



- THE COORDINATION OF THE FAMILIES OF THE GDEIM IZIK PRISONERS -
- THE RAFTO FOUNDATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS -
- THE NORWEGIAN SUPPORT COMMITTEE FOR WESTERN SAHARA -



16 May 2022

INVITATION FOR VIRTUAL PRESS CONFERENCE

Press conference with participants from the international mission of jurists for the protection and liberation of Saharawi political prisoners of Gdeim Izik in Rabat.

18 May 2022, 15:00 – 16:00 CET

Zoom: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83905908319> (English, Spanish, French, Arabic)

PARTICIPANTS

- Mr. Bjørnar Dahle, Rafto Foundation and member of the international delegation for the protection of the Gdeim Izik prisoners
- Ms. Kerry McLean, American lawyer and member of the international delegation for the protection of the Gdeim Izik prisoners
- Ms. Laurence Greig, French lawyer and member of the international delegation for the protection of the Gdeim Izik prisoners
- Ms. Claude Mangin-Asfari, French wife of Gdeim Izik prisoner and Saharawi human rights defender Naama Asfari, sentenced to 30 years in prison
 - Family members of the Gdeim Izik prisoners

MODERATOR

Ms. Tone Sørfohn Moe, Norwegian jurist and member of the Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara

HOSTED BY

the Coordination of the families of the Gdeim Izik Prisoners, the Rafto Foundation for Human Rights and the Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara



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INTERNATIONAL DELEGATION TO RABAT DENOUNCES ABUSES AGAINST THE SAHARAWI PRISONERS, GROUP OF GDEIM IZIK

- *From 7 to 10 May, an international delegation of human rights experts, jurists and lawyers met with families of prominent Sahrawi political prisoners (Group of Gdeim Izik) in Rabat (Kingdom of Morocco) and denounced abuses to embassies.*
- *One of the foreign participants of the meeting was denied entry to Morocco.*
- *Alongside the families of the prisoners, a **virtual press conference** is to be organized 18 May 15:00 CET.*

An international delegation on 7 to 10 May met with the families of a so-called Gdeim Izik group – a group of imprisoned Saharawi human rights defenders held in Moroccan jails since 2010. In meetings, the families denounced how their sons, brothers and husbands have been punished for their advocacy.

The 19 "Gdeim Izik" prisoners are prominent Sahrawi human rights defenders who were arbitrarily arrested in 2010 and sentenced to lengthy terms in prison following two trials marred by allegations of torture and numerous other irregularities. They are currently held under brutal conditions in six different prisons on Moroccan's soil and denied medical, legal and family visits.

The Norwegian jurist Tone Sørffonn Moe was on 5 May 2022 denied entry to Morocco by local police at Rabat airport on her way to the meeting. The police explained that she was prevented for "having problems with Morocco" and Norwegian embassy personnel present at the airport was prevented from talking with the expelled jurist. Moe denounces that her expulsion is linked to her human rights work and the condemnation of the Kingdom of Morocco by the United Nations human rights mechanisms that the Kingdom refuses to respect and implement.

For nearly five years and despite fierce condemnation from rights groups and interim measures by the UN Torture Committee, the Gdeim Izik prisoners have been held in solitary confinement, subject to intimidations, threats, racial discrimination, medical neglect and arbitrary deprivation of rights. According to information provided, the prisoners held in Tifelt 2, Ait Melloul (1 and 2) and Kenitra prison is daily subject to psychological and physical violence, with the prisoners held in Tifelt 2 and Ait Melloul (1 and 2) having been held in solitary confinement since their arbitrary transfer of 2017. The families denounced how the treatment of the prisoners is also a punishment to silence the families' voices. During the meetings, the sister of Ahmed Sbaai denounced how her brother had been thrown into a dirty toilet for 10 days in 2017 after she had travelled to the Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria to highlight his case, serving as a stark reminder of what the prisoners in Kenitra prison is exposed to.

