



## Statement on Aminatou Haidar

This is a crucial time in efforts to save the life of Aminatou Haidar known as the ‘Saharawi Gandhi’. Mother of two, Aminatou is a prominent human rights activist and former political prisoner and Nobel Peace Prize nominee. She is renowned for her non-violent resistance to the occupation of Western Sahara by Morocco. She has been awarded the 2009 Civil Courage Award, the 2008 Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, the 2007 Silver Rose Award (Austria), and the 2006 Juan Maria Bandres Human Rights Award (Spain). She was nominated by the European Parliament for the Andrei Sakarov Human Rights Award. Amnesty International (USA Branch) nominated her for the Ginetta Sagan Fund Award.

On Wednesday she entered her 24th day of hunger strike after being expelled from her home in Western Sahara. Negotiations are still taking place between Spain and Morocco. Doctors have said she has only days to live.



*Aminatou holding pictures of victims of Moroccan torture and (right) is taken back to the airport on a stretcher after Morocco refused to allow the plane to take off (Source Reuters)*

Aminatou was returning to occupied Western Sahara after travelling to the US to collect the 2009 Civil Courage Award for “steadfast resistance to evil at great personal risk.” On her return she wrote Western Sahara on her landing card, as she has done numerous times before. This time the Moroccan authorities threatened her and tried to force her to write Morocco. When she refused, she was expelled from the country.

Her deportation has been condemned by human rights organisations including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International who have issued an urgent action.<sup>i</sup> The High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, Chairperson of the Commission of the African Union (AU), Jean Ping and UN Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres<sup>ii</sup> have all called for her return. Morocco refuses to comply and is prepared to let her die. The Moroccan authorities say she can only return if she issues an apology to the King and renounces her Saharawi identity.

This is part of the Moroccan government’s increasing regressive stance against anyone who objects to their occupation of Western Sahara listed by the UN as a Non-Self-Governing Territory.

## **The UK's role**

This is a clear violation of human rights by Morocco (See info from Amnesty and Human Rights Watch below). The situation in occupied Western Sahara is so desperate that this woman - an internationally recognised human rights activist - is prepared to die in order to expose the extent of the suffering of the Saharawi people. This is due to a lack of action from the UN Security Council on the issue of Western Sahara. All members of the Security Council have a responsibility for this issue. Pressure from the UK at this stage will be crucial in saving Aminatou's life and will send a clear message to Morocco that the escalating repression and human rights abuses will not be tolerated.

## **The UK Government must:**

- Issue a PUBLIC statement demanding her immediate and unconditional return.
- Call on the UN to implement human rights monitoring within the region
- Call for the suspension of negotiations on Morocco's advanced status
- Acknowledge the need for a UN agreement that respects the requirement for a process of self-determination in line with international law

Aminatou, alongside many of the Saharawi people has suffered before. In 1987, aged 20, she "disappeared" and was tortured by the Moroccan secret police for four years for advocating independence. In 2005 she was jailed for seven months after being beaten by a Moroccan policeman during a demonstration protesting against the Moroccan occupation.

*I was kidnapped and detained in prison for 4 years. I was blindfolded continuously throughout this time, and spent 9 months in solitary confinement...sometimes we would be forced to face the wall with our hands tied and spend the whole night standing on one foot. If we fell, we were tortured...the threat of rape meant we were afraid to sleep...my family, including my young children had no idea of my whereabouts."<sup>iii</sup>*

In a cruel twist on Friday, her supporters including her 2 children were jubilant as the Spanish authorities told Aminatou she could return home only to be distraught when the Moroccan authorities refused to allow the plane meant to be taking her home to leave. Her children have issues an emotional appeal for her release.

Her campaign has attracted high profile support including actors Javier Bardem, Juliet Stevenson and Terry Jones, film directors Pedro Almodovar and Ken Loach, musicians Manu Chao and Brian Eno and Nobel Literature Laureate, Jose Salamango

## **Media coverage**

This has made international headlines with front-page news in Spanish newspapers. For a selection of coverage in English see:

[The Guardian: We will not bow to this Moroccan King](#)

[The Independent Marooned at Lanzarote airport, the 'Gandhi of the Western Sahara'](#)

[The Guardian, Hunger Striker](#)

[The Guardian, Nobel nominee hunger strike fears](#)

[BBC, Morocco demands apology from hunger strike activist](#)

BBC [Concert backs 'Gandhi of Sahara'](#)

[The Observer on Dec 6](#)

[UN urges right of return for hunger striker](#)

[Afrik.com: Western Sahara: Joy turns to anger](#)

[Afrik.com: British MPs support Haidar](#)

[Associated Press](#)

## **Statements of Concern**

### **US State Department**

[UN commissioner for Refugees](#)

[Statement from the African Union](#)

[Statement from the South African Government](#)

[Statement from Amnesty International](#)

[Statement from Human Rights Watch Morocco: Reverse Expulsion of Sahrawi Activist](#)

[Human Rights Watch article on escalating Moroccan repression](#)

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<sup>i</sup>Expulsion of human rights defender reflects growing intolerance AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT 17 November 2009 <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE29/012/2009/en/9168fdcd-6f76-4f8f-949a-e3346239b061/mde290122009en.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/4b18f6909.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Aminatou Haidar, Saharawi Human Rights Activist and Nobel Peace Prize nominee speaking about her experiences. Sandblast Festival, October 2007, London