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ALERT: NEW WAVE OF REPRESSION AGAINST INDEPENDENT JOURNALISTS IN WESTERN SAHARA

Call to Action: Equipe Media and other Sahrawi media collectives warn about a new wave of arrests, trials, physical abuse and reprisals against independent journalists and media activists in the Morocco-occupied Western Sahara and urge international human rights monitors to pressure Morocco to respect the right to freedom of the press

In the past few months, Morocco has been carrying out a new wave of repression against Sahrawi citizen journalists, including the arrest, trial and sentencing of media activists **Said Amidan, Brahim Laajail** and **Walid Batal**; physical abuse and confiscation of equipment against videographers such as **Nazha El Khalidi**; and retaliations against imprisoned journalist **Mohamed Banbari** after he attempted to contact international organizations about his case. There is also concern about fairness in the upcoming trial on December 26th of journalist **Bachir Khadda** and 24 other activists previously tried by a Moroccan military court for their participation in the **Gdeim Izik** protest camp. In addition, a team from the US global news hour **Democracy Now!** that visited the city of Laayoune on November 18-22 reported being harassed and constantly followed and monitored by Moroccan authorities. These cases are detailed below.

The Western Sahara, occupied by Morocco since 1975, is practically inaccessible to international media and human rights monitors. Dozens of journalists and observers have been expelled or denied entry to the territory just in 2016. The UN peacekeeping mission in the territory, known as MINURSO, is the only one of its kind without a human rights mandate. In the absence of international observers, Sahrawi citizen journalists, most of them self-taught and working with few resources, are often the only source of information -- and particularly of footage -- on the human rights violations that take place there on a daily basis. These media activists risk their security and physical integrity to film and share videos of peaceful demonstrations and police repression against Sahrawi civilians. Independent journalism in Western Sahara is not permitted by Moroccan authorities, so these media activists work clandestinely and are vulnerable to arrest and prosecution. Lacking funds for an adequate defense, they are represented by volunteer lawyers and subjected to summary trials.



In November, Reporters without Borders [called](#) on Moroccan authorities to stop violating the rights of Sahrawi and foreign journalists who attempt to cover the Western Sahara and urged Morocco to end all reporting restrictions there. Reporters Without Borders reported on Amidan and Laajail's detention, as well as on the arrest of El Khalidi and the case of French journalist Camille LaVoix, who was deported from the city of Dakhla in September of 2016 as she was reporting for the French daily Le Monde.

The following are just some of the examples of recent cases of harassment against journalists and media activists attempting to cover Western Sahara.

- **Citizen journalists Walid Batal, Said Amidan and Brahim Laajail sentenced to prison**

On December 5th, 2016, 22 year-old media activist Walid Batal was [sentenced](#) by a Moroccan court to 14 months in prison for participating in and filming a peaceful [demonstration](#) in the city of Smara to commemorate International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, held on November 25th. Twenty people, the majority women, were injured by police violence during the protest, which was organized by the women's group Fafesa. The Moroccan court found Batal guilty of obstructing traffic and attacking a public employee, a charge frequently leveled against protesters and journalists attempting to film demonstrations and police repression.

Batal is a video activist with the media group Smara News and covers protests in which Sahrawis frequently demand respect for their right to self-determination.

[This video](#) shows him at a demonstration in Smara being taken by police into an alley, where he was beaten. Batal is the son of prominent activist Salek El Batal, member of the Sahrawi Committee of the Defense of Human Rights in occupied Smara. Batal Sr. was also arrested in Smara on November 15 and taken before the prosecutor, charged with participating in a demonstration on November 6, 2009, and with inciting other Sahrawis to participate in protests against the Moroccan occupation. His trial on December 5, originally scheduled on the same date as his son's, has been postponed.

On November 29, 2016, citizen journalists Said Amidan and Brahim Laajail, from the group Equipe Media, were sentenced to three and two months in jail respectively following a three-day ordeal in detention, when they say they were beaten and interrogated. They were convicted for "attacking a public employee". Although neither will have to do actual time in jail, they both deny the charges and plan to appeal.

Amidan and Laajail were arrested on September 29, 2016 in the Moroccan city of Guelmim while they were traveling to Agadir, where they both study. They were detained for three days, during which their families and friends were unaware of their whereabouts. They were interrogated and suffered ill treatment inside a police station. After their release they said they had been questioned about their political and media activities, including their relationship with international human rights observers and journalists who attempt to visit Western Sahara.

