

Good Afternoon Everyone,

After sitting through the first two days of testimony on the question of Western Sahara I would like to start with a few reflections:

- 1) I have read the news too; news about the violent suppression of Sahrawi protests that took place in 2010 and 2011 in response to ongoing discrimination, poverty and human rights abuses; and news about cancelled UN envoys to Western Sahara due to the objections of Morocco, its occupier.
- 2) I have read history to include that of my country, the United States of America, and its quest to modernize other lands in its image and the pressure the U.S. has exerted on its allies to do the same. This has always been done without the consent of the governed.
- 3) I have also served in the U.S. military, which I legally joined at age 17. Perhaps concerns about the militarization of youth would be better discussed in a forum on this topic? There are groups in the United Kingdom who would like to participate, I am sure, where the minimum age to enlist is 16. Military indoctrination starts at a much earlier age in both the U.S. and U.K.

Ultimately, I am sitting here today because I have traveled to Western Sahara twice this year and I witnessed firsthand the brutal oppression of Sahrawis by Moroccan Occupation Forces.

I went this March with a delegation of unarmed civilian protectors whose presence was requested by Human Rights Defender Sultana Khaya. Her home had been under siege by Moroccan Occupation Forces for over 480 days. We went in an attempt to end the siege on her home, and join the calls for an end to the rapes and for an international investigation into human rights abuses.

During my stay, we took testimonies from Sahrawi women who had been brutalized by Moroccan Occupation Forces. We received reports of children being detained and held overnight with no word given to their parents. We received reports of Sahrawis being denied entry into Boujdour. When I inquired about the right to vote in elections, the response was “what free and fair elections?”

When I departed Boujdour that March, we encountered seven checkpoints in the drive to Laayoune. Bribes for safe passage are common. We later received reports that our driver was punished for transporting us to the airport. Threatening the livelihoods of Sahrawis is common, as are arbitrary detention, arrest, and torture.

In April, I was in contact with the remaining unarmed civilian protectors in Boujdour. We spoke after several Sahrawi women were violently punished for exercising their freedom of speech. One woman was told she would never raise the Western Sahara flag again as the bones in her hand were being broken. We spoke again after the home was rammed in the middle of the night by an industrial vehicle. Whether the intent was to destroy the home and evacuate the inhabitants or kill the inhabitants remains an unclear and disturbing question. We spoke again after a member of the Khaya family was attacked by Moroccan Occupation Forces. A sleepless night was had by all until we learned that he had escaped and evaded his attempted kidnapping.

I attempted to return to Boujdour in May with additional unarmed civilian protectors. We were met at the Laayoune airport by over a dozen Moroccan Occupation officers who denied our entry into Western Sahara and physically forced us back onto a plane to Casablanca. We were told we were free to remain in Morocco, but that we were not welcome in Western Sahara. Our Sahrawi hosts who were at the airport awaiting our arrival would have disagreed, but they weren't allowed to do so.

In conclusion,

- 1) There are rampant human rights abuses being perpetrated by Moroccan Occupation Forces that necessitate an international investigation;
- 2) Autonomy under the conditions of the oppressor is no autonomy at all; and,
- 3) The only way to know what Sahrawis want is to hold a free and fair referendum.

Thank you.