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ZAHRA SAHEL (Batul)

Zahra was born in 1982 in Tan Tan and currently resides in El Aaiún in the occupied territory. She actively participates in the Saharawi association to protect the Saharawi culture and heritage.

Zahra began her activism at the age of 17. From this young age, Zahra witnessed cases of kidnappings, arrests and beatings. In 2005, she took part in the *intifada*, which had its strongest support in her neighborhood.

In 2010, Zahra was returning from a visit to the Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria, accompanied by 71 other activists. They encountered harassment, degrading treatment, and humiliation at the airport upon their return home. When the activists arrived at El Aaiún, the police were waiting for them. The authorities cleared the airport, allowing all other passengers to depart first. The police conducted thorough searches, specifically targeting national Saharawi flags. Activists were forced to remove their clothing under orders.

Gdeim Izik

Zahra was among the thousands of Saharawis who participated in the Gdeim Izik protest camp in 2010. Alongside other activists, some of whom are now serving lengthy prison sentences, were responsible for raising awareness about the national cause. At the start, the demands behind the protesting camps were socio-economical, but it slowly turned political. The police had a checkpoint that led to the area where the protest took place, and they had lists with names and pictures of the Saharawis who had recently been in the refugee camps. Those on the list were denied entry to the protest area. Zahra managed to enter either by masking her identity or by concealing herself beneath piles of luggage in the back of a Land Rover.

The night before the attack on the protest camp, Zahra went to the market in El Aaiún city. When she wanted to return to the camp, the police denied her entry. As news spread about the brutal attack on the camp, the entire city erupted in protest, with many individuals waving the Saharawi flag in solidarity.

Since that time, Zahra still suffers from shortness of breath and allergic reactions triggered by strong smells. She attributes these issues to the moment she was suffocated by the tear gas the police used. The gas had made her suffocate, and after regaining consciousness, she returned to the streets. During that distressing time, Zahra

witnessed the police brutally beating young Saharawis who were raising flags. She observed the youth being arrested, with the police carrying them away in police cars.

A video of Zahra after she was attacked brutally by the Moroccan forces



Work opportunities

Like other activists in the occupied territories, Zara faces challenges in securing employment or accessing social benefits. It is a common dilemma for activists like her to avoid public jobs altogether to evade the constant need to compromise or become a target of pressure and blackmail from authorities. The Moroccan government employs various tactics, including violence, threats, and rewards, to coerce activists into ceasing their activities. Zahra was promised to get whatever she wished in her life if she stopped her activism. They said she doesn't even have to say "long live the king", and it would be enough if she just stopped and remained in her house.

The defamation

In the systematic slander campaign run by the Moroccan secret intelligence website activists, Saharawi families and all their networks become targeted victims of rumours. One common rumour alleges that activists receive money from the Polisario Front, a claim that Zahra strongly dislikes.

Targeting sensitive areas to avoid documentation

To avoid documentation, the police now target hidden areas of female activists' bodies. Knowing very well that due to religious and cultural reasons that expect modesty and decency, women would either never take pictures of it or hesitate to share it with the public.

Interviewed and written by Asria Mohamed