a shame... I knew that my mother's aunts **Khwaidija** and **Salka Aayache**, the latter's son, **Mohamed Lkhalil Ayache**, my uncle **Ali Aayache** and my cousin **Laghdaf Aayache** were all together with me, enduring the same systematic inhuman torture.

The torturers and investigators were such sadistic that they took the blindfold off my eyes to make me watch my uncle **Ali Aayache** completely nude ... He was in a delicate health situation due to the savage torture he had gone through...His face swollen, he was faint and unable to speak.

They obliged me to see him naked in order to humiliate our standards and principles as Saharawis on the one hand and to frighten me on the other. As I looked around, I could see the place was dull, everything was cruel and bitter... Piles of faint people everywhere...Clothes full of vomit and blood ... and stench filled the place. The torturers' frivolity added more fear and panic to the scene. Then, I discovered the seriousness of our misery.

After these first torture sessions, a group of the kidnapped and myself were taken to different places, handcuffed and blindfold and under strict control. We were obliged to keep silent and maintain the blindfold on our eyes. We were deprived of food and denied going to the toilet during the period of interrogation. The continuous beating was the only language spoken.

A few moments later, I was taken again to be interrogated about some Polisario flags. Where I had got them from, the reason behind our demonstrations, who were the coordinators and the organizing cells, were some of their most repeated questions. After refusing to give any information, I was subjected to cruel torture: hard beating upon the sense organs, branding by cigarettes and blowing their smoke on my face. I was clapped and beaten to the extent that I could no longer feel my face.

I lost consciousness several times... As I regained it, I was interrogated again, insulted and tortured. They, from time to time, pour cold filthy water on my body. Gradually, I could not remember what I said and I completely lost consciousness.

After my second torture session, I was taken with some other kidnapped, in a landrover to a coastal place that I would later on know that it was 'Thakanat Albir' (The Barracks of the Well), a secret jail in El Ayun, W.S.

We were distributed upon rooms, where we suffered over crowdedness, were forbidden to sleep, talk or even move. We were ill-nourished and deprived of being cured. The process of interrogation and torture continued, which led most of us to delirium and consciousness loss...

I remember now what happened to my relative, **Mohamed Lkhalil Aayache**, who is still disappeared up to now. He was being tortured throughout the period we were detained, not far from us and from his mother, **Salka Aayache**, who had to endure both her and her son's torment.

We frequently heard them ordering him, 'Say Long live the King, son of the bitch...say the Sahara is Moroccan...' He persisted refusing, challenging the torturers through his patience and the strong faith in his cause. He was thrown in a place that we were using as a toilet. They trod on him, and we were obliged to do the same as a kind of revenge on him and us for sticking to our principles.

Mohamed Lkhalil Aayache continued this way.. We could do nothing for him. His mother was facing his groaning with patience. He was inspiring her and us to cling to resistance and life, until his groaning faded away... **Mohamed Lkhalil Aayache** disappeared, his fate being unknown, like hundreds of the Saharawis in the Moroccan prisons and secret jails.

Being unable to accept her son's disappearance, the poor mother has been in a serious psychological breakdown for many years, even after our release. She is still awaiting to embrace her son one day.

After spending some time in the secret jail, Thakanat Albir, we were taken back to the ill-known secret detention center, PC CMI (Poste de Commandement - Compagnie Mobile d'Intervention). We were in a terrible condition because of many days of torture. We, the women, were put in the same cell after releasing 07 of us. Among them was **Ftaima ment Saaid**, who had been kidnapped away from her a two months old baby. She tried hard to be patient enough to be back to her newborn, left to its unknown destiny. Feeling sad for her, we took turns sucking her breasts to alleviate the pain that the bursting of milk breasts were causing her. That could not happen until we begged some guards to let us do so.

Like **Ftaima ment Saaid**, our comrade, **Igga Alaalem's** suffering was even worse. She endured an illness that caused her to lose memory. She was thrown on the earth hallucinating for a long period of time. No one was there to cure her until flesh started to fall off her body. Despite our constant begging of the guards to take her to be cured, we were sadistically replied, 'You are here to die...a slow death...'

