

PUNISHING DISSENT: TORTURE OF PROTESTERS IN WESTERN SAHARA

Briefing Paper

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REDRESS

Ending torture, seeking justice for survivors

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For over fifty years, the people of Western Sahara have lived under a system of Moroccan repression that punishes those who speak out for self-determination and human rights. Among them is Ayoub El Ghan, a young activist who began peacefully protesting from a young age. In June 2018, during a demonstration in which authorities threatened and beat protesters, El Ghan was cornered in a small street and run over twice by a Moroccan police car - an act that constitutes torture.

The attack has left El Ghan with life-changing physical and psychological injuries. Following the protest, he and his family were subjected to repeated instances of intimidation, harassment and assault. Eventually, he was forced to flee his home, leave his family behind, and seek safety abroad.

El Ghan's experience is not an isolated case. It reflects a broader pattern of torture, other violence and repression in which protest and calls for human rights relating to Sahrawi self-determination are routinely met with crackdowns by Moroccan police and security forces, resulting in numerous grave human rights violations. Despite systematic violence, such State-sponsored acts are met with near-total impunity.

Survivors of torture in Western Sahara often fear filing complaints against the Moroccan authorities, due to the well-evidenced risk of retaliation and little or no prospect that such complaints will lead to accountability. Nevertheless, El Ghan attempted to take criminal legal action to seek justice domestically. He filed a complaint with the police on 14 January 2019 and followed up several times; however, to the best of his knowledge, no investigation or legal proceeding was ever initiated, and the perpetrators remain unpunished. With REDRESS's assistance, El Ghan has now sought a remedy through application to the United Nations' (UN) Committee Against Torture (CAT) for Morocco's breaches of the UN Convention Against Torture (UNCAT) in his case.

This briefing paper outlines El Ghan's case, which is emblematic of activists and protesters in Western Sahara who suffer human rights violations and pursue justice. Morocco, the CAT and others in the international community should take urgent steps to ensure that all people in Western Sahara are protected from torture and ill-treatment and that, for those who have already been subjected to human rights abuses, effective remedies and reparation are facilitated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations to the Moroccan Government

1. Uphold the absolute prohibition of torture and other ill-treatment at all times.
2. Amend its laws in order to fully comply with its obligations under UNCAT.¹
3. Implement specific measures to prevent and respond to torture and ill-treatment, including:
 - Adopting concrete steps to immediately end the police practice of chasing and running over protesters; prioritising communication and de-escalation where conflict arises; and ensuring that force by law enforcement in protests is used only as a last resort and is strictly necessary, legal, and proportionate;
 - Enacting laws, policy and regulations on the broader use of force by the police and security forces in protests in line with the UN Model Protocol for Law Enforcement Officials to Promote and Protect Human Rights in the Context of Peaceful Protests and other international standards;²
 - Providing human rights training programmes for law enforcement personnel involved in the control of protests and other assemblies;
 - Safeguarding the role of protest monitors, including where exercised by national human rights institutions and civil society organisations;
 - Ensuring that all allegations of torture and ill-treatment are promptly, effectively and impartially investigated and that perpetrators are prosecuted and punished with sentences commensurate with the grave nature of their acts; and
 - Ensuring that protocols are in place to facilitate a safe environment for all victims and witnesses to report acts of torture and ill-treatment, and that they are duly protected against threats and reprisals.

Recommendations to the international community

- Make diplomatic efforts to prompt Morocco to comply with its international human rights obligations – both within Morocco itself and in Western Sahara – at fora such as the UN Human Rights Council, CAT, and bilateral human rights dialogues.
- Ensure human rights due diligence, benchmarks and safeguards against torture and human rights abuses are integrated into processes for cooperation, aid and other partnerships with the Moroccan Government.