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- **New trial for Bachir Khadda, media activist originally tried by military court for participating in Gdeim Izik protest camp**

Bachir Khadda, a citizen journalist and coordinator of video archives for Equipe Media, will be retried in Rabat on December 26th along with 24 other Sahrawi activists, all of them known as the "[Gdeim Izik 25](#)". In February of 2013 a military court sentenced them to between 20 years and life in prison for their participation in the 2010 Gdeim Izik protest camp, which many say was a precursor to the Arab Spring. Around twenty thousand Sahrawi women, men and children set up the camp outside the city of Laayoune on October 9th, 2010, to protest conditions under occupation and demand improvements in their lives; the camp was [violently dismantled](#) by Moroccan security forces on November 8th, resulting in the deaths of eleven Moroccan police and two civilians as well as mass arrests and retaliation on the part of Moroccan settlers and police. In the aftermath of the dismantlement the authorities repeatedly [beat and abused](#) detainees.

International human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, launched a [campaign](#) asking Morocco to free or retry the activists in a civilian court after concluding that the military trial was held without guarantees and that convictions were based on "confessions presumably obtained under coercion or torture, without other evidence connecting them to these homicides".

In July 2016 a Moroccan court of cassation [quashed](#) the convictions of all the prisoners and ordered a new trial, this time in civilian court, after Morocco revised its legislation and determined that military courts do not have jurisdiction over civilians in time of peace. This trial is set to begin December 26th.

Khadda, who is 30 years-old, was arrested in December of 2010 in Laayoune and charged with membership in a criminal gang and violence against a security officer resulting in his death, both incidents connected to Gdeim Izik. Khadda, who denies the charges and says he never visited the camp, told international human rights observers that police tortured him in May of 2011 and that he was forced to sign a confession while blindfolded. His supporters are convinced that he and the others were arrested for their activism: Khadda was already well known by authorities and in 2007 he served 10 months inside the Black Prison for participating in a peaceful demonstration.

Equipe Media and human rights monitors are concerned that Khadda and his co-defendants may not be granted a fair trial. The International Association of Jurists for Western Sahara (IAJWS) has called for volunteers to attend the December 26th trial as international observers.

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Equipe Media reports on reprisals against jailed journalist Mohamed Banbari

Equipe Media has reported that one of its journalists, Mohamed Banbari, who is serving a six-year prison sentence, is being subjected to retaliation by Moroccan authorities for his [attempts](#) to take his case to international institutions including the European Parliament and the United Nations. Banbari has been named a prisoner of conscience by the Washington-based NGO Freedom Now, which recently submitted a [report](#) on his case and arbitrary detention by Morocco before the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Banbari, who is also a human rights defender, recently told his sister Azza Banbari that he has been subjected to isolation and solitary confinement and that he has been transferred to different prisons several times before ending up at the Ait Melloul prison in the Moroccan city of Agadir, around 1100 kilometers from his home. This transfer deprives him of family visits, as his relatives do not have the means to travel this far to see him.

Banbari was arrested in the city of Dakhla on August 26, 2015 and charged with participating in a demonstration in 2011 after a soccer match that eventually turned into three days of violent clashes between two neighborhoods, and that resulted in the deaths of two Moroccan police officers. Banbari covered the protests for Equipe Media and was critical of the Moroccan response. According to Freedom Now, which has launched a [campaign](#) to free him, Banbari was subjected to torture intended to exact a false confession and was forced to sign one, which he was not allowed to read.

On January 12th, 2016, Banbari was charged with forming a criminal gang, participating in murder, obstructing a public road and a number of other crimes. Freedom Now states that "in response to his work he was falsely accused of forming a criminal group, provocation and participation in riots, vandalism and throwing stones. In recent years similar charges have been made against many Sahrawi activists and journalists" and concludes that "like many Sahrawi individuals, Mr. Lebsir remains in prison for his work as a human rights defender and engaging in peaceful protests".

Banbari was prosecuted almost four years after the events took place, despite the fact that those responsible had been arrested and prosecuted years prior. According to Equipe Media, the only evidence weighed by the judge who presided over the case against Banbari were the confessions allegedly made by former prisoners. However, the court did not call any of these witnesses to testify, and the only one who appeared, Atiko Baray, denied these charges. A judge in the Appeals Court of Laayoune handed out a prison sentence of twelve years that was later reduced to six years in January of 2016.

