

Information on the voyage to the occupied territories of Western Sahara on 10 December 2019 by Isabel Lourenço and the actions of the Moroccan authorities

In the framework of observing and monitoring the situation in Western Sahara, I traveled to El Aaiun on 10 December 2019.

My work is public I am a researcher at the Center for African Studies of the University of Porto, a member of Fundación Sahara Occidental, a contributor to the website www.porunsaharalibre.org and a contributor to the Tornado online journal. I have participated in United Nations human rights sessions in Geneva, as well as at the United Nations 4th Commission for Decolonization and at events in the European Parliament. Over the last years I have presented my reports and given conferences regularly on this subject.

I carry out this observation and monitoring work on the Western Sahara conflict in the Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria, in the liberated territories of the RASD (Democratic Saharawi Arab Republic), in the Moroccan occupied territories of Western Sahara, and with the Saharawi community in the diaspora (France, Spain and Belgium).

I decided to travel to El Aaiun on December 10, 2019 to contact the family of Ms. Mahfouda Lefkir, who was sentenced to six months in prison for saying (at the end of her cousin's trial) that "it was an unfair trial and only they treated them like that because they were Saharawis."

Ms. Lefkir, who has serious health problems and is awaiting surgery, was beaten while still in the court permisses when she refused to enter a male comun prisoner transport van.

During the same trip I also intended to contact the families of the Saharawi political prisoners of the Gdeim Izik group and Saharawi students and children.

Before the voyage, as I knew of the obstacles raised by the Kingdom of Morocco, as pointed out by the United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, who stated in his report on Western Sahara in April 2019 that access to international observers, members of NGOs and journalists have been barred by the Kingdom of Morocco, I checked if it met the entry requirements required by the occupying power (law 02/03 of Morocco).

As I had the necessary requirements, ie passport valid for more than 6 months, return ticket and hotel booked, I informed of my voyage, not only the Portuguese Embassy in Rabat, but also the Portuguese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the representation of the European Union. in Rabat, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the 4th Commission for Decolonization and members of the United Nations Security Council as it has a Mission (MINURSO) on the ground.

Although the territory of Western Sahara is a non-autonomous territory awaiting decolonization and Morocco has no sovereignty over it (see United Nations, African Union, International Court of The Hague and last three judgments of the European Court of Justice), Morocco is the occupying force and de facto administrator being Spain de jure administrator.

Given that,

I want to mention that:

On December 10th I traveled from Lisbon to Gran Canarias (Las Palmas) on TAP flight and then to El Aaiun, capital of the occupied territories of Western Sahara on ROYAL AIR MAROC flight AT 995 which landed at El Aaiun airport at 4:20 pm local time.

Upon landing the pilot of the plane was informed that all passengers should leave the plane except Mrs. Lourenço which was transmitted to the passengers by a crew member.

The passengers started to leave, and I enquired why I couldn't get off the plane. I was told by a crew member that he did not know and that the pilot had received orders from the "authorities" and he would see what was happening.

The pilot came to me and explained that I could not get off the plane and would have to go on the same plane to Marrakech.

I replied that I had no intention of going to Marrakech, and that I had not bought a ticket for Marrakech but for El Aaiun, where I was going to stay. I also warned the pilot that he could neither hold me on the plane nor send me to another city against my will under these circumstances and that it would be his and Royal Air Maroc's responsibility and that this resembled a kidnapping.

The pilot began to argue with the authorities, from what I understood he was that the authorities were causing them a lot of trouble because they wouldn't let foreigners out of the plane (alluding to the dozens of expulsions from the last two years). My passport was given to the "authorities" and a few minutes later returned.

During this dialogue I continued to slowly approach the exit door as an unidentified man in civilian clothes boarded the plane, telling me that my intentions were political and that I was not welcome. I replied that my intentions were public, to speak and to interview families of Saharawi political prisoners, namely the family of Mrs. Lefkir and the families of the political prisoners of Gdeim Izik, cases that I have been following. I also told him that I would also talk to Saharawi youth and children and that I was not there to represent any political party or organization.

I asked repeatedly to give me some kind of official document stating the reason for prohibiting me to leave the plane as well as to enter Western Sahara.

I explained that I was not in breach of any of the requirements of Moroccan Law 02/03 governing the entry of foreigners, but that if they found that I was in violation of any of the articles of that law, I should be informed of this and of which one.

They did not answer me or provide me with any.

Still inside the plane, a crew member brought a ticket issued in my name to Marrakech, which I refused, as I had not purchased any tickets nor wanted to go to Marrakech, as I had said. At that point I again stressed that I had come from Gran Canarias to El Aaiun and that if I was refused entry my only return destination would have to be the Gran Canarias.

As I maintained that I was entitled to enter the country for the purposes I had informed them, I was told that the representative of all the Saharawis was present at the place and that he would speak to me, and I said that I did not know the gentleman in question and had no interest in talking to him.

I continued forward and got off the plane, getting to the top step of the stairs.

Around this stairway were more than a dozen civilian-clad men as well as two uniformed policemen (one man and one woman).