Part of the room roof was open to the air; we were subjected to extreme cold, hunger and the absence of the simplest conditions of life, such as clothes, blankets and other necessities ...during the whole period of our disappearance that lasted about four years.

I was kidnapped while I was only 17 years old. I was then divorced and mother of a twelve months baby, **Lhalla Charafi**. As I was very young, how could I practice my motherhood outside prison, let alone inside?

I was constantly thinking of her, fearing that she was also subjected to abduction. The anguish was squeezing my heart. I was handcuffed, but I was embracing her in my mind, playing with her beautiful hair. My angel, Lhalla, was helping me endure the torturers' violence. But I was wondering day and night what happened to her, where she was...what she was eating..where she was sleeping ...

I usually saw her walking, trying to speak, crying, smiling, approaching me and saying, 'Mummy...Mummy...'. I was saying to myself that my daughter was still alive. I was suffering a lot while thinking of her.

Our suffering intensified by being deprived of our relatives and friends' visits, of being cured and of taking a refreshing recreation outside the cell. We ate and drank in dirty dishes, slept in filthy places, coexisted with bad smells, insects and lice that invaded our bodies. We were not given any clothes during the four year-detention but twice. We did not have access to bathing. We were usually deprived of doing our prayers. We were handcuffed, blindfold and obliged to sit squatting, our faces towards the wall.

I spent, together with more than 60 Saharawi kidnapped, about four years in detention. We were 10 women. The rest were men of different ages. Among us were minors, old people and teenagers. There were also two blind men, **Sidati Essallami**, 55, and **Chrif Elgarhi**, 22. Although they were blind, **Sidati** was dragged by his beard to the torture sessions, and **Chrif** was frequently taken to the toilet under the guard of dogs, a way to enjoy his torture.

One day, the sadistic torturers agonized my comrades, **Lghalia Djimi** and **Salka Aayache** through the trained fierce

dogs. They were freed to bite **Lghalia** and **Salka**, who still have the biting traces on their bodies up to now.

This miserable situation and the ill-nourishment for about four years made us very faint. It also caused many diseases to spread among us, such as tuberculosis, rheumatism, mental illnesses, stomachaches, intestine disorders, short sight, anemia, heart diseases, severe asthma as well as different skin diseases.

I cite here the case of my comrade, **Aminatou Haidar** who was half-paralyzed and went through a serious breathing disorder, like **Ovum Almouminin Mahmoudi** and **Mohamed Khalfou**. The latter died because of tuberculosis as soon as we were released in 1991.

We spent a lot of time in the PC CMI, (in El Ayoun, W.S.) which has been destroyed now, in order to remove the traces of the atrocities committed there. We were never presented before a trial, nor sentenced to a verdict. We were never visited by families... We simply were in the unknown. We then realized that we were there to die slowly, because we were calling for our people's right to self-determination.

We were released from the PC CMI, and had to learn the art of living again. We were out-of-date. But we left behind us four of our comrades, **Mohamed Lkhalil Aayache**, **Salama Hania**, **Mohamed Ali Karroum** and **Aandallah Boumehdi** whose nails of both hands and toes were pulled up during the torture. Their fate, like that of hundreds of Saharawi citizens, is still unknown. We felt sorry for their relatives and all the people asking for them.

I could not dream of being released and see my little daughter, **Lhalla**, again. She was now five years old. She was brought up by my mother, **Salka Abdelfattah Elouali** (Mercy upon her) despite her old age, permanent illness and the daily worries after my abduction.

At first, I had difficulties convincing my daughter that I am her mother. As I approached her, she ran away. I went through difficult moments and hard psychological problems to

persuade her. That required a lot of patience and forgetting my personal suffering to take care of her and my ill mother. Ironically, I got back the feeling of motherhood through bringing up my little sister, **Soukaina** who was then two years old, after the death of my mother in 1994.

