



EC/ECHO/Khaled Halouane



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 Lakkhal —————

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 administering 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 govern-

ment 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 situ-

ation 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 this was in itself a risk as the Moroccan political police is very active in the occupied zone and in universities especially.

Because of my activism, I was first arrested in January 1992. So I entered a new experience. Imprisoned in a secret detention camp in El Aaiun, with some 100 other Saharawi youngsters, I was subjected 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, 93, 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



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the younger generations about how to fight back the occupation in peaceful ways.

In 1999, we succeeded in organising the biggest peaceful popular uprising ever organised since the Moroccan occupation. Thousands of Saharawis in all the cities of the occupied zone of Western Sahara and in the southern cities of Morocco joined the protest. For four months people got to the streets, chanting slogans in favour of the independence of their country, fighting back Moroccan military and police forces' attacks against peaceful demonstrations. Hundreds of demonstrators were arrested, tortured, imprisoned or abused in one way or another by the colonial forces. And I was forced to work undercover, because this time, I learnt that the secret police was really determined to shut me up for ever.

From September 1999 to August 2000, I lived undercover, working with activists and comrades, but it was impossible to live this way forever so I decided to flee the occupied areas and join the independence movement on the other side of the Moroccan military wall (berm). And in the first week of August I started the long journey with two other friends, in the desert heading to the berm in the south of Western Sahara.

The Moroccan military wall (or the wall of shame) is another inhumane outcome of the occupation. It is a 2 700km long sand wall that divides the territory of Western Sahara and its people in two from north to south. It is guarded by more than 120 000 Moroccan soldiers, barbed wire and landmines.

We walked for three days and three nights in the desert, heading south, thinking about all the probabilities but resolute to die rather than be arrested by the military soldiers. The third day we reached the wall, and managed to cross it unnoticed.

After another night walk we reached the territory of Mauritania and managed to get to the nearest city in the north-west of Mauritania, Nouadhibou, where we could contact representatives of the Saharawi liberation movement and join the Saharawi camps in August 2000.

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. They built hospitals and schools for

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their children, organised themselves and run a government with all institutions any government may need. And they are determined to struggle to return to their homeland.

Because I have a lot of contacts in the occupied zone, and in the universities, I found that the best way to help my people is to get the information out of the siege, to contact international organisations and to be a sort of bridge for the human rights activists and victims with the outside world.

Life in the occupied zone of Western Sahara is becoming even worse since 2005. Morocco rejects all UN peace plans for the decolonisation of the territory, and abuses the Saharawi people's human rights.

The Saharawis started a new popular and peaceful uprising in May 2005. They are demonstrating on a daily basis, expressing their rejection of the occupation but also paying the cost of this refusal with hundreds of arrestees, thousands injured during peaceful demonstrations, and also hundreds of youngsters are forced to migrate or to flee to neighbouring countries, and sometimes they do not survive the journey.

Human rights activist or journalist?

With regard to my personal experience as a colleague of yours, I have to admit that I became a journalist out of necessity. My education and language skills as well as the need to spread information about the Saharawi cause were factors that pushed me to embark in a journalistic adventure and role. This has not been easy as I had practically no previous training, few means and almost no free time to learn.

However, with a lot of patience, perseverance, amateurism but determination I managed, with the help of many foreign friends, to contribute in shed-

ding light on the Moroccan human rights violations against my people.

Despite the lack of means and training, Saharawi journalists have succeeded in setting up an online Saharawi news agency, a national radio and four regional channels, a local TV that will be a satellite TV soon, a few magazines and many websites.

My modest organisation, the Saharawi Journalists' and Writers' Union (UPES) was created years ago, and was reconstituted in 2005 after many years inactivity. A small group of Saharawi journalists, poets, writers and intellectuals decided to reactivate this body to participate in the social life and struggle of their people, in the refugee camps and in the occupied zone. We launched a website in Arabic, and recently in English too, to open an additional space for writers from the occupied zone and the camps to interact and publish their writings.

UPES also constituted the first classes for a future school for journalism and peaceful resistance in the camps, the Basiri Institute for Communicators for Peace, with the contribution of a Spanish organisation, Comunicadores por la Paz, but it is still in its beginnings, and I cannot say that I am the best of its students.

Internet is the best avenue we use to communicate with the outside world and with our people in the occupied areas despite the fact that the Moroccan regime invests money and technology to censor and block all the Saharawi and pro-Saharawi internet websites.

This talk was given in Sydney to the members of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance in Australia and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in July.

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