In front of the stairs but farther away were the passengers waiting to board for Marrakech.

I asked the various men around the stairs who were telling me that I was a persona non grata, paid by Algerians, and a threat to sovereignty, to identify themselves. I was told that they were "the authority" or some identified themselves as "a high official" without mentioning whether they belonged to any branch of the police, military structure, government, or customs authorities, nor their names.

All the while, these individuals were on their cell phones asking for orders, but to the extent that they were given orders that seemed contradictory, they could not agree on what action to take. I repeated the request again for an official document giving me the reason for being prohibited to leave the plane and to enter Western Sahara.

I also mentioned, again, that I was not in breach of any of the requirements of Moroccan Law 02/03 and that if they thought that I was in breach of any of the articles of that law, they would necessarily have to inform me of this, in particular by submitting a document attesting to what is the reason for the prohibition to leave the plane and enter Western Sahara.

They replied that they would not give me any documents.

A man dressed in a daraa (traditional Saharawi male costume) was brought before me and I was told that he was the representative of all the Saharawis and that I had to talk to him. I thanked and said I had no interest in talking to this man, I had never seen him, and that at that point I only wanted to talk to the authorities and understand what was going on.

The exchange with the "authorities" was done in French, English and Spanish since I don't understand enough Arabic to hold any kind of conversation.

The individuals, around 20, continued to address me with single statement, changing from one to the other, saying for example:

"You come attack our sovereignty"

"You are a persona non grata"

"Interviewing is not talking!"

"You need permission to speak with people from the Moroccan Interior Ministries"

"You've learned a lot since your expulsion from February 2015, I remember you"

"We are the authority"

"You can't talk to anyone"

"Your not a tourist, you are welcome as a tourist"

"We will never give you a document"

"You can't talk to whomever you want"

"Freedom of expression is for Moroccan citizens not for others."

Due to the protests of the passengers waiting to board for Marrakech and my refusal to return inside the plane, they took me to the entrance hall, where the passports are stamped, but only "authorities" and a few uniformed officials were there.

I had two cell phones with me, one with Portuguese number and one with Moroccan number, which I bought before the trip due to the high roaming costs.

During the events described above, I recorded audios of what was going on and left a message to my husband explaining that they would not let me off the plane, that was the last message I was able to send.

The cell phone I had in my hand was immediately removed by force by one of the individuals, dressed in civilian clothes and claiming to be an "authority."

Then both my backpack and purse were searched, my other mobile phone and my computer were removed, as well as my passport, which were taken by one of these individuals and taken to an unknown location.

Two female uniformed agents searched my body (without removing my clothes) in a closed room.

This all happened before my passport was stamped by the authorities.

I asked several times to let me contact my embassy, which was refused. I was also refused to contact my family or lawyer.

I asked if I was detained and what was the alleged offense, but they didn't answer me.

After a while (I can't precise the extent of time because I had no watch) one of the "authority" members shouted to me that I had three possible choices:

1st: To remain detained in that room until the following day at 7 pm and return to Gran Canarias,

2nd: Take the 10 pm plane to Casablanca,

3rd: "Take" immediately a taxi to Agadir.

I replied that my choice was to enter El Aaiun, any other situation or decision was not mine and was "their" responsibility and against my will and right of free movement, since they never presented me with any documents or identified themselves.

I reaffirmed that I had a passport with a validity of over 6 months, return flight and hotel booked in El Aaiun, fulfilling the requirements for entry into the country as a European citizen.

After a few more minutes of phone calls and discussion between the "members of the authorities" the same man came back and told me "You will go to Agadir by Taxi!".

They stamped my passport, which was still in their possession, and began to fill out the entry form without asking me anything, but discussing among themselves which square they should mark on the reason for entry (tourism, studies or work) - I don't know what they indicated since I have never seen the form, neither filled out nor blank.

They told me to wait and the bulk of the "authorities" left the room.

After a while I was taken to a civilian vehicle outside the airport, guarded by two "members of the authorities," and driven to a Taxi Square in El Aaiun city.

Along the way, I was told that **"those you want to talk to are not human beings"** and that Spain never developed Sahara as Morocco, that Morocco is an exceptional country, better than Portugal in all respects, and often reaffirmed that **" those you want to talk to are not human beings. "**

Arriving at the taxi square, I was offered a bottle of water by one of the men who had identified himself as a senior official who said, "You can drink, you see it's closed, you can trust."

I did not accept the water bottle.

I was ordered by the same individual to get into a public collective taxi (7 seats), but I refused since I had no passport, no cell phones, no computer, all still in possession of the "authorities".

They told me they would give me a passport after getting inside the taxi and I answered that I wouldn't go anywhere without my passport.

Eventually they left my passport, cell phones, and computer in the taxi, and the same man asked me if I wanted to go to Agadir Matar (Agadir Airport) or Agadir Hotel, and I answered I wanted to go to the Lekouara Hotel in El Aaiun.

The "authority" man shouted to the taxi driver to go to Agadir and 5 unknown men entered getting the taxi fully occupied.