1 Notably, this should include: (i) stipulating that an order from a superior officer or a public authority may not be invoked as a justification of torture; (ii) providing for penalty against senior officials authorising, acquiescing or consenting, in any way, to acts of torture committed by their subordinates; (iii) ensuring that no amnesties or pardons are granted for the crime of torture, and, to that end, amending Articles 51 and 53 of the Moroccan Criminal Code; (iv) ensuring that the crime of torture is not subject to any statute of limitation; and (v) introducing legal provisions to ensure that victims of torture have the right to equitable compensation that is commensurate with the harm suffered.

2 For example, through implementation of the Model Protocol for Law Enforcement Officials to Promote and Protect Human Rights in the Context of Peaceful Protests (2024).

- Encourage Morocco to allow monitors such as the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture to visit when requested.
- Assist Morocco in building institutional capacity to investigate and prosecute cases of torture and other human rights violations through training programs, technical assistance, and other support.
- States should consider: (i) imposing targeted sanctions against individuals and entities responsible for torture and other gross human rights violations; and (ii) consider the use of universal jurisdiction in prosecuting crimes of torture and other serious human rights abuses that are not investigated and prosecuted in Morocco.

■ AYOUB EL GHAN'S CASE ■



© Ayoub El Ghan

El Ghan's story

Background

Ayoub El Ghan was born and raised in Laayoune, Western Sahara, where he grew up in the context of longstanding repression of the Sahrawi people. Like many Sahrawi families, during his life he experienced the human rights violations that followed the Moroccan invasion of 1975 and subsequent conflict. Several of his relatives were arrested and tortured by the Moroccan authorities, while others fled to refugee camps in Algeria. Discrimination and abuse of Sahrawis continued throughout El Ghan's childhood in the 2000s, and, in response to this injustice, he began participating in peaceful protests while still in primary school.

By the age of 16, El Ghan had a role documenting alleged human rights violations for a Sahrawi human rights organisation, the Nushatta Foundation, but his continued participation in protests meant that he was subjected to increasing scrutiny by the Moroccan authorities. This experience was commonplace among those in Western Sahara advocating for self-determination and human rights. Although El Ghan avoided arrest during the earlier years of his activism, those who were detained were reportedly coerced under torture and threats of sexual violence into identifying their co-activists. Such coercion resulted in El Ghan's identification, after which police repeatedly visited his family home and questioned his relatives.

The attack

In late June 2018, Laayoune was heavily militarised by the Moroccan security forces owing to a planned visit by the UN Secretary General's Personal Envoy for Western Sahara. In parallel, El Ghan and others organised a peaceful protest aiming to communicate the plight of the Sahrawi people to the UN Envoy.

During the protest, they were soon threatened and attacked by Moroccan police officers and supporting forces who wielded batons and shields. Amid the beatings and threats, El Ghan and few other protesters were forced into a side street. It was there that an armoured Moroccan police vehicle, driven by an officer recognised by El Ghan as one with a reputation for targeting Sahrawi activists, came towards him. He started to run but was eventually cornered on a sidewalk, and the police car deliberately drove into him, reversed, and ran over him a second time.

As El Ghan lay seriously injured, additional police officers arrived at the scene. They did not provide assistance, but instead violently threw stones at him, causing further injury.

In a critical condition

El Ghan was taken to hospital by other protesters, where it was found that he had pelvic fractures and injuries to his legs from the force of the police vehicle, and was bleeding from the head. Most pressingly, he had severe internal bleeding which required surgery.

While awaiting his surgery alone, in significant pain and being administered blood transfusions, a plain clothes police officer filmed an interview with El Ghan, which was published shortly afterwards. Physically vulnerable and in a state of immense fear, El Ghan complied with the officer's line of questioning and said that he was run over by a civilian car in a different location. El Ghan does not remember this interview, but on learning that it had happened once he awoke from his coma 12 days later, he recorded himself giving his own account of what had happened.

During his hospitalisation, numerous members of El Ghan's family were targeted and physically attacked by police, and his house was kept under surveillance. His family was subject to intimidation, including the detention of a relative and pressure to misrepresent the circumstances of his injury.