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Police violence against media activists and confiscation of equipment: The case of Nazha El Khalidi

Cases of police abuse and violence against Sahrawi citizen journalists who attempt to document and report about human rights violations in Western Sahara are too numerous and frequent to all be documented in this report. The case of Nazha El Khalidi, a reporter with the Sahrawi media outlet RASD TV, illustrates how police uses violence to deter media activists from doing their job.



El Khalidi was arrested and beaten by police on August 21st 2016 when she was covering a [peaceful demonstration](#) led by women at a beach in Laayoune. In this [video](#) she can be seen covering the protest camera in hand (she is the woman in pink at the left of the screen). Minutes later police breaks up the protest, [charging](#) against the women and injuring twenty protesters, most of them women. In a video she posted on Facebook, El Khalidi said that during her overnight detention she was “beaten on all parts of my body” and that police confiscated her camera. The organization Adala UK quotes her as saying: “It’s obvious that what they hoped to achieve with my detention and their threats and torture was for me to stop filming and writing on the abuses they commit but I am determined that they will not achieve this”, she said. In another online [video](#) she describes her attempts at recovering her camera.

Job firings and salary cuts as deterrents against media activism: The case of Mohamed Mayara

Mohamed Mayara, co-founder and coordinator of Equipe Media who also co-founded the human rights organization ASVDH and whose father was killed in Moroccan custody when he was a baby, has been fighting for almost a decade to recover his employment after he was fired in 2007 from his job as a city employee in Laayoune for participating in sessions on Western Sahara before the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights.

In 2011 Mayara was re-hired as a public high school history teacher in Laayoune at the recommendation of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission, created to compensate victims of the "Years of Lead" under King Hassan II. However, in August of 2013 his salary was suspended without prior warning or explanation. Mayara says he sought an explanation and was told that the suspension had been ordered by the Ministry of Education. He has sued in administrative court to get his job back.

Mayara is very active both as a journalist and as a coordinator for international teams of journalists and observers visiting Western Sahara, and says that his work situation is due to this [activism](#). Employment termination and suspension of pay is one of many tactics used by Morocco to discourage Sahrawis from challenging the occupation.

Mayara says that he and his family are subjected to intense police surveillance, constant [harassment](#) and death threats, and that his seven year-old daughter lives in constant fear that he or his wife, also an activist, will be arrested. "I try to prepare her for the possibility that I might end up like her grandfather," he recently told a US journalist.

The imprisonment of Salah Lebsir

Salah Lebsir, correspondent for RASD TV, is serving a four-year prison sentence after being convicted of participating in protests in the city of Smara. In April of 2013 police arrested three young Sahrawi activists in Smara and also issued an arrest warrant against Lebsir, accusing them of “organizing a criminal gang, lighting fires, destroying common goods and blocking circulation”. Lebsir, who denies these charges, left Western Sahara and traveled to the Sahrawi refugee camps near the Algerian town of Tindouf, where he stayed with relatives for two years. While there, he took part in a human rights video advocacy [workshop](#) organized by the FiSahara film festival and led by the New York-based human rights NGO WITNESS. Right before returning to Western Sahara he posted [this video](#) (in Hassanya with Spanish subtitles) explaining that he wanted to return to his homeland but feared for his safety.



Lebsir was arrested in June of 2015 soon after his return to Western Sahara and was tried in October of that year. He says he has suffered ill treatment in prison at the hands of prison guards and other prisoners, incited, he says, by the Moroccan authorities. His case also appears in the Freedom Now report submitted to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

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Democracy Now! TV crew harassed, followed and monitored by Moroccan authorities during reporting visit to Laayoune

A four-person crew from [Democracy Now!](#), the global daily TV and radio news hour from the United States, visited Laayoune from November 18 to 22 right after covering COP22 in Marrakesh and was harassed, monitored and followed by Moroccan authorities, who visited their hotel late at night, followed them everywhere in cars and motorcycles and organized a protest against their presence in Western Sahara on November 21st at a restaurant where they were eating -- blocking their vehicle to prevent them from covering a [demonstration](#) across town where a number of people were injured by police.