The cab started and we made the trip at high speed, overtaking several trucks at once, on unlit roads and deplorable pavement.

When I tried to turn on the phones, I noticed that the phone with the Portuguese number had been completely reconfigured, not leaving the home screen and in French (before it was in Portuguese). I tried to reconfigure, but it gave error so it was not possible.

The phone with the moroccan number had also been unlocked, reconfigured and all applications had been deleted and I could not access its features. After about half an hour I was able to get the phone to function only to receive and make calls and sms and that's when I received the call from the consular emergency and the embassy.

My sim card had little balance and along the way in both stops to "eat" I managed to install Messenger.

I didn't eat or drink anything at the stops.

We often stopped at checkpoints where documents were requested, in my case the passport.

During the ride the taxi driver received a package which was delivered to another person in an off-road location not on the road to Agadir, bypassing the main road and entering a locality, then backtracking back to the main road.

At 4:00 am, the taxi stopped in a square and I was told it had to leave, as it was the final stop. I asked where I was since I didn't seem to be in Agadir. I was informed that I was in **Inzegane** (12km from Agadir) and had to leave. I paid nothing to the taxi driver, as I had not booked a trip and **forced to make this voyage against my will**, but I also was not asked for any payment.

With no other alternative I went on foot to what looked like a taxi cue and tried to find a taxi to Agadir. I went in a taxi to Agadir asking to go to the Ibis Hotel (French chain) as I did not want to go to a Moroccan hotel.

At the hotel at 5:30 am I requested a room until December 12th, as I no longer had time to buy a ticket that same day to Lisbon, since there are no direct flights.

I went to the hotel room where I had wifi, but still with the misconfigured phones and unable to solve the situation.

My family sent me a return ticket Agadir- Casablanca- Lisbon for December 12th, which I printed at the hotel reception.

On December 12, 2019, I left at 7am from the Hotel to Agadir Airport. I passed baggage checks and at passport control I was told I could not leave the country on the grounds that I needed an exit permit.

I contacted the consular emergency again to explain what was going on.

According to the passport control officer, I would have to go and arrange my departure with the Customs inspector, as there was a problem with my "entry by car". Two other uniformed agents joined the first, saying they were only there to help me.

The last time I entered and left Morocco by car was in 2017, during the trial of the Gdeim Izik group, and since then I have entered and left Morocco, having attended the trial of the Saharawi Student Group "El Ouali" in Marrakech . The car I used on the trip in question, and that left Morocco through Tanger, is parked in front the door of my house in Lisbon, Portugal.

Arriving at the Customs inspector (after leaving one place at the airport and entering another), he stared at the computer for several minutes without doing anything. He then said that I had to wait for him to remember the password. I informed him that I was going to call my embassy again, and that I had a plane to catch.

He then began to say that the license was already there and quickly filled out a blank form, then demanded the license plate number of the car. I replied that it was strange, especially since I had not entered by car, but by air from Gran Canarias, and that if there was a problem they didn't know the plate number, to which he replied to provide the registration of the car I had entered in 2017. Since I did not know the registration, I called my husband to go see the license plate of the car, which, as I had already mentioned, was in front of the door of my house in Lisbon, Portugal.

The Customs inspector filled out the rest of the form and I asked for a copy, but he refused, saying that I was not entitled to a copy.

I returned to passport control, going through all baggage controls again. They stamped my passport but gave me no copy of the permit and claimed it was a "pending matter".

Arriving in Casablanca, I was waiting several hours for the flight to Lisbon, shortly before boarding the plane, my mobile phone with the Moroccan number was stolen from my purse.

We arrived in Lisbon with delay.

This account is a summary of the events on my trip to speak with the families of saharawi political prisoners and young Saharawis that could not be accomplished by the circumstances described above.

Morocco and its "authorities" have never acted in an official manner, never identifying themselves, nor ever giving any kind of document concerning the various actions.

They violated privacy by checking my phones and computer, but even more grave was the fact that they uninstalled and deleted their content, including a banking app.

The forced taxi ride to Inzegane resembles a kidnapping, with the "authorities" making sure that I was incommunicado with totally misconfigured mobile phones, and there was no guarantee of security since I was with 6 strangers and was taken to a place that was not indicated by the "authorities". The fact that I was in touch with the embassy and consular emergency as soon as I could get one of the phones working was no improvement to the situation despite the kindness of all the staff that spoke to me.

The arbitrary retention I have been subjected to for more than three consecutive hours incommunicado is contrary to the European Convention on Human Rights, in particular Article 5 (1). The Kingdom of Morocco has agreements with the European Union whose fundamental pillar is respect for human rights which have been clearly violated in this case, and there is an impediment to freedom of movement, association and assembly adding to the arbitrary retention. Also the universal charter of human rights was not respected as well as International Law.

Moroccan "authorities" have made it clear that everything that goes on in the occupied territories of Western Sahara is not to be seen, heard, let alone reported. It was also clear

from the various statements throughout my arbitrary detention that they do not regard the Saharawi as "human beings" and that "freedom of expression is for Moroccan citizens only".

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