The day after his surgery, El Ghan was transferred to a hospital in Marrakech by helicopter. This transfer was arranged by the authorities against the backdrop of the ongoing visit of the UN Envoy; rumours about El Ghan's condition were circulating and activists were seeking to inform the UN Envoy.³ El Ghan then remained in recovery in Marrakech for over two months. Upon his return to Laayoune in December 2018, a police presence surrounded his home.

Seeking legal recourse

A month after returning to Laayoune, El Ghan filed a complaint before the general prosecutor and requested that a criminal investigation be opened for his attempted murder. Despite naming the police officer driving the vehicle and following up on several occasions, to date, he has received no response to his complaint.

3 UN Peacekeeping, Personal Envoy for Western Sahara visits the Territory, 28 June 2018.

Instead, El Ghan became subject to increased police harassment and intimidation. He was detained and questioned by the police on several occasions, including at Casablanca and Marrakech airports and in Laayoune, with no legitimate reasons. During these interrogations, he was assaulted by the police, subject to a non-consensual strip search and forced to sign reports that he was not permitted to read. El Ghan attempted to file a further complaint in relation to these abuses, but the prosecutor refused to do so.

Concerned by the repeated police harassment and fearing for his life and freedom, El Ghan felt forced to flee the country, leaving his family behind. He sought refuge in a European country, where he currently lives.

As a result of the torture and ill-treatment that El Ghan faced at the hands of the Moroccan police, he has suffered profound and enduring physical and psychological harm. These lasting injuries have meant that he is limited in the type of work he can do, and he has struggled in his search for a job.

Action for justice internationally

El Ghan has been unable to secure any acknowledgment, investigation or remedy through the Moroccan judicial process for the human rights abuses he suffered. This accords with a wider trend of impunity for torture in Morocco, especially in cases concerning survivors and victims from Western Sahara. UN mechanisms and others have noted their concern about this impunity, as well as the fact that that current domestic legislation falls short of Morocco's international treaty obligations.⁴

On 13 April 2026, REDRESS brought El Ghan's case to the attention of the CAT, after domestic remedies proved ineffective. El Ghan is asking the CAT to urge the Moroccan government to conduct an independent and impartial investigation into the torture he suffered in 2018, to provide him with fair and adequate compensation for the life-changing harm he suffered as a result, and to issue a public apology and implement measures of non-repetition.

Key violations of UNCAT

El Ghan was not only a victim of the police excessive force, but the evidence in his case also indicates that he was deliberately run over by Moroccan police officers because of his participation in peaceful protests advocating for Sahrawi self-determination and human rights. The attack was intended both to punish and to intimidate him and other activists. Furthermore, it was carried out in a discriminatory context linked to his Sahrawi identity. Together with the severe pain and suffering inflicted on El Ghan, these elements bring the attack within the definition of torture under UNCAT (Article 1).

The attack was followed by further harassment of El Ghan and his family, as well as attempts by the Moroccan authorities to fabricate an alternative, false account of what happened. Rather than investigating the incident and holding those responsible to account, the authorities' response compounded the harm suffered by El Ghan, further violating Morocco's international human rights obligations.

⁴ See, for example: CAT, [Morocco: Gdeim Izik cases reveal torture, coerced confessions, and failure to investigate, UN committee finds](#), 20 May 2026; International Service for Human Rights, [Morocco: UN Committee finds torture violation over Sahrawi Defender's detention conditions](#), 18 August 2026; UN Special Procedures, [Joint Communication concerning alleged violations against Sahrawi human rights defenders in Western Sahara](#), AL MAR 3/2025, 20 March 2025.

