

WESTERN SAHARA

Morocco committing 'all kinds of atrocities' in Western Sahara

Thursday 5 July 2007, by [ILTIS Tony](#), [LAKHAL Malainin](#) (Date first published: 28 June 2007).

Secretary general of the Saharawi Union of Journalists and Writers (UPES) Malainin Lakhal, currently on a speaking tour of Australia, spoke to *Green Left Weekly's* Tony Iltis about the human rights situation in Western Sahara and the Saharawi people's long struggle for democracy and self-determination.

Lakhal described the dire human rights situation under the three-decade-long Moroccan occupation. The Moroccan authorities "commit all the kinds of atrocities that dictatorships commit, such as torture, arrest, forced detention and disappearances. The victims of these violations are mainly women and young people", he said. He referred to the recent case of student Sultana Khaya: "She was demonstrating in the university campus with her comrades. They were asking only for their right of self-determination and independence of their country. Instead of treating her as a peaceful demonstrator, the Moroccan police attacked her and her comrades. They tortured her in the middle of the campus. The information we got is that she was also tortured in the ambulance, though she had already lost her eye."

Lakhal said this was just one example of many. "Since the new uprising in the occupied territory in 2005, two young people were killed by police in the middle of the street. One was killed in the capital of Western Sahara, El Aaiun, the other in a city in south Morocco called Tan-Tan, and both of them were only demonstrating their support for the independence of Western Sahara. Our human rights organisations talk about more than 500 disappeared, 151 Saharawi prisoners of war who are still not accounted for by the Moroccan authorities, 20,000 victims of arbitrary arrest and hundreds of victims of torture during demonstrations. And these are only the cases that these human rights organisations could document."

Lakhal pointed out that such abuses were not new. "It started in 1975 when the Moroccan invasion started. Because, what the Moroccans were planning to do was to exterminate the Saharawi people. That was clearly declared by the Moroccan King ... But the Polisario Front and the Saharawi people were organised before the invasion, thank God. The liberation movement was constituted in '73, to fight against the Spanish, so we were able to resist this Moroccan invasion."

"And we succeeded in protecting our population", Lakhal explained. "The Polisario Front built camps in Algerian territory" to protect the refugees. "The Saharawi Republic was proclaimed in 1976 by the Polisario Front. It is actually constituted ... so we have the only camps in the world in which there is a state."

In response to the liberation of a large part of Western Sahara's territory by the Polisario, the Moroccans built a wall that dissects the country. To its east is the liberated zone and to its west is the territory under Moroccan occupation, where the political struggle continues despite the

repression. In 1991 a ceasefire was agreed, but since then Morocco has been stalling on the question of a referendum.

“So far the Moroccan government is refusing all peaceful resolution to the conflict. A referendum should be the solution to the conflict according to international law and all United Nations resolutions. But Morocco is to this day [refusing to allow] the Saharawis self-determination, thanks to the help of France and the United States. It is because of these two powers and because of Spain that the Moroccan Kingdom has succeeded so far” in not complying with international law.

Despite this, the Saharawi Republic has received a large degree of international recognition. “We were recognised by the Organisation of African Unity in 1984, then we became a founding member of the African Union. We are recognised by big countries such as Venezuela, Cuba, Mexico, Algeria, South Africa and Nigeria.”

Western countries recognise the Polisario Front as a liberation movement but refuse to recognise the Saharawi Republic: “They say that they want to wait for the decolonisation of the territory and if Western Sahara gets its independence, they will recognise the Saharawi Republic. This is the excuse they have. But we are now campaigning and we have a lot of support, especially in the Scandinavian countries where we have a strong movement of support to convince their governments to recognise the Saharawi Republic.”

Lakhal also drew attention to Australia’s role in the exploitation of Saharawi resources: “We think that the worst thing that Australia is doing is importing our phosphate, knowing that this is an illegal act. This is a question of companies and we are actually contacting these companies to try to convince them to disinvest from our territory.”

Lakhal stressed that the Saharawi bear no enmity towards the Moroccan people. “The Moroccan people are oppressed people and they have never been asked their opinion about what the regime is doing. So the question of Western Sahara is a question for the regime. The Moroccan people, especially the settlers in the occupied territory, are peaceful people. So our problem is not with the Moroccan people or the Moroccan settlers. The Polisario Front clearly said in its last proposition of a solution to the conflict that it is ready to offer to these settlers the right to Saharawi citizenship.”

He added: “We now have a Moroccan political party, the Democratic Path, which is a Marxist-Leninist movement, openly supporting the Saharawi people’s right to self-determination. And we also have the Moroccan Association for Human Rights, which is a leftist human rights organisation that supports the Saharawi people’s rights.”

Lakhal said that the human rights situation has become worse in Morocco and Western Sahara since the accession of King Sidi Mohamed in 1999. “The Moroccans themselves think that they were deceived because in the first year of his accession to the throne they had a lot of hopes and expectations. Now they say that the six years of rule that he has behind him are worse than the whole reign of his father on all levels. His father was a dictator but at least he was a clever politician.

“They say the new king is not happy with his role: he would prefer to be swimming or skiing. His security services are practising torture and other abuses more than his father’s. And economically speaking Moroccans are suffering ... There is more poverty. And this poverty is very dangerous - it’s pushing many people to terrorism. It’s giving the Islamist and fundamentalist movement an opportunity to recruit desperate people.”

However, the rise of religious fundamentalist terrorism has itself created new pretexts for

governmental repression. "The Moroccan government has lately passed an anti-terrorism law that allows the security services to arrest, detain and interrogate anyone they like, without even excuses or reasons", Lakhal said. "They didn't need that to commit human rights abuses in the occupied territory - they've been doing it since '75 - but the situation is getting worse, not only for the Saharawi but also for the Moroccans. We think that this 'war on terror' has caused a real mess, not only in the United States and Iraq but for the whole world."

Lakhal also pointed out that "The United States has succeeded in convincing some countries to torture people on their behalf. Morocco is now one of the torturers for the United States."

"Governments are tending to be dictatorships", Lakhal said. "Even those governments that are the result of a democratic process are tending to make use of the same practices that they used to criticise, which are used by dictators in the Third world. I personally think that the international citizen - we the people - need to think about what our governments are doing and find a way to say no to them and stop them from abusing our rights."

P.S.

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