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Statement - Western Sahara/Morocco: Morocco must immediately release Gdeim Izik human rights defenders

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the ongoing imprisonment of Sahrawi human rights defenders who were arbitrarily arrested in November 2010 by Moroccan authorities during the dismantling of the Gdeim Izik camp. Front Line Defenders joins the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) and numerous human rights organisations in calling for their immediate release.

On 11 October 2023, [the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention deemed the imprisonment of a group of Sahrawi activists](#), who were sentenced over a decade ago by a Moroccan court, as illegal. In its opinion, it urged the Moroccan authorities to promptly release the group of detainees, which comprises of journalists and human rights defenders, from Western Sahara. These detainees, known as the Gdeim Izik prisoners, have reportedly faced inhumane treatment since their non-violent protests in 2010 in the Gdeim Izik camp in Western Sahara. The prisoners include a number of human rights defenders.

Between October and November 2010, 20,000 Sahrawis moved into the Gdeim Izik camp in Western Sahara, south of the town of Laayoune, to peacefully protest against the discrimination they felt they were suffering at the hands of the Moroccan government. On 8 November 2010, Moroccan security forces forcibly evacuated the camp. Deadly clashes broke out between the Moroccan forces and Sahrawi protestors in the camp and subsequently in the town of Laâyoune. Thirteen people, eleven Moroccan security officers and two Sahrawi activists, were killed.

The “Gdeim Izik prisoners” refers to more than 20 Sahrawis who were arrested prior to, during and after the dismantling of the peaceful protest in the camp of Gdeim Izik on 8 November 2010. A number of the “Gdeim Izik prisoners”, sentenced by the Appeals Court in Salé in 2017, are prominent human rights defenders who had been openly defending human rights in Western Sahara, and who have since been held in arbitrary detention for 13 years. Three of these defenders, namely [Ahmed Sbaai](#), co-founder of the Sahrawi League for the Protection of Political Prisoners inside Moroccan jails, [Sid’Ahmed Lemjaid](#), president of the Committee for the Protection of Natural Resources in Western Sahara (CSPRON) and [Brahim Ismaili](#), president of the Centre for Preservation of the Collective Sahrawi memory, received life sentences. Human rights defenders [Ennaâma Asfari](#), Vice-president of the Committee for Liberties and Respect for Human Rights in Western Sahara (CORELSO), and [Mohamed Embarek Lefkir](#) received 25 and 30 year sentences respectively. Moreover, Sahrawi journalist and human rights defender [Mohamed Lamin Haddi](#) was sentenced to 25 years. Mohamed Lamin Haddi’s arrest is believed to be related to his having assisted two Belgian doctors linked to “Doctors without borders” who were on a humanitarian mission to provide medical assistance to Sahrawi victims of Moroccan oppression in the Gdeim Izik camp. [El Bachir Khada](#), a human rights defender and journalist for Equipe Media and member of the Sahrawi Observatory for Human Rights in Western Sahara, and [El Hassan Eddah](#), a journalist for RASD-TV and human rights defender associated with the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations Committed by the Moroccan State (ASVDH), were sentenced to 20 and 25 years respectively. [Mohamed Tahlil](#), president of the Bojador section of the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights

Violations Committed by the Moroccan State (ASVDH) was also sentenced to 20 years. Human rights defender [Mohamed Khouna Babait](#), who was arrested months after the initial arrests, was sentenced to 25 years for taking part in peaceful marches calling for the release of the Sahrawi prisoners.

The UN WGAD has stated that it considers the deprivation of liberty in the cases of the Gdeim Izik prisoners to be arbitrary in that it contravenes articles 3, 9 and 10 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as articles 9 and 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and, as such, falls within categories I and III of the WGAD's classification of arbitrary detention. The concerns raised by the UN WGAD mirror [those previously articulated](#) by the UN Committee against Torture and various Special Rapporteurs regarding the Gdeim Izik prisoners.

The UN WGAD, in advocating for the prisoners' release, highlighted several serious violations, including the denial of the prisoners' right of access to a lawyer, the use of confessions obtained under torture, and the lack of impartiality and independence of the court. The group concluded that the prisoners had been arbitrarily deprived of their liberty since their arrest in 2010. In addition, the UN WGAD called on Morocco to guarantee reparations and encouraged the Kingdom to conduct an investigation into the arbitrary deprivation of liberty, and to bring those responsible to justice.

Front Line Defenders stands in solidarity with the imprisoned Sahrawi human rights defenders and all other human rights defenders in Western Sahara who have been targeted for their peaceful activities.

Front Line Defenders urges the Moroccan authorities to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally release the all Sahrawi human rights defenders who are being arbitrarily detained and guarantee reparations;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into their arbitrary detention and with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Guarantee in all circumstances that all human rights defenders in Western Sahara are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisal and free from all restrictions, including judicial harassment.