In particular, we argue that Morocco breached the following international human rights obligations under UNCAT:

- i. **Prevent torture:** Morocco failed to take effective legislative and administrative measures to prevent officials from committing torture in Western Sahara, a territory under its control (Article 2).
- ii. **Investigate allegations of torture:** Despite knowing of the attack against El Ghan, and receiving his complaint, the authorities failed to conduct an effective investigation. They did not take meaningful steps to collect evidence or hold perpetrators accountable, and there is evidence suggesting that officials instead sought to fabricate an inaccurate account of events (Article 12).
- iii. **Protect complainants from reprisals:** Morocco failed to protect El Ghan and his family from harassment and intimidation following his complaint. Instead, the authorities' continued targeting of El Ghan ultimately led him to leave the country and his family behind (Article 13).
- iv. **Provide redress:** Morocco failed to provide El Ghan with an effective remedy and full reparation. He has received neither compensation, nor adequate rehabilitation, and had to seek additional medical treatment in Algeria (and then in Europe) as he was not fully treated in Morocco or Western Sahara. He also faced numerous barriers to justice (Article 14).

TORTURE IN WESTERN SAHARA BY MOROCCO

Ayoub El Ghan's story is sadly not unique. Moroccan control of Western Sahara has long been predicated on a climate of fear created by persistent human rights violations and a culture of impunity. Human rights defenders and Sahrawis advocating for self-determination have been targeted, as in El Ghan's case, through brutality in protest, including the weaponising of official vehicles, arbitrary detention, and consistent harassment and police surveillance of activists and their families.

Historical background

Following nine decades of colonial rule, Spain withdrew from Western Sahara in 1975. Morocco then forcibly took control of most of the territory, despite the International Court of Justice's advisory opinion affirming the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination.⁵ Violence continued unabated between the Moroccan authorities and the local independence movement – the Polisario Front – until a UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991 envisaged a referendum that has never taken place, leaving the territory in a prolonged political deadlock.⁶ Western Sahara has been recognised as a non-self-governing territory by the UN for over 60 years.

Widespread human rights violations

The lack of political resolution and limited UN safeguards in the region have provided the background for well-documented systematic abuse of human rights by the Moroccan police and other security forces. According to one report, between 1975 and 2025, there were 390 long-term enforced disappearances, 4,565 short-term abductions, 1,242 political arrests, 317 extrajudicial executions, and 13 deaths resulting from death sentences imposed by Moroccan authorities.⁷ Morocco has not taken steps to address these abuses. Instead, for example, it continues to withhold information about the fate and whereabouts of 440 unaccounted for disappeared individuals.⁸

To the present day, discrimination in schools and by employers, police harassment, surveillance of and brutality against Sahrawis are understood to be common. These violations have been particularly targeted at Sahrawis advocating for their self-determination, as well as human rights defenders and journalists.⁹ To curb such advocacy, gatherings, freedom of speech, and both mainstream and social media are greatly restricted. In 2024, it was reported that at least 30 peaceful demonstrations

5 Britannica Editors, [Encyclopedia Britannica: Polisario Front](#), 11 April 2026; International Court of Justice, [Western Sahara: Request for Advisory Opinion, Written Statements and Documents \(Volume I\)](#), 16 October 1975; International Court of Justice, [Western Sahara: Advisory Opinion, Written Statements and Documents](#), 16 October 1975.

6 Britannica Editors, [Encyclopedia Britannica: Polisario Front](#), 11 April 2026; Terhi Lehtinen, [The unfinished referendum process in Western Sahara](#), *Journal of African Elections* 1 (1), May 2001.

7 Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders (CODESA), [Western Sahara: The Last Test of the Credibility of the United Nations System](#), 31 October 2025.

8 UN Human Rights Council, [Written statement submitted by Mouvement contre le racisme et pour l'amitié entre les peuples, a non-governmental organization on the roster, A/HRC/51/NGO/10](#), p.3; Working Group on Human Rights in the Occupied Territory of Western Sahara, [Enforced disappearance and Western Sahara: In search of justice](#), 20 August 2024, para. 9.