On 15 March 2022, news was received that imprisoned Saharawi journalist Mohammed Lamin Haddi had been subjected to torture. The incident was reported by ACAT France¹ and Amnesty International,² informing that he, in response to having declared his intention to initiate an open hunger strike, had been beaten severely whilst handcuffed, had his hair pulled from his beard with pliers and subjected to choking. In meetings, his brother, having visited him in Tifelt 2 prison the same day, denounced how the marks of torture were still visible on his body. Despite his isolation of nearly 5 years and arbitrary violence, the imprisoned journalist told his brother that his only avenue for resistance remains a hunger strike. Mohammed Lamin has initiated several hunger strikes over the past years, but without his situation ever changing.

¹ ACAT France, Mohamed Lamine Haddi Torturé À La Prison De Tiflet 2, 14 April 2022 https://acatfrance.fr/appeal-a-mobilisation/mohamed-lamine-haddi-torture-a-la-prison-de-tiflet-2?utm_source=aam&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=mohamed_lamine_haddi_avril22&fbclid=IwAR32p2RTtGK2w2njWxztfdS32xmlZoESCqSpGxmQP4scFMwrSoaO-s6OzM
² Amnesty International, Morocco: Further information: Sahrawi activist beaten by prison guards: Mohamed Lamine Haddi, 19 April 2022, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde29/5488/2022/en/>



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On 1 April, two of the Gdeim Izik prisoners, Hassan Eddah and Hussein Ezzaoui, commenced on an open hunger strike in protest of the deplorable conditions they are living under. The strike lasted for 30 days. The health of the two was deteriorating quickly; linked to the prisoners already serious health condition after nearly 12 years of medical neglect and inhumane living conditions as well as the effects of torture and scars from past hunger strikes. The aunt of Hassan Dah, Fatimato Dahwara, denounced in the meetings how the prisoners are demanding to be transferred closer to their families, having not had any family visits for over two years with only minutes on the phone each week. Fatimato explained how the family must travel over 1300 km to visit their family members in prison and that they are arbitrarily denied entry. Fatimato is herself a victim of the Kingdom of Morocco, subject to enforced disappearance for 16 years.

The Gdeim Izik prisoners were arbitrarily arrested, tortured, tried and handed long sentences following the month-long protest camp known as Gdeim Izik in 2010 against the Moroccan occupation by thousands of Sahrawi civilians. Three years later, in 2013, the group was brought in front of a Military Court that sentenced them to harsh prison sentences on the basis of unread confessions signed under torture. The sentences were to a large extent confirmed by a civilian court in 2017, before they were upheld by the Moroccan Court of Cassation in November 2020. The situation of the Gdeim Izik prisoners swiftly changed to the worse following the decision rendered by the Appeals Court in 2017, with the prisoners being dispersed into six different prisons, reporting both physical and psychological torture, harassment, and increased isolation.

While in Rabat, the delegation held meetings with embassies, echoing the demand of the families to immediately release the prisoners, to transfer them to a prison closer to their families and to demand a visit from an international delegation. Last time an international delegation visited the Gdeim Izik prisoners was in 2013 during the country visit of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, led by the then President Rapporteur of the Working Group, Professor Mads Andenas.³ Prof. Andenas participated in organizing the May 2022 international delegation for the protection of the Gdeim Izik prisoner and recalls that, “in the visit, the Gdeim Izik prisoners informed of torture and ill-treatment, and we observed the deteriorating health conditions of some of the detainees due to the prison conditions. We also received information that several of the detainees in the Gdeim Izik group started hunger strikes, and that their health conditions were further deteriorating. Their life is now in graver danger than ever before”.

The delegation of international jurists, human rights defenders and observers alongside the families of the Gdeim Izik prisoners will hold a **virtual press conference on Wednesday 18 May, 15:00 CET**, to address the critical situation and demand international action for their immediate release.

³ Report of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention. Mission to Morocco (2013), <https://www.refworld.org/docid/53eb30eb4.html>



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BACKGROUND: THE GDEIM IZIK PRISONERS

The Gdeim Izik group was originally comprised of 25 Saharawi activists, journalists, human rights defenders, political activists, jurists and protesters who were arrested prior to and following the violent dismantlement of the Gdeim Izik protest camp in November 2010.⁴ The members were targeted for arrest and imprisonment due to their role as prominent Saharawi human rights defenders, political activists, and journalists.

