



CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

Acceptance Speech

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Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, let me at the outset salute The Train Foundation for recognizing and rewarding heroes of conscience the world over. Permit me also to thank the chairman and all the members of this noble foundation for honoring me with this prestigious prize, which recognizes the sacrifices of brave people who risk their lives to defend fundamental human values.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Moroccan army forcibly annexed the territory of the Western Sahara on October 31, 1975. Violating international law, this invasion was also a violation of the process of decolonization of that territory, which had been pushed by the United Nations since the beginning of the '60s. That was the start of the humanitarian tragedy suffered by the Sahrawi people to this day.

At the same time Morocco pursued a policy of repression, to sow terror in the civil population. This policy forced thousands of Sahrawis to abandon their homes. For 34 years, they have been living in refugee camps in Algeria in wretched conditions, dependant on aid from international humanitarian organizations. These dreadful experiences have pushed many Sahrawis to migrate temporarily into nearby countries, such as Mauritania and Algeria, and also to some European countries, notably France and Spain.

Campaigns of kidnappings and arbitrary arrests have hit all Sahrawis without regard to age or sex: old people and young people, women, including pregnant women, and even infants.

Hundreds of Sahrawis were "disappeared" before reappearing years later. The periods of their "disappearances" varied between several months and sixteen years. Some died under torture and the horrible conditions of their imprisonment. More than 500 Sahrawis have been "disappeared" since 1976. Morocco won't reveal what has happened to them.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am myself a victim of this crime against humanity. In 1987, when I was 20 years old, I was picked up by the Moroccan police, and then locked away in a secret center at El Aaiun, the capital of Western Sahara, where I spent four years without any judicial process. Throughout that period I was entirely isolated from the outside world, badly fed, deprived of proper hygienic facilities, and with physical and psychological torture, including

threats of rape and indeed execution. These conditions lasted during the whole period when I was subject to this horrible forced "disappearance."

In order to observe law but also to urge self-determination for the Sahrawi people, non-violent demonstrations unfolded on May 21, 2005 in the cities of the Western Sahara and also southern Morocco, where Sahrawi students were pursuing their studies.

The Moroccan authorities adopted their usual policy of repression after these peaceful demonstrations. Three young Sahrawis were killed while being beaten up on the street by the Moroccan police. The same also happened to some Sahrawi students, murdered last December.

Moroccan repression against civilian demonstrators caused grave injuries in several cases. One person lost his right eye and another became a paraplegic.

These human rights demonstrators have had their homes looted, have been subject to acts of intimidation, arrest, torture, loss of work, thrown out of university, and, indeed physical removal to towns within Morocco. Forty of them, including students, are in prison right now, as I speak. Seven have been arrested in this month of October.

Ladies and gentlemen, I myself, thanks to my work for justice for my people, was beaten in the street on June 7, 2005. After being treated at the hospital at El Aaiun, the Moroccan police arrested me on the basis of a false deposition. I was sent to prison, where I suffered from horrible conditions. For four years I have been not been able to work, and my salary has been impounded. When I go home I may be arrested right in the airport and all my papers may be confiscated.

Ladies and gentlemen, the right of our students to education is being frustrated by repressive practices. Our educational institutions have virtually changed into police stations, where the students are subject to arrest and intimidation.

The economic crimes committed by Morocco in Western Sahara are no less important than the violation of their political rights. Our natural resources have undergone a vast campaign of pillage. Particularly, our fisheries and phosphate mines have been exploited by Morocco, contrary to resolution 1803 of the U.N. General Assembly in December 1966, relating to our permanent ownership of our natural resources.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is time for the international community to renounce its attitude as a passive spectator with regard to the abuses of the Sahrawi population.

All we ask is the right which the United Nations, and also the United States, have repeatedly agreed that we are entitled to, namely a free vote on our future political status.

Thank you.