9 NovAct, [Executive overview of Voices Breaking Free from Repression: Human Rights Violations in Occupied Western Sahara Documented During 2024](#), 6 March 2025, p. 2 (Full Report).

advocating for Sahrawi self-determination were brutally repressed, resulting in arbitrary arrests and injuries.¹⁰ Morocco seeks to police and deter the activities of activists and human right defenders by targeting their homes for surveillance and siege.¹¹

Details emerging from prisons unfortunately support this picture. Case studies indicate that at least four Sahrawi prisoners died in suspicious circumstances while in custody in 2024 alone.¹² During that year, there were also at least 30 Sahrawi political prisoners serving between ten years and life imprisonment, of whom more than 12 had experienced ill-treatment and denial of medical care.¹³ Arbitrary detention remains a well-documented tool used against Sahrawi activists and human rights defenders.¹⁴

Sultan Khaya's case: Arbitrary Detention and Sexual Violence Targeting a Human Rights Defender

Sultana Khaya is a well-known human rights activist and advocate for Sahrawi self-determination. From 2020, Moroccan authorities placed her under arbitrary house arrest for nearly two years. During this time, the house was constantly guarded and raided without a warrant.¹⁵

These raids saw masked security agents, believed to be Moroccan forces, physically and sexually assault Khaya and her family, and commit significant damage to their property. Notably, during one of several 2021 raids, the women were repeatedly gang-raped and beaten by security forces.¹⁶ Khaya was also reportedly forcibly administered unknown substances by injection and inhalation. No medical treatment was provided during her detention, and this remained the case even when she fell ill with Covid-19.¹⁷

Khaya's experience illustrates the use of prolonged arbitrary confinement, sexual violence and intimidation against prominent Sahrawi activists.



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10 Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders in Western Sahara, [The Annual Report on the Human Rights Situation in Western Sahara](#), 17 February 2025.

11 NovAct, [Executive overview of Voices Breaking Free from Repression: Human Rights Violations in Occupied Western Sahara Documented During 2024](#), 6 March 2025, p. 2 (Full Report).

12 Al Jazeera, 10 January 2013; UN, [Non-Self-Governing Territories](#), 9 May 2024; Erica Vasquez [Living under occupation in the Western Sahara: women, resistance and self-determination](#), Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace & Security 6, November 2014.

13 Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders in Western Sahara, [The Annual Report on the Human Rights Situation in Western Sahara](#), 17 February 2025.

14 NovAct, [Executive overview of Voices Breaking Free from Repression: Human Rights Violations in Occupied Western Sahara Documented During 2024](#), 6 March 2025, p. 2 (Full Report).

15 UN Human Rights Council, [Joint Written Statement - Western Sahara: monitor the crimes committed against the Khaya family in the occupied town of Boujdour](#), A/HRC/49/NGO/59, 14 February 2022, p. 3

16 Front Line Defenders, [Woman Human Rights Defender Sultana Khaya Attacked in Her Home](#), 20 December 2021.

17 European Parliament, [Sultana Khaya, Western Sahara/Morocco](#), 2021.

Omar Abdelmajid's case: Death in Custody of a Sahrawi Human Rights Defender

On 3 November 2024, 59-year-old Omar Abdelmajid, a Sahrawi activist, was beaten and arrested by four Moroccan police officers for an alleged drug trafficking offence. He was held in pre-trial detention, and his family were refused access to see him. After three days, they were informed that he had been transported to a second prison, and then to hospital on 7 November. However, the hospital had taken receipt of Abdelmajid's already lifeless body; it is presumed that he died in police custody. Neither an autopsy nor any official information about the circumstances of his death have been provided to his family.¹⁸

Abdelmajid's case illustrates the death of a Sahrawi activist in detention.

¹⁸ NovAct, *Voices Breaking Free from Repression: Human Rights Violations in Occupied Western Sahara Documented During 2024*, 6 March 2025, p. 21; Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders in Western Sahara, *The Annual Report on the Human Rights Situation in Western Sahara*, 21 January 2025, p. 4.

