

5 February 2021

Western Sahara: House arrest and physical assault of woman human rights defender Sultana Khaya

Woman human rights defender **Sultana Khaya** has been under house arrest for almost 11 weeks in her home in Boujdour. On 19 November 2020, several Moroccan police units imposed a siege around her house, during which the woman human rights defender was subjected to physical and verbal assaults.

[Sultana Khaya](#) is a Sahrawi woman human rights defender whose work focuses on promoting the right of self-determination for the Sahrawi people, through participating in several peaceful demonstrations. The woman human rights defender is president of the organisation League for the Defense of Human Rights and against Plunder of Natural Resources in Boujdour. In the occupied territories, Sultana Khaya is a prominent figure on the frontline of the Moroccan occupation, participating in demonstrations and advocating for the end of the occupation and denouncing violence against Saharawi women. The woman human rights defender has travelled internationally to participate in conferences and other events relating to the human rights situation in Western Sahara and she has participated in the UN Human Rights Council twice.

On 19 November 2020, while the woman human rights defender was travelling from El Ayoun city to Boujdour, she was arbitrarily detained by Moroccan police at a checkpoint between the two cities. The woman human rights defender said she was subjected to interrogation, physical inspection, and verbal assaults. After being in their custody for 20 minutes, she was released. On the same day, several police vehicles imposed a siege around Sultana Khaya's house, and a police man entered the house and reportedly physically abused the woman human rights defender's mother and the sister. Sultana Khaya's mother suffered injuries on her back and head and she was knocked unconscious as a result of police intervention. After several hours of negotiations with the Moroccan police, they allowed the family to transfer Sultana Khaya's mother to a hospital in Boujdour, even though the medical examinations that she needed are only available at El Ayoun city hospital, the Moroccan authorities prevented them from travelling to El Ayoun.

On 20 November 2020, the Moroccan police raided the house of the woman human rights defender, after several family members tried to visit the sick mother. During the raid Sultana Khaya's sister was reportedly physically abused and injured by police who hit on her neck and head.

Woman human rights defender Sultana Khaya and her family are still under house arrest, which was imposed without a court order, or any legal basis. Police vehicles continue to block the entrance to the house. On several occasions, when trying to leave the house, the woman human rights defender said she was physically assaulted, and forced to go retreat back into the house. On two occasions, the police covered the windows in black plastic to prevent Sultana Khaya from taking pictures and documents the house siege being imposed on her and her family by the Moroccan police.

Moroccan authorities have intensified harassment against Sahrawi human rights defenders over the last few months by imposing physical surveillance on prominent human rights defenders, the use excessive force to disperse peaceful protests, the mistreatment of imprisoned human rights defenders and taking arbitrary disciplinary measures against human rights defenders in their employment. For example, on 28 November 2020, Moroccan security forces attacked the house of prominent human rights defender and co-founder and leading member the Sahrawi Collective of Human Rights Defenders **Ali Salem Tamek** in the city of Laayoune while he was hosting a family

event where some traditional Sahrawi songs were played. Some members of the Moroccan security forces threw rocks at his house, terrifying his family and his guests.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned regarding the unwarranted house arrest against woman human rights defender Sultana Khaya and her family. Front Line Defenders believe that the woman human rights defender and her family are being harassed, physically assaulted, and under illegal house arrest solely as a result of Sultana Khaya's peaceful and legitimate human rights activities.

Front Line Defenders urges the Moroccan authorities to:

1. Immediately and unconditionally remove all restrictions on the free movement of Sultana Khaya and her family and cease all further forms of surveillance or harassment against them, as it is believed that these measures are not only solely related to Sultana Khaya's legitimate human rights activities and, furthermore, constitute a direct transgression of the rights of the woman human rights defender;
2. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation into the physical assaults against Sultana Khaya and her family, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
3. Cease targeting all human rights defenders in Western Sahara and guarantee in all circumstances that they are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and free of all restrictions including judicial harassment.

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