

Morocco suppressing activists in Western Sahara after deal with Israel

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Supporters of Western Saharan independence demonstrate in France. (Photo: AFP)

Rabat, February 21 (RHC)-- Activists and ordinary people in Western Sahara are said to have been subjected to a harsh crackdown and human rights abuses by the government in Rabat, weeks after the United States recognized Morocco's sovereignty over the disputed territory — where pro-independence sentiments run high — as a gift following its normalization with Israel.

The Middle East Eye news portal cited the activists as saying that Washington's decision on December 10, 2020, to recognize Morocco's territorial claim to Western Sahara had emboldened Rabat to harass ordinary people and those critical of the move.

Mahmoud Lemaadel, one of the activists, reported an "unprecedented" number of assaults on activists and campaigners in Western Sahara over the past weeks. "Since that point (US recognition), Morocco has launched an arbitrary campaign targeting human rights activists and also citizens who have nothing to do with any type of activism," Lemaadel said.

Following the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Sudan, Morocco became the fourth Arab country late last year to reach a normalization agreement with Israel, which was brokered by the administration of ex-US president Donald Trump during its final days in office.

As part of the contentious deal, Trump agreed to recognize Morocco's authority in Western Sahara, which has been at the center of a decades-old territorial row between Morocco and the Polisario Front. The Algeria-backed movement has been fighting for the Sahrawi people's aspirations for independence from Moroccan rule and for a referendum on their self-determination, something that has been pledged to the region in UN resolutions.

Resource-rich Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony, was claimed by Morocco in 1957, but its indigenous population is firmly opposed to Moroccan control and has been calling for independence from the North African country.

Elaborating on Rabat's campaign of suppression, Lemaadel said since last December, Sahrawi citizens have been stopped in the streets and grilled about their views of Morocco's rule over the territory. In turn, Mohamed Elbaikam, another activist, revealed other repression tactics used by the Moroccan government. "Salaries of human rights activists have been cut off or frozen, their family members are often threatened and there have been several examples of phones hacked and exposed," he said.

Elbaikam further rejected Trump's claim that his decision was meant to provide the locals with an opportunity to live a better life and said the recognition had instead paved the way for a "stronger, more intense and continuous" repression campaign against the Sahrawi people. "Therefore, the people of Western Sahara are under unprecedented military and security siege and pressure these days, especially as the [Persian] Gulf countries have shown support to the Trump proclamation," he said.

Meanwhile, Nazha el-Khalidi, an activist and journalist, warned that Trump's move could negatively impact the already conflict-stricken region. "We Sahrawi people do not want to be the scapegoat for any relationship that binds one state to another... the bridge between Morocco and Israel has been built over the blood of Sahrawi people," she said.

"Trump's decision has given a green light to more violence towards Sahrawi people... authorities are even transforming our houses into prisons. Right after Trump's proclamation, all houses of activists came under constant surveillance," she added.

Meanwhile, Lemaadel said Morocco had also stepped up its arrest campaign against activists in recent weeks, saying those detained had faced "vague" or "made-up" charges so that they could be kept in jail.

Last December, the Human Rights Watch (HRW) slammed Rabat for having kept a "strong lid on any manifestations of opposition to Moroccan rule in Western Sahara for a long time. The leading New York-

based rights group said Moroccan authorities “have prevented gatherings supporting Sahrawi self-determination, beat activists in their custody and on the streets, imprisoned and sentenced them in trials marred with due process violations including torture, impeded their freedom of movement, and followed them openly.”

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