TORTURE IN PROTEST

Longstanding use of excessive force to police protest

Peaceful protests have proven to be a context where Moroccan authorities target Sahrawi activists through the use of excessive force and other human rights abuses with impunity. The right to peaceful assembly is enshrined in both Moroccan domestic law¹⁹ and its international obligations, but assemblies require advance notification and approval from the authorities.²⁰ This discretion has been frequently abused to ban Sahrawi political demonstrations in breach of the right to freedom of expression.²¹ Where peaceful protests do occur, Moroccan authorities have used various violent means of dispersal.²²

Moroccan authorities' response to Sahrawis protesting discrimination at Gdeim Izik: fatal attacks, torture and further repression

A notorious case of the Moroccan authorities' oppression of protesters relates to the Gdeim Izik encampment, established in Western Sahara by Sahrawis to demonstrate their socioeconomic conditions in October 2010.²³ On 8 November 2010, Moroccan security forces attempted to dismantle the camp of several thousand tents, resulting in several deaths. They detained hundreds of protesters, who they then beat and abused once in custody.²⁴ 25 men, many of whom were Sahrawi human rights defenders, were charged with "forming a criminal gang and participating in or being complicit in violence against security forces."²⁵ The vast majority were sentenced to 20 years or life in prison, despite the reported use of torture-tainted confessions. In 2026, the CAT found that the treatment of some of these individuals by the Moroccan authorities constituted torture²⁶ and they remain in custody in poor conditions.²⁷



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19 Royaume Du Maroc [Constitution] art. 29 (Morocco, 1996) ("Freedom to gather and freedom of assembly and peaceful demonstration shall be guaranteed"); Dahir No. 1-58-377, 27 November 1958, Art. 12, 17

20 ICCPR Art. 21 ("The right of peaceful assembly shall be recognized"). Morocco ratified the ICCPR in 1979. OHCHR, [Ratification of 18 International Human Rights Treaties](#).

21 Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, [Concluding observations on the combined nineteenth to twenty-first periodic reports of Morocco](#), 21 December 2023, para. 19.; HRW, [Human Rights in Western Sahara and in the Tindouf Refugee Camps](#), 19 December 2008, p. 88.

22 UN Human Rights Council, [Civil and political rights in Western Sahara](#), A/HRC/19/NGO/69, 22 February 2012, p. 3.

23 HRW, [Western Sahara: Long-Term Prisoners Await Justice](#), 8 November 2022.

24 HRW, [Western Sahara: Beatings, Abuse by Moroccan Security Forces](#), 26 November 2010.

25 HRW, [Western Sahara: Long-Term Prisoners Await Justice](#), 8 November 2022.

26 CAT, Decision adopted by the Committee under article 22 of the Convention, concerning communication No. 871/2018, CAT/C/72/D/871/2018, 28 January 2022; CAT, Decision adopted by the Committee under article 22 of the Convention, concerning communication No. 923/2019, CAT/C/72/D/923/2019, 28 January 2022; CAT, Decision adopted by the Committee under article 22 of the Convention, concerning communication No. 891/2018, CAT/C/74/D/891/2018, 30 September 2022; CAT, Decision adopted by the Committee under article 22 of the Convention, concerning communication No. 999/2020, CAT/C/75/D/999/2020, 3 February 2023; CAT, Decision adopted by the Committee under article 22 of the Convention, concerning communication No. 650/2015, CAT/C/72/D/650/2015, 21 January 2021.

27 UN Security Council, [Situation concerning Western Sahara : Report of the Secretary-General](#), S/2025/612, 30 September 2025, para. 72.

This is not a recent phenomenon. In 2006, the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations (ASVDH) complied with protest notification requirements, before beginning to gather peacefully. As the demonstrators arrived, police beat them with clubs.²⁸

The harassment of human rights organisations like ASVDH has persisted to the present day; for instance, ASVDH members were attacked at a peaceful commemorative protest in early 2025. The attack was followed by members having their homes monitored and later besieged by Moroccan police forces.²⁹

Vehicles as a weapon of torture

Documented incidents spanning more than a decade indicate that Moroccan law enforcement have repeatedly used official vehicles to deliberately strike individual protesters. This practice allows the Moroccan authorities to instil fear and punish Sahrawis through excessive violence without being individually identifiable by protesters or journalists.

