



## Former Refugees in Washington, DC this week speak out for thousands still held in Polisario camps

**Washington, DC (May 5, 2008)** – This week, a group of former Sahrawi refugees held by the Polisario Front in southern Algeria—some for their entire lives—have come to United States to meet with US government officials, media, and human rights organizations. Their mission is to speak out on behalf of their own families and the tens of thousands of other refugees still being held in the tightly-controlled Polisario camps.

Among the group of former refugees are: **Naba Deddah El Meki** (a former Polisario humanitarian aid coordinator who witnessed systematic corruption and theft), **Naha Al Salek Sidi** (a handicapped mother of two, who was used by the Polisario to solicit medical supplies from international NGOs – supplies which were subsequently sold), **Salma Essalek** and **Said Abderahman** (a pregnant woman and her husband who made their nighttime escape through a minefield, chased by Polisario soldiers), **Al Afia Hammidi** (a mother of five who, with the assistance of UNHCR, last week won the battle to force the Polisario to return her two youngest children) and **Brahim Al Selem** (a former Polisario police officer who was imprisoned for speaking out against the Polisario, and who has first-hand knowledge of secret prisons for unwed mothers, and the extensive smuggling and contraband network operating in the region).

Their testimonies are hardly unique; they represent hundreds of similar accounts witnessed by international organizations, such as the UN High Commission for Refugees and the World Food Program. Too often, the Polisario Front has used the Western Sahara political impasse to distract attention away from this on-going humanitarian crisis. In fact, just two weeks ago, the UN Secretary General's Personal Envoy for the Western Sahara, Peter Van Walsum acknowledged that there is also a "moral dilemma" to the situation and lamented that the intolerable status quo is "too readily accepted [. . .] by deeply involved supporters of the Frente Polisario, who do not live in the camps themselves [. . .]."

"It is vital for the international community to be aware of these inhumane conditions and denial of refugee rights under international law, including the most basic freedom to leave the Polisario controlled refugee camps," said Robert Holley, Executive Director of the Moroccan American Center for Policy. "The overall situation in the Western Sahara is not merely a political conflict, but an unconscionable humanitarian crisis that must be addressed."

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**The Moroccan American Center for Policy (MACP)** is a non-profit organization whose principal mission is to inform opinion makers, government officials and an interested public in the United States about political and social developments in Morocco and the role being played by the Kingdom of Morocco in broader strategic developments in North Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East.

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