



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Aminatou Haidar hunger strikes in protest of detainment, Western Sahara, 2009

15 November

2009

to: 16 December

2009

Country: Spain

Country: Western Sahara

Location Description: *Laayoune Airport and Lanzarote Airport*

Goals:

Freedom from detainment

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 121. Refusal of public support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) › hunger strike and refusal of medical care

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) › hunger strike and refusal of medical care

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) › hunger strike and refusal of medical care

Methods in 4th segment:

- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) › hunger strike and refusal of medical care

Methods in 5th segment:

- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) › hunger strike and refusal of medical care

Methods in 6th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support › letters of support from Amnesty International
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast) › hunger strike and refusal of medical care

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- human rights activist

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Aminatou Haidar

Partners:

Not Known

External allies:

Amnesty International

Involvement of social elites:

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton; Pedro Almodóvar, film producer; Javier Bardem, actor; French President Nicolas Sarkozy

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Amnesty International

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Joining order of social elites is not known

Segment Length: 5 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Moroccan government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

Not Known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

1 point out of 3 points

Western Sahara is one of the last remaining land disputes regarding decolonization issues. It was previously a colony of Spain until 1975, when the native Sahrawi people were promised a vote of self-determination. However, Morocco annexed the territory despite a ruling in the international court of justice that rejected this claim of sovereignty. A sixteen-year-war between Morocco and the Sahrawi nationalist Polisario Front resulted, eventually ending in 1991 with a ceasefire and an agreement to hold a UN-sponsored referendum on independence. But Morocco never allowed the vote of self-determination to take place, stating that autonomy was the best available option. Within Western Sahara, talk of independence was completely taboo, and it was dangerous to even mention Sahrawi identity; thus the Polisario Front set up a self-proclaimed government in exile in refugee camps in southwestern Algeria. On November 6, 1991, Moroccan King Mohammed VI hinted at harsh action towards anyone in Western Sahara still questioning the Moroccan claim of sovereignty.

As a result, Aminatou Haidar, Western Sahara's most prominent human rights activist, has risked her life several times in pursuit of self-determination. One of her actions for Western Sahara occurred in November 2009 when she went on a hunger strike at Lanzarote airport in Spain once she was expelled from her home country by Moroccan authorities. Haidar was on her way back from the United States, where she was given the 2009 Civil Courage Prize, which was awarded for her struggle for the Sahrawis' right to self-determination. On November 12, 2009, the government detained her in Western Sahara's Laayoune Airport when she gave her home as "Western Sahara" instead of "Moroccan Sahara" on her landing card. Then officials interrogated her about her travel and her political opinions and affiliations. Once the questioning was finished, these officials confiscated her passport and identification card and detained her in the airport overnight.

On November 14, Moroccan officials offered to release Haidar if she publicly acknowledged Morocco's "sovereignty" over Western Sahara. She refused this option and was consequently sent to Lanzarote airport in the Canary Islands. Starting on November 15, Haidar began a hunger strike in protest of her detainment, and the denial of her rights to return to her homeland. Her family said that she became physically weak during this time, because her only consumption for over a month was sugar water. Furthermore, she had particularly risky health because she had anemia and a stomach ulcer. In addition to her hunger strike, she also refused to take her regular ulcer medication. She stated that she would carry on her hunger strike until the Spanish and Moroccan governments allowed her to return to her home or until she died.

In Lanzarote, Haidar rejected the offer of Spanish citizenship or refugee status, insisting on her right to return to Western Sahara. Because of her refusal to accept these proposals, the Moroccan government kept her confined to the airport and this created diplomatic tension between Spain and Morocco, Western Sahara's former and present occupying powers.

During her hunger strike, Haidar gained support from Amnesty International as well as several social elites. United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Spanish film producer Pedro Almodóvar, and Spanish actor Javier Bardem all took up her cause. In fact, Javier Bardem claimed that José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Spain's Prime Minister, should be blamed if she died

on Spain's soil. As her health continued to decline, French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, intervened and asked Morocco to return Haidar's passport. In addition, on December 11, Amnesty International wrote a letter to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, which urged him to continue his efforts of ensuring Haidar's return home. Amnesty International also reemphasized its desire for the inclusion of a human rights monitoring component in the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, which had been in place since 1991 to monitor a ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario Front and to conduct a referendum on the status of the territory.

Finally, thirty-two days after she began her hunger strike, Morocco reversed Haidar's expulsion. Although the terms of the deal were unclear, the Moroccan government said it agreed to a request from friendly countries and partners to allow her re-entrance. Haidar told Amnesty International that her return was "a triumph for international law, for human rights, for international justice and for the cause [of Western Sahara]."

Research Notes

Sources:

"Morocco Must Allow Human Rights Activist Aminatou Haidar to Return Home." Amnesty International. Web. 05 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.amnesty.org/en/appeals-for-action/morocco-must-allow-human-rights-activist-aminatou-haidar-return-home>>.

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