

Western Sahara: Activist Badly Weakened by Hunger Strike

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MADRID, Dec 2 (IPS) - The firm stance taken by Western Sahara independence activist Aminatou Haidar, in her third week of a hunger strike in an airport in Spain's Canary Islands, contrasts with the weak position of the Spanish government vis-à-vis the Moroccan government, which it has failed to pressure to allow the activist to return to her homeland.

Haidar, who is president of the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders (CODESA), is reportedly so weak she can hardly stand or speak.

The Moroccan authorities confiscated the passport and identity card of Haidar, who is known as the "Sahrawi Gandhi", and expelled her to Spain on Nov. 14 as she was returning to Western Sahara via this European country after a trip to receive a human rights award in the United States.

Mohamed Jadad, the delegate in Spain of the Polisario Front - the Sahrawi independence movement based in Algeria - told IPS that the government of socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero should press Morocco "to allow Aminatou to return to her home in El-Ayoun, to her family and her children."

El-Ayoun is the capital of Western Sahara, which Morocco annexed after Spain pulled out in 1975. Although fighting came to a halt in 1991 in the phosphate-rich disputed desert territory on the northwest coast of Africa bordered by Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania, the Polisario Front continues to demand independence, but Morocco has only offered "autonomy."

Jadad said the Spanish government does not dare risk annoying the Moroccan government, and "is turning a blind eye to human rights violations and to that country's rejection of the United Nations 1991 and 2003 plans."

The 42-year-old Haidar, one of the leading activists for self-determination for Western Sahara, and the winner of the prestigious Robert F. Kennedy human rights prize in 2008, has been forcibly disappeared, held and tortured in Moroccan prisons in the past.

On Nov. 14, on her way back from receiving the Civil Courage Prize from the Train Foundation in New York on Oct. 21, the police took her aside for 12 hours of questioning at the El-Ayoun airport.

On her entry form, Haidar had left the citizenship line blank and listed her place of residence as "Western Sahara" rather than "Morocco" - which she says she has frequently done in the past without any problems.

But this time Moroccan authorities said she had thus waived her Moroccan citizenship, and they confiscated her passport and put her on a plane, against her will and without papers, back to Lanzarote in the Canary Islands, a Spanish archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Morocco.

Since Nov. 16 she has been on a hunger strike in the Lanzarote airport, demanding to be given back

her passport and allowed to return to El-Ayoun.

The Spanish Foreign Ministry initially said Haidar could not leave the country because she did not have a passport. But Foreign Minister Miguel Ángel Moratinos then offered her refugee status, which she turned down because it would not allow her to return home. And on Nov. 28, the minister personally telephoned to offer her Spanish nationality and a passport, as an “exceptional measure.” However, she also rejected that proposal.

On Tuesday, the minister said he was in contact with Moroccan authorities, and that he had suggested that they send Haidar a passport, “either her old one or a new one.”

But a senior Moroccan official said Haidar must “apologise” before her passport is returned.

A Spanish Foreign Ministry official announced Tuesday that the Spanish government had asked United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to help work things out.

Haidar, meanwhile, has received an outpouring of international support.

British MPs from the three main political parties tabled a motion stating that “this House condemns the escalating wave of human rights violations against Saharawi human rights activists...(and) is dismayed over the expulsion of prominent Saharawi human rights activist and winner of the 2009 Civil Courage Award Aminatou Haidar from Western Sahara.”

In a Nov. 17 statement, Amnesty International said it “deplores the decision of the Moroccan authorities to expel human rights defender Aminatou Haidar from Western Sahara on 14 November, and urges the authorities to immediately allow her to return to her home in Laayoune (El-Ayoun). Amnesty International is concerned that she is being targeted because of her human rights work and her public stance in support of self-determination for the people of Western Sahara.”

Human Rights Watch Middle East and North Africa director Sarah Leah Whitson said “Morocco cannot summarily denaturalise and deport its own citizens because of the way they fill out entry forms at the airport. They must let Haidar return home and stop harassing her for peaceful advocacy of Sahrawi self-determination.”

The U.S. State Department said in a communiqué that “The United States remains concerned about the health and well-being of Saharawi activist Aminatou Haidar...We urge a speedy determination of her legal status and full respect for due process and human rights.”

Her supporters around the world include 87-year-old Portuguese Nobel Literature Laureate Jose Saramago - who visited her at the airport; East Timor President José Manuel Ramos-Horta, a Nobel Peace Prize-winner; Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodovar; Spanish Oscar-winning actor Javier Bardem; Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano; British filmmaker Ken Loach; and British actor and former Monty Python, Terry Jones.

Among the friends and supporters accompanying her at the airport are activists from the Washington-based Robert F. Kennedy Centre for Justice and Human Rights.

But Gustavo de Arístegui, the foreign policy spokesman for Spain’s centre-right Popular Party, the main opposition force, said the only thing that Haidar, “with her stubborn position...is doing is messing up, muddying and complicating the negotiations” on Western Sahara.

He also criticised Spanish artists and personalities who have expressed their support for the activist, saying they should mobilise for other causes, rather than this one, which he said “just makes them

look more progressive and gives them greater visibility.”

The talks on Western Sahara are at a standstill over incompliance with agreements reached by the U.N. in 1991 and 2003.

In 1991, then U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan appointed former U.S. secretary of state James Baker as his special U.N. envoy to Western Sahara, and the U.N. Security Council established the U.N. Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), which was to oversee the ceasefire that went into force that year, and to organise a referendum in which Sahrawis would choose between integration with Morocco and independence.

In 2003, the U.N. passed resolution 1495, known as the Baker Plan II, which proposed autonomy for a five-year period, followed by a referendum including the option of independence.

Leire Pajín, the secretary of the governing socialist party (PSOE), underlined that Haidar is in Spain against her will, and that all she wants is to return home to her mother and children.

Pajín urged Morocco to immediately help resolve the situation, because Haidar’s deportation “violates the U.N. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights that Morocco has also signed.”

María José Fernández of the Asturian Association of Friends of the Sahrawi People flew to Lanzarote last week to accompany Haidar, who she said was extremely weak and occasionally fainting, and needs help just to get up and go to the bathroom.

But she added that despite the Sahrawi activist’s physical weakness as a result of the hunger strike, her spirit is strong and she is clear-headed, reading the newspapers and receiving everyone who visits her.

The activist told Fernández that “she doesn’t want to talk to Moratinos on the phone anymore; if the minister wants to talk to her, he can come here.”

The coordinator of the United Left opposition coalition, Cayo Lara, criticised the stance taken by the government and told it to stop being an “accomplice” in Morocco’s “illegal” actions against the activist, who he said should be allowed to go home immediately.

In statements to Spain’s leading newspaper, El País, Haidar said that “from the very start, I saw there was complicity between the Spanish and Moroccan governments, and that my being sent back to Spain was a political matter.

“The Spanish government must rectify this flagrant violation of human rights, of Spanish law, and of international treaties,” she added.

In a communiqué, she said it is her convictions and conscience that tell her what she has to do, not those who support or oppose her, “neither the Polisario Front, nor Morocco, the United States, Moratinos or anyone else.”

PSOE’s secretary of social movements and relations with NGOs, Pedro Zerolo, and senior Foreign Ministry official Agustín Santos talked to Haidar at the airport Tuesday.

But the only conclusion they reached, Santos said at the end of the meeting, was that the contacts with Morocco must continue.

An odd footnote to the whole incident, perhaps indicative of the official treatment Haidar has

received, is that Judge Ángela López fined the activist 180 euros (370 dollars) for creating “public disorder.” (END/2009)