This dates back to at least 2006, when Mohamed Boutabâa, a protester for Sahrawi self-determination, was deliberately driven into by Moroccan police resulting in severe injuries.³⁰ In 2019, 24-year-old teacher Sabaj Njourni was struck by two security force vehicles at a demonstration, with witnesses reporting that official vehicles drove on the pavement and against the direction of traffic in their quest to disperse the public.³¹

Like El Ghan's attack, such incidents have been met with a failure of the authorities to investigate and there have been no known repercussions for the perpetrators. Boutabâa filed two complaints with the local court, but following an enquiry made by Human Rights Watch, the Moroccan authorities stated that the case had been closed due to "lack of evidence", and that the claims were "specious complaints that aim to prevent public agents from fulfilling their responsibilities". This was despite not having examined Boutabâa's injuries or requesting further information.³²

Indeed, like those responsible in El Ghan's case, some officials appear to have taken steps to fabricate alternative narratives and to obfuscate the true events in such instances. After a police van drove into 16-year-old Abdelmoula Zaiquer during a protest in the northern Moroccan city of Jerada in 2018, hospital documents fraudulently recorded his injuries as resulting from a "car accident".³³ Reminiscent of the harassment of El Ghan's family, Zaiquer's mother was warned by authorities not to speak to journalists or activists and was subject to surveillance.³⁴

28 HRW, *Human Rights in Western Sahara and in the Tindouf Refugee Camps*, 19 December 2008, p. 90.

29 Front Line Defenders, *Western Sahara/Morocco: Multiple attacks on the physical integrity of Sahrawi human rights defenders and flagrant violation of the right to peaceful assembly*, 4 March 2025.

30 HRW, *Human Rights in Western Sahara and in the Tindouf Refugee Camps*, 19 December 2008, p. 82-83.

31 HRW, *Morocco: Another Crackdown on Protests*, 4 June 2018; Amnesty International, *Morocco/Western Sahara: Investigate brutal crackdown on Sahrawi protesters*, 1 August 2019.

32 HRW, *Human Rights in Western Sahara and in the Tindouf Refugee Camps*, 19 December 2008, p. 82-83.

33 HRW, *Morocco: Another Crackdown on Protests*, 4 June 2018; Facebook, *MarocOnline*, 15 March 2018 (Video of the incident authenticated by HRW).

34 HRW, *Morocco: Another Crackdown on Protests*, 4 June 2018.

DOCUMENTED INTERNATIONAL CONCERNS

Concerns about the human rights of Sahrawis have long been raised by international organisations, human rights NGOs, and individual States. Notably, given its involvement in shaping the recent political history of the region, the UN has also continually documented and expressed concern about the Moroccan authorities' treatment of Sahrawi activists and human rights defenders.

2013

Visit and report of the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture: The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture highlighted that he had found that “torture and ill-treatment had been inflicted during arrest, at police stations and at the prison, and that excessive use of force was used during demonstrations for the independence of Western Sahara”.³⁵

2014

Report of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (UN WGAD): The UN WGAD found that torture and ill-treatment were used to extract confessions from Sahrawi detainees in numerous cases. They also reported that Moroccan law enforcement targeted those believed to be protesters for Western Saharan independence and used beatings and intimidation techniques, arbitrary detention, and excessive force to repress demonstrations. One frequently observed tactic was for Moroccan security forces to assault Sahrawis, and then abandon them in rural areas of the desert region.³⁶

2016

Report of the UN Human Rights Committee on Morocco: The Committee recorded that it was “concerned by reports that the activities of human rights defenders are subject to disproportionate, unjustified restrictions and that human rights defenders’ freedom of movement is limited, particularly in Western Sahara”.³⁷

2019+

Repeated communications to the Moroccan Government from Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council: At least a dozen letters have been sent to the Moroccan Government from Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council since 2019.³⁸ Each details concerns about numerous human rights violations, repeatedly referring to “allegations of repression and continuing violence committed by Moroccan police and security services against Sahrawi

35 UN Human Rights Council, Addendum to Report of the Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, Juan E. Méndez, A/HRC/22/53/Add.2, para 84.