The month-long Gdeim Izik camp outside Western Sahara's capital city of El Aaiún, which preceded the Arab Spring and had as many as 15.000 Sahrawis including entire families with makeshift tents. Its main purpose was to protest conditions under the occupation of the Kingdom of Morocco, including fierce repression and social and economic discrimination against the Saharawi population of Western Sahara. Some members of the Gdeim Izik group of prisoners participated in the camp's Dialogue Committee, which held talks with Moroccan authorities throughout the protest. Other prisoners were Saharawi protesters who resided in the Gdeim Izik camp with their families. Currently, 19 of original 25 remain imprisoned.

In his 2011 report on Western Sahara, the UN Secretary General concluded that due to its size, the apparent unification of the Saharawi people and their social demands related to the right to benefit from their own natural resources based on the right of self-determination, the protest camp had the “*potential to alter the conflict's status quo*”.⁵ In response, and in the early hours of November 8, 2010, when up to 15.000 men, women and children were still living in the camp, Moroccan authorities brutally dismantled it and made hundreds of arrests.

In 2013 the Gdeim Izik prisoners were handed down stiff prison sentences by a Military Court; in 2017 they were re-tried by a civilian court that also handed down lengthy sentences later upheld by the Moroccan Court of Cassation in November 2020. Both trials relied on confessions obtained under torture as evidence against the prisoners, sparking widespread condemnation from rights groups. In a July 2017 joint communication, five independent UN experts listed numerous violations: “serious concerns are expressed about the allegations of torture carried out during the custody of the under-mentioned detainees”... “arbitrary detention as well as obstacles to the right of defense of the accused and the lack of independence, impartiality and respect for the accused of the Court of Appeal of Rabat” as well as “the violent dispersal of a peaceful gathering exercising their right to assembly” with the detention and legal proceedings being “linked to their [prisoners'] exercise of their right to freedom of opinion and expression and their commitment to the human rights of Sahrawis”.

Soon before the Moroccan Court of Cassation's November 2020 decision to uphold the lengthy sentences, both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch⁶ called on Morocco to re-try the 19 defendants, decrying the breach of due process and a trial marred by torture allegations. In upholding the sentences, the court ignored these calls. In its newly published Country Report on Morocco,⁷ the US State Department stated that “while the government’s stated aim in creating the council [Moroccan Court of Cassation] was to improve judicial independence, there was limited progress in that regard since its inception as an independent entity in 2017. Human rights activists alleged trials in cases involving [...] Western Sahara, sometimes appeared politicized”.

Between their arrest and their appeal in 2017, the Gdeim Izik prisoners were arbitrarily detained under alarming prison conditions; in addition to the prolonged effects of the torture at the hands of Moroccan police at the time of their initial arrest, their health deteriorated due to the multiple hunger strikes they

⁴ 19 of original 25 remains imprisoned. Four of original 25 has been released on sentence served (Ettaki Elmachdoufi and Sidi Abderahmane Zeyou was sentenced to 3 years by the Military Court in 2013, with Larabi El Bakay and Deich Eddaf sentenced to 6 years by the Court of Appeals in 2017). One (Mohamed El Ayoubi) was released on temporary release on humanitarian grounds, and later died in 2018 due to his complications from torture. One (Hassania Alia) was sentenced to life in absentia and is currently living as a refugee in Spain.

⁵ Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara. S/2011/249. Para 2-10.

⁶ Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, Morocco High Court Reviewing Key Western Sahara Case, 8 November 2020,

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/11/morocco-high-court-reviewing-key-western-sahara-case/>

⁷ US State Department Report, 2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Morocco, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/morocco>



carried out to protest their confinement and treatment in prison as well as medical neglect by prison officials. Once their appeals were denied by the court in 2017, the prisoners' already bad situation worsened. Morocco carried out reprisals against all of them for their open advocacy in favor of the right to self-determination, their protest of blatant breaches of due process and their cooperation with the UN and human rights organizations. In September of 2017 they were dispersed and taken to six different prisons in Morocco. Once there, they reported being subjected to both physical and psychological torture, harassment and increased isolation.

