The Saharawi struggle

It is difficult to summarise 32 years of occupation, fear, war, exile, human rights violations and lost dreams of the people of Western Sahara, the last colony in Africa.

by Malainin Lakhal

But I will try to give you an idea about my own experience within the framework of the general experience my people went through for three decades and are still living with.

I was born under the Spanish occupation in 1971, in El Aaiun, the capital of Western Sahara, and I grew up under the Moroccan occupation.

Western Sahara has been recognised as a non-self-governing territory by the United Nations since the early 1960s. It was decided then that Spain, the de jure administrating power of the territory, should co-operate with the international community in the decolonisation process recommended by the UN Security Council and General Assembly, and a referendum on self-determination was supposed to take place in 1975. Instead, in 1975, Spain, Morocco and Mauritania signed an illegal tripartite agreement, the Madrid Accord, by which the Spanish administration unilaterally withdrew from the territory leaving it to the two neighbouring countries, but maintaining a privileged priority in the exploitation of Western Sahara's natural resources. Unfortunately, this illegal act was blessed by both France and the US.

The invasion completely changed the human rights situation in the territory, and a set of violations and crimes against humanity committed by the Moroccan army and authorities has been reported by international and local human rights organisations and also by eyewitnesses and survivors. The Saharawi people resisted this de facto situation the three countries wanted to impose on them and decided to proclaim an independent Saharawi State, on 27 February 1976. The Saharawi government established its administration and authorities over 20% of Western Sahara (known as the liberated areas) as well as in the refugee camps in the south-east desert of Algeria, and is now recognised as a sovereign state (though in exile) by some 80 countries worldwide, and is a founding member of the African Union.

After fierce fighting the Saharawi liberation movement, Polisario Front, which was created in 1973 by the different Saharawi political tendencies, succeeded in forcing Mauritania to sign a peace treaty in 1979, and recognise the Saharawi State as the sovereign authority in the territory. Morocco remains the only occupying force now and the human rights violations are the daily routine in the “occupied zone” of Western Sahara (80% of the territory under Moroccan illegal occupation).

As a child I did not realise what was going on because the adults were so scared to speak out about the atrocities they had been subjected to since 1975. But, when I became 14 years old, I started to understand and discover that my country is colonised, that I was treated differently, despised and discriminated against at school and in the streets.

And in 1987 my generation experienced the biggest shock of its life. Moroccan authorities forced 10 000 Saharawi students to stop their studies and deported them from Western Sahara to Moroccan cities to work. Another 300 Saharawi students and activists disappeared. They were detained in Moroccan secret detention camps and those who survived torture and humiliation were released four years later, in 1991.

Outraged, we just could not accept this situation and we decided to do something. Of course the first thing to do is to fully understand what's going on, what's the story, and what's the best way to react.

With friends, we started as secondary school students, but particularly in the university in Morocco (because the colonial power did not build a single university or high school in Western Sahara), to organise ourselves in secret organisations, to search documents and books about the colonisation of Western Sahara, and to find a secret police. Whenever a demonstration is organised anywhere in Western Sahara, I would be arrested, for hours, or days and some 100 other Saharawi youngsters, I was subject to all imaginable methods of torture on a daily basis, handcuffed and blindfolded for two months, but the secret to survive this experience was very simple, as a wise young friend said: “just say NO!”.

And I survived the first experience, so I became a “client” of the secret police. Whenever a demonstration is organised anywhere in Western Sahara, I would be arrested, for hours, or days and sometimes for a week or more.

With my friends, students, unemployed qualified graduates, and human rights activists, we succeeded in organising or helped in organising a lot of activities and acts of protest against the Moroccan occupation in 1992, 95, 97 and 99, and it was a long, hard and risky process of raising awareness but it was also harder to break the siege of fear and terror imposed on the old generation and to educate
In the camps another story of resistance began. The Saharawi refugees live in dire conditions, but in dignity. They struggle to survive, but they are also struggling to build the basis for a future modern and free state.