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Western Sahara: Prevention of the holding of the first national congress of the Sahrawi Collective of Human Rights Defenders (CODESA) followed by attacks to five human rights defenders

On 21 October 2023, a group of plain-clothes agents prevented the **Sahrawi Collective of Human Rights Defenders (CODESA)** from holding its first national congress in Laâyoune at the house of the Sahrawi human rights defender Ali Salem Tamek. Photos and videos shared by CODESA show that some of its members and other human rights defenders who came in solidarity, were physically attacked. Among those who suffered violence, the human rights defenders **Ali Salem Tamek**, **Atiqou Barray**, **Jamila Mojahid**, **Said Haddad** (a person with a disability) and **Fatima Zahra Bougarfa** were targeted.

CODESA is a collective of Sahrawi human rights defenders. It was created in 2002, but the Moroccan authorities prevented CODESA's constituent congress from being held in 2007. On 25 September 2020, the constituent congress was finally held in Laayoune, Western Sahara. It has been working for years to promote the right to self-determination in the territory of Western Sahara under Moroccan control, in the cities of southern Morocco where there is a high concentration of Sahrawi people, and in Moroccan universities where Sahrawi students pursue their higher education. At the same time, it aims to inform the international community about the human rights violations against the Sahrawi civilian population have been suffering, since the forced annexation of the non-autonomous territory of Western Sahara on 31 October 1975

Ali Salem Tamek is a prominent human rights defender and founding member of the Western Sahara branch of the Forum for Truth and Justice, an organization that campaigns for the rights of victims and families of victims of torture, disappearances and other human rights violations. He is also the first Vice-President of the Saharawi Collective of Human Rights Defenders (CODESA). He has faced routine harassment and persecution in his attempt to monitor and denounce abuses by Moroccan authorities.

Deprived of their rights of association and assembly since the founding of the collective in 2007, the members of CODESA have decided to hold their first national congress on 21 October 2023 at the home of one of its founding members the human rights defender Ali Salem Tamek, as they are unable to do so in a public space. They report that on the eve of 21 October 2023, they observed the presence of plain-clothes officers coming into the neighbourhood in large numbers. On the morning of the 21 October, people coming from outside the city to attend the congress were prevented from passing.

CODESA members documented the use of force by plain-clothes agents in photos and videos. They entered the building and forcibly evicted the people who had come for the event. Among those who suffered violence, the Sahrawi collective mentioned the human rights defenders: Ali Salem Tamek , Atiqou Barray , Jamila Mojahid , Said Haddad (a person with a disability) and Fatima Zahra Bougarfa woman human rights defender who were attacked with a sharp instrument caused injury to her arm during the evacuation.

CODESA has denounced this targeting , which it describes as contrary to international humanitarian law and international human rights law. The Sahrawi human rights group said that the denial of their right to freedom of association followed a series of harassments by the Moroccan intelligence services, which completely besieged Ali Salem Tamek's home and all the avenues and streets surrounding the Al-Mustaqbal neighbourhood in the centre of Laâyoune.

The decision made by Moroccan authorities prevented dozens of Sahrawi human rights defenders and media bloggers, as well as members of CODESA and members of its administrative committee and executive board, from reaching the meeting planned for the Collective's congress.

In a press release issued on 21 October 2023, the members of CODESA reported these violations and confirmed their commitment to fully exercising their rights to freedom of expression, assembly and organisation. It is worth recalling that on 7 October 2007, CODESA was also banned from holding its founding congress in the town of Laâyoune. The human rights organisation CODESA also called on the international community and human rights organisations and bodies to support its efforts to overcome the deprivation and restrictions to their rights of association and assembly to which it is continuously exposed.

Front Line Defenders express its concern with the targeting of CODESA by repeatedly preventing the human rights organisation to meet on their national congress as it evidences a pattern of targeting Sahrawi human rights defenders who are working on the right of self-determination of the West Sahara's people.

Front Line Defenders is deeply concerned by the harassment of the human rights defenders organisation CODESA its members and their families, as well as the human rights defenders who support them, and believes that this is solely motivated by their peaceful and legitimate activities in defending human rights. Front Line Defenders condemns the violence committed on CODESA's members and believes this to be in reprisal for their legitimate and peaceful work as a human rights defenders.

Front Line defenders call the Moroccan authorities to:

1. Carry out an immediate, thorough and impartial investigation on the violent attack of the members of CODESA, with a view to publishing the results and bringing those responsible to justice in accordance with international standards;
2. Ensure in all circumstances that human rights defenders in Western Sahara are able to carry out their legitimate human rights activities without fear of reprisals and without any restrictions.