Currently, the prisoners are spread throughout seven different Moroccan prisons:

- El Bachir Khadda, Mohammed Lamin Haddi and Sidi Abdallahi Abbahah are held in Tifelt 2 prison (Tifelt/Rabat)
- Brahim Ismaili, Mohammed Bani, Mohammed Bourial and Sidahmed Lemjeyid, in Ait Melloul 1 and 2 prison (Agadir)
- Hassan Eddah, Houcein Ezzaoui, Abdallahi Lakfawni, Ahmed Sbaai, El Bachir Boutinguiza, and Naama Asfari, in Kenitra prison (Kenitra/Rabat)
- Cheik Banga, Mohammed Khouna Babait and Abdallahi Toubali, in Bouzakern prison
- Mohammed Ebarek Lefkir and Abdeljalil Laroussi, in Tan Tan prison (Tan Tan)
- Mohammed Thalil, in Ain Borja prison (Casablanca)

The families report that the prisoners held in Tiflet 2 and Ait Melloul 1 and 2 prison have been held in solitary confinement since 16 September 2017 and that all prisoners are constantly subject to racial discrimination, threats, intimidations, medical neglect, physical violence and arbitrary deprived of their contact with the outside world. As for Mohammed Thalil, having no family living in Western Sahara but only in the Saharawi refugee camps, no news has been received for the last 1,5 years. The prisoners in Kenitra also suffer from restrictions, discrimination and denial of medical treatment whilst placed under collective isolation from the rest of the other prison inmates, subject to arbitrary punishment in the form of both physical and psychological violence.

The practice of transferring Saharawi political prisoners from the occupied territories of Western Sahara to Morocco proper started in conjunction with the Saharawi uprising of May 2005, called Intifada May, causing great suffering to both the prisoners and their families, who often lack the financial means to visit them. The suffering is aggravated by the fact that following days of travelling, the families are often arbitrarily denied the right to visit or the visit is limited to only a couple of minutes. Saharawi political prisoners are commonly only granted the right to make a phone call twice a week for a couple of minutes (3-4 minutes) to three identified / pre-approved persons. The prisoners often lack the right to communicate with their local lawyers, and report that if they are granted the right to call their lawyers, their calls are monitored by the prison guards. The isolation of Saharawi political prisoners runs in parallel with the systematic racial discrimination of Saharawi political prisoners in response to them being Saharawi and their opinions in support of the right to self-determination for the people of Western Sahara.

As a recent development, the UN Torture Committee recently published two decisions concerning Gdeim Izik prisoners Mohammed Bourial and Sidi Abdallahi Abbahah. As for Bourial, the UN Torture Committee denounced that Bourial had been tortured, being “suspended upside down and given electric shocks, repeatedly beaten and insulted”, subject to “long periods of solitary confinement without being able to be seen by a doctor of his choice” and with “restricted access to his lawyer and family”. Also, in the case of Abbahah, and whilst reiterating its finding on Western Sahara, the UN Torture Committee concluded that “11 years have elapsed since the events and the submission of the first allegations of torture, and no investigation has been opened. The cassation did not change this situation, and the complainant is still detained on the basis of his coerced confession”. Both decisions serve as stark critique of the Kingdom of Morocco and echoes the non-independence and impartiality of the Moroccan judiciary when dealing with cases of Saharawi activists. The UN Torture Committee has previously



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reached the same conclusions in the case of Naama Asfari, whom has been subject to reprisals from the Kingdom of Morocco in response to his cooperation with the UN ever since.

IMPORTANT SOURCES

- [CAT/C/59/D/606/2014](#), UN CAT decision Naama Asfari:
- [CAT/C/72/D/923/2019](#), UN CAT Decision Mohammed Bourial:
- [CAT/C/72/D/871/2018](#), UN CAT decision Sidi Abdallah Abbahah:
- [A/HRC/27/48/Add.5](#), UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, Country Report Visit to Morocco, 2013:
- [20 July 2017, Morocco, AL MAR 3/2017](#), Joint Communication 2017:

RESOURCES

- [Database pictures of the Gdeim Izik prisoners and criminal proceedings](#)
- [Geneva Support Group for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights in Western Sahara, Soon 12 Years of arbitrary detention for the Gdeim Izik Saharawi prisoners, 12 April 2022](#)
- [Amnesty International, Urgent Actions Morocco: Sahrawi Activist Beaten by prison Guards](#)