"We were the first foreign television news crew to get into Western Sahara in recent years", wrote Goodman and her fellow journalist Dennis Moynihan in a [column](#) published soon after their visit. "We were followed constantly, on foot and by men on motorbikes and in cars. They stood outside our hotel night and day. Moroccan secret police came to our hotel at midnight on our first night, a "strictly routine" visit, they told us, "to protect us." Foreign journalists who do get in are often promptly expelled if the Moroccan intelligence agents see them interviewing pro-independence Sahrawis".

Describing the harassment they suffered at the restaurant, Goodman and Moynihan wrote: "A dozen plainclothes agents, one wearing an NYPD baseball cap, were there coordinating, constantly on their cellphones. Outside, security agents' cars blocked ours. Several of the men seated near us seemed very agitated, and we feared this bizarre display could turn violent. They surrounded us as we left. While almost none in the mob spoke English, they unfurled several glossy vinyl banners with slogans in English like 'Shame on Democracy Now!' The banners were identical in design to ones displayed after U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon condemned the Moroccan presence in Western Sahara as an occupation".

Despite the constant harassment, Democracy Now! was able to interview Sahrawi activists from different organizations and collectives. At the two Smara Avenue demonstrations that took place on November 21st during their visit, police used violence against dozens of Sahrawis, the majority of them women, and conducted raids against Sahrawi homes.

Democracy Now! visited the victims and documented the bruises and other marks of violence on their bodies. In interviews, the women described how they had been sexually assaulted on a side street as several plainclothes agents surrounded them, a moment captured on camera by an activist who filming from a nearby home. Goodman noted how one woman who had lost consciousness after being strangled with her own dress was constantly vomiting but refused to go to hospital for fear of reprisals. "The women showed



us their injuries, describing how the police twisted their breasts and nipples, inflicting intense pain and bruising them” wrote Goodman. “Aziza was faint, throwing up repeatedly.”

Call to Action: Sahrawi media groups call on the international community to observe and report on abuses and to defend freedom of the press in Western Sahara

Sahrawi media collectives warn about their extremely fragile situation in the face of increasing Moroccan repression against their efforts to document and report on human rights violations in Western Sahara. “We are frequently the only witnesses of the repression who can film images of the peaceful demonstrations, and of violence that they face, and share them with the rest of the world”, says Ahmed Ettanji, President of Equipe Media.

“Morocco persecutes us, monitors us, beats us, arrests us, interrogates us and tortures us: authorities confiscate our equipment, falsely accuse us of committing crimes, subject us to summary trials. We lack the resources to defend ourselves against these abuses. We need the help of the international community”, adds Ettanji.

On behalf of Sahrawi media collectives, Ettanji says: “We call on the Moroccan authorities to immediately free Mohamed Banbari and all other journalists and media activists jailed and detained for their activities, and to stop harassing members of these collectives who are only trying to do their jobs as reporters.”

Sahrawi media collectives urge human rights organizations, especially those who monitor freedom of information and of the press, to:

- Monitor the situation of Sahrawi media activists and citizen journalists who risk their security and physical integrity to report on the situation in Morocco-occupied Western Sahara;
- Contact Sahrawi lawyers, media collectives and human rights organizations in Western Sahara to establish a working relationship, gain more understanding on the situation of Sahrawi citizen journalists and, if possible, support the defense of Sahrawi journalists under attack;
- Pressure Moroccan authorities to allow freedom of the press in Western Sahara by permitting international media and monitors to enter, research and report freely on Western Sahara, and by ending all harassment, repression and persecution Sahrawi journalists and media activists;
- Call on the Moroccan government to release all Sahrawi journalists who have been arrested, jailed or tried for reporting on the Western Sahara;
- Regularly report on the human rights situation Western Sahara and help end the media blackout;
- Pressure the UN Security Council to include human rights monitoring as part of the mandate of the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Western Sahara, known as MINURSO. The next vote will take place in late April of 2017

Equipe Media, Smara News and RASD TV are Sahrawi media groups working clandestinely inside the Morocco-occupied Western Sahara to report on the human rights situation and end the media blackout on the conflict in Western Sahara. Defying Moroccan bans against independent reporting



on the conflict, they secretly film videos, write reports and share them on their social media channels for the world to see. Along with other Sahrawi media collectives, they have participated in media [workshops](#) organized by [WITNESS](#) and [FiSahara](#), and also collaborate with the digital video curation platform [Watching Western Sahara](#), a website created by [WITNESS Media Lab](#) and [FiSahara](#) that shares verified, contextualized human rights eyewitness videos filmed by Sahrawis in the occupied territory.