

A total of 925 Sahrawi NGOs active in the fields of human rights and development in the Moroccan Sahara have underlined the “normal character” of the situation of human rights in the southern provinces, welcoming “an area of freedom” governed by an evolving and credible institutional and legal framework”.

“As Sahrawi organizations operating freely on their soil and in their country, Morocco, we underline the normal nature of the human rights situation in the Moroccan Sahara”, these NGOs stress in a letter sent to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet.

“What is certain is that we are working in a promising and evolving context and that we also have an area of freedom governed by an evolving, credible, legal and institutional framework”, they add. These 925 human rights organizations noted that they are engaged in close and constructive interaction with the National Human Rights Council (CNDH), as a national institution in full compliance with the Paris Principles and which has regional commissions working on the ground.

Indeed, the CNDH and its regional sections “accompany and support our work to enable all citizens to fully enjoy all their rights”, they explain, highlighting the positive interaction with their national, local and regional officials and their sincere determination to promote and protect human rights. They also denounced the adoption by the “Polisario”, alike its Algerian mentor, of a contradictory approach to the issue of human rights, as they use it for political ends and consider it as a tool for propaganda and pressure to promote their separatist project.

While launching an offensive propaganda speech against Morocco and spreading baseless allegations on the situation of human rights in the Moroccan Sahara, the “Polisario” and Algiers paradoxically refrain from providing the most basic data on the situation of human rights in the Tindouf camps. “Do we have to believe that Algeria and the Polisario are more aware than us, the NGOs working on the ground and living with the Sahrawi population, of the human rights situation in the Moroccan Sahara? Is it reasonable to accept, in return, that the population held in the Tindouf camps can fully enjoy all their rights and freedoms?”, they wonder.

The Sahrawi NGOs noted that “all these elements are irrefutable proof that the attitude of Algeria and the Polisario on the issue of human rights is mainly motivated by considerations of propaganda and political pressure in the context of the regional conflict over the Moroccan Sahara”. The letter regrets that the other parties to the conflict “do not hesitate to increase the attempts to destabilize our

southern provinces by manipulating some of our young people to push them into a violent confrontation with the security forces, so that they can use them in sordid media campaigns.”

These NGOs recall that the High Commissioner herself had met supporters of the “Polisario” who travelled with Moroccan passports to Geneva where they organized activities hostile to the Kingdom before coming back to the Kingdom without any harassment. They wonder in this context: “How many opponents from inside the Tindouf camps have had the opportunity to meet you and then return to the camps?”.

They also recalled that in July 2018, the Human Rights Committee had expressed its concern over Algeria’s contempt for its obligations and responsibilities in accordance with the requirements of international human rights and international humanitarian law, by handing its judicial powers to the Polisario. The Human Rights Council has also expressed concern about the inability of Sahrawi victims of human rights violations in the Tindouf camps to seek justice before the courts of the State Party, the letter points out.

NGOs have called it an “anomaly” to keep thousands of people isolated from the outside world for more than 45 years, regretting that those held in Tindouf camps are left at the mercy of a non-governmental entity that exercises its control over these people with impunity, through armed militias that commit all forms of human rights violations against a population which is “vulnerable and stuck in a no man’s land”. The letter notes that the testimonies of Saharawi survivors have mentioned thousands of victims following summary and extrajudicial executions, arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances, torture and rape, which affected men, women and even children by separatist militias.

Human rights organizations have considered that the pretexts provided by Algeria to justify the illegal renunciation of its jurisdiction are “legally and morally unacceptable”, given that the responsibility to ensure the respect and protection of human rights, in accordance with international law, is that of the State party, rather than non-State actors. They recalled that no depositary of special procedures mandate who went to Algeria had previously visited the Tindouf camps, adding that independent international organizations are banned from visiting these camps.

“Only those who take positions in favor of Algeria and the Polisario are allowed to go to the camps,” they said. They also stressed that “the truth on the ground

cannot be measured by the scale of the propaganda or by the spread of allegations which are promoted within international human rights mechanisms in order to influence, or rather to mislead public opinion.

“In conclusion, these Sahrawi NGOs reiterated their full support for the autonomy proposal presented by Morocco “as a solution that can put an end to this artificial conflict between brothers and safeguard our dignity and our freedom”, calling on the High Commissioner to communicate their observations to the Human Rights Council and the UN Secretary-General (MAP).