36 UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention: Mission to Morocco, A/HRC/27/48/Add.5, 4 August 2014, para. 63 – 64.

37 Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Morocco, 1 December 2016, para. 41.

38 See, for example: UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders and others, Communication to Morocco, MAR 1/2025, 12 February 2025; UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders and others, Communication to Morocco, MAR 2/2024, 3 January 2025; UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders and others, Communication to Morocco, MAR 2/2023, 24 May 2023; UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression and others, Communication to Morocco, MAR 2/2020, 7 July 2020; and UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders and others, Communication to Morocco, MAR 1/2019, 8 November 2019; many are cited by The Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara in UN experts urge Morocco to stop repressing Saharawis in Occupied Western Sahara, 2 June 2025.

activists, human rights defenders and organisations defending the right to Western Saharan self-determination and Sahrawi identity”.³⁹

2021

Statement of the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders: The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders released a public statement decrying the “intimidation, harassment, death threats, criminalisation, physical and sexual assault, threats of rape and surveillance” of human rights defenders.⁴⁰ She also highlighted cases of arbitrary detention and torture of human rights defenders from Western Sahara in her subsequent report to the UN General Assembly.⁴¹

2022

Concerns of the UN Security Council (UN SC): In its report on Western Sahara, the UN SC discussed the allegations of excessive use of force, arbitrary detention, and the significant curtailing of freedom of expression and association against Sahrawi people, including allegedly through surveillance using spyware.⁴²

2024

UN SC reiterates concerns: The UN SC’s report on Western Sahara two years later noted that, for the ninth consecutive year, the representatives of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights had had their requests for an official visit rebuffed or ignored.^{43]}

CONCLUSION

The repeated warnings of UN bodies and human rights organisations have not brought an end to torture, repression or impunity in Western Sahara. El Ghan’s case underscores the need for those longstanding calls to be matched by stronger, concrete action to protect Sahrawi protesters and activists, ensure accountability, and provide effective redress to survivors.

39 Translation from the original, being “*les allegations de répression et de violence continues de la part de la police et des services de renseignement marocains contre les activistes sahraouis, des défenseurs des droits de l’homme et d’organisations défendant le droit à l’autodétermination du peuple du Sahara occidental et l’identité sahraouie*”; UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance and others, MAR 3/2025, 20 March 2025.

40 Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Press Release, Morocco: UN human rights expert decries “clampdown” on human rights defenders, 1 July 2021.

41 UN General Assembly, Situation of Human Rights Defenders: Note by the Secretary General, A/76/143, 19 July 2021, para. 91-94.

42 This latter is not merely scaremongering. In April 2024, cybersecurity company, Cisco Talos, reported that human rights defenders in Western Sahara and Morocco were being targeted by malware embedded in a news application for Android; Cisco Talos, Starry Addax targets human rights defenders in North Africa with new malware, 9 April 2024; UN SC, Situation concerning Western Sahara: Report of the Secretary-General, S/2022/733, 2 October 2022, para. 78-79.

43 UN SC, Situation concerning Western Sahara - Report of the Secretary-General, 1 October 2024, para. 72.

Photo cover: A Sahrawi woman walks past Moroccan police in Laayoune, Western Sahara. For more than five decades, Sahrawis have endured repression for advocating self-determination, human rights, and freedom of expression.

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REDRESS

Unit G01, 65 Glasshill Street
SE1 OQR, London, UK
+44 (0)20 7793 1777
info@redress.org

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