

# Western Sahara: Living Dangerously Under Moroccan Occupation

By André Dao



Centre Director Professor Joseph moderates a question from the audience while Aicha Dahane (centre) and Dr. MacQueen (left) look on.

The troubled region of Western Sahara has been a disputed territory since before Spain ceded control to Mauritania and Morocco in 1976. In 1991, a ceasefire was negotiated between the Polisario Front, the Saharawi national independence movement, and the Moroccan government, promising a referendum of self-determination for the people of Western Sahara. Two decades later, the referendum has still not occurred, and Western Sahara remains under Moroccan occupation. Aicha Dahane, international officer of the Forum for the Future for Saharawi Women, spoke at a Castan Centre event to a keen audience about her personal experiences growing up in Western Sahara.

Ms. Dahane began by expressing her sincere thanks to the audience for listening to her story. She was born in Western Sahara and spent what she described as a difficult childhood there. When she was twelve, her twenty-year old eldest brother, Brahim, was abducted by the Moroccan government. He spent four years in prison without being charged, let alone facing trial. During that time, Ms. Dahane and her family had no knowledge of his whereabouts or his safety. His eventual release in 1991 was attributable in large part to the pressure exerted by international organisations like Amnesty International on the Moroccan government. But as Ms. Dahane acknowledged, the day of her brother's release was a bittersweet one, given that more than 500 political prisoners remained unaccounted for.

Although Ms. Dahane was able to study law at Rabat University in Morocco, she told the audience that as simple an act as wearing her traditional clothes could draw hostile attention. Eventually, she was forced to seek asylum in the UK in 2002 which meant that she was not able to finish her law degree although she had completed three years of the four year course. However, this was not the end of her family's trouble, as Brahim was arrested again in 2006 and held for six months without charge after being involved in a demonstration at which a Saharawi man was beaten to death for raising a Western Saharan flag. In 2009, Brahim was again arrested with six others (known as the Casablanca Seven) at Casablanca's airport on their

way back from visiting the Saharawi refugee camps. He was released on bail on 18 April 2011 after 18 months imprisonment.

Ms. Dahane, who had just come from Western Sahara and Morocco where she had been giving evidence at Brahim's trial, spoke passionately about her brother's plight and the struggles of her people. She said that the Saharawi are treated like second-class citizens who do not even benefit from their own natural resources. In fact, one of Western Sahara's major natural resources is phosphate, which Ms. Dahane was surprised to learn was imported by three Australian companies – Incitec Pivot, Wesfarmers-CSBP and Impact Fertilisers. She urged the audience to put pressure on these companies to stop all practices which support the Moroccan occupation, including the importation of phosphate.

Dr. Benjamin MacQueen, from the School of Political and Social Inquiry at Monash University, then spoke briefly about the international legal framework surrounding the dispute in Western Sahara. According to Dr. MacQueen, the situation is framed by two UN resolutions, the first being resolution 1514 in 1960, on the granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples. The second was resolution 2229 in 1966, which was a binding resolution on Spain to organise a referendum of self-determination in the Territory. Spain duly conducted a census in 1974 which would later become crucial to plans for a referendum, but by 1976 control was handed over to Morocco in violation of UN's doctrine of decolonisation. Despite the establishment of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara in 1991, a referendum has still yet to take place. The three options for a referendum, if one was to take place, would be independence, autonomy within Morocco or integration with Morocco. An audience member raised the issue of the historic ruling of the International Court of Justice of 16 October 1975 which affirmed unequivocally that Morocco had no historical or sovereign title over Western Sahara and that the indigenous Saharawis were entitled to exercise their inalienable right of self-determination in accordance with UN General Assembly resolution 1514.

The event ended with a lively and spirited question and answer session. In particular, one audience member questioned Ms. Dahane's claim that the Saharawi people constitute a distinct culture from the Moroccan people. Ms. Dahane's response drew appreciative applause from the audience as she argued that although the Saharawi people are in fact a distinctive culture, they will always be neighbours with Morocco. She finished by saying that any long-term solutions in the region must therefore involve both independence for Western Sahara and a better working democracy in Morocco.

**Aicha Dahane's visit to Australia was supported by the Australia Western Sahara Association.**