I had to go through a totally new experience, overcoming my sorrows, coping with my mother's death and practicing the role of the mother of both my daughter, 08, and my little sister, 02.

We were released on June 19, 1991 in El Ayun, W.S. thanks to an international campaign led by the Polisario Front and many other human rights associations and international organizations such as AFAPREDESA, Amnesty International ...etc.

We had difficulties getting used to our new environment and with our ill bodies. Our families took charge of our treatment. Some of us had to do chirurgical operations. We were in terrible health and psychological conditions. However, we were frequently subject to control and interrogation in order to isolate us from our society and from each other.

Yet, we were determined to challenge all the hardships and continue our path to make our voices heard by the international associations and human rights organizations. We unveiled what happened to us and to hundreds of other Saharawis in many Moroccan secret detention centers.

Thus, I joined my comrades, the defenders of human rights, pinpointing and unveiling the flagrant human rights violations daily perpetrated by the Moroccan regime in the W.S. This made me a target to more harassment such as my torture in Smara Street in El Ayun with the human rights defenders, **Elhoucine Lidri** and **Aminatou Haidar** on June 17th, 2005. **Aminatou** was abducted the same day from the emergency room

in Belmehdi Hospital, El Ayun, by the Moroccan police led by the famous torturer, Ichi Aboulhassan.

Since then, my house has been controlled by the Moroccan secret agents. On July 20th, 2005 they broke into my house and abducted three human rights defenders, **Brahim Noumri**, **Lhoucine Lidri** and **Larbi Massoud**, who were later on sentenced to hard and unfair verdicts. My name has repeatedly been mentioned in the proceedings of the Judicial Police. More than this, I was several times interrogated by the Moroccan police so as to restrict my human rights activities.

The Saharawi Intifada since late May 2005 has obviously unveiled more atrocities committed by the torturers responsible for our suffering. Most of them were either promoted, or recompensed with large fortunes, while others bought lands from drugs trade.

The following list of torturers among others broke into the Saharawi citizens' houses, abducted and tormented men, women and children in the PC CMI secret jail, and even inside police cars. Then they leave them in remote areas outside the city. They also arrested minors, mainly students since the outburst of the Intifada on may 21st, 2005. The martyr **Hamdi Lembarki** was tortured until he died on October 30th, 2005 in a public street in El Ayun.

The torturers responsible for our abduction and torment in 1987 and during our disappearance period are:

1. **Saleh Zemrag**: He was the governor of El Ayun, W.S. before he died in 1993.

2. **Mohamed Elgarouani:** An ex-pasha in El Ayun, W.S. Now in Khnifra, a city in Morocco.
3. **Brahim Bensami:** He was promoted to "Governor of Security" of El Ayun before he was moved to Settat, Morocco.
4. **Larbi Hariz:** He was promoted to the "Governor of Security" of Dakhla, W.S. He used to be the general intelligence president in El Ayun.
5. **Abdelhaq Rabii:** A police officer still working in El Ayun.

6. **Ben Hima:** A police officer moved from El Ayun to Agadir, Morocco.
7. **Abdelhafid Ben Hachem:** An official in the Moroccan ministry of Interior. He used to give orders in coordination with the former minister of interior, Driss Bassri.
8. **Aziz Elaamraoui and Mohamed Jtiou:** They were among the guards responsible for our torture in the PC CMI secret jail, in El Ayun.W.S.
9. **Erroumi Aayad:** A Moroccan police investigator in El Ayun, Western Sahara since December 1975.
10. **Abderrahim Taifi:** A Moroccan police investigator in El Ayun, W.S. since December 1975.
11. **Sanhaji:** A Moroccan police official who was in charge of the general intelligence in El Ayun, W.S. from December 1975 to 1996.

Finally, I think that bringing to justice those responsible for the flagrant violations of human rights in the Western Sahara, signing the international agreements banning torture and taking the case to the International criminal court is the only way to make justice and keep our collective' memory.