



Jesuit Refugee Service – Europe

The Treatment of Migrants in Morocco: A reflection after following deportation convoys

By Josep Buades SJ

Who were the migrants deported from Ceuta and Melilla?

They were citizens of several sub-Saharan African countries. A large number of them were irregular migrants trying to reach Spanish territory. There were also asylum seekers, people who had been expelled from Spain and two students with valid visas to study in Morocco. The migrants were mainly men, but there were also women, children and infants.

In view of this, the deportations done by Morocco can be regarded as collective expulsions, which are prohibited by protocol 4 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

To where were they deported?

Contrary to the usual practice of the Moroccan authorities, which send migrants to the North-East border close to Oujda, this time the migrants had been abandoned in desert areas further south. Three places should be identified:

- *Ayoun Chouatter* (between Bouarfa and Errachidia)
A rocky desert at the foot of the High Atlas, where Morocco has a border dispute with Algeria. Some migrants managed to escape north along the road towards Oujda or between Errachidia and Meknès, while the others were found lost in the desert. 12 of them died.
- *Beyond Smara*
Inside the Occidental Sahara, the desert itself becomes more dangerous and added to that there are mines put there by the Moroccan army and the Front Polisario. Many of the abandoned migrants were saved by the Polisario, others by the Moroccan security forces. I learnt this from a woman before she died, whose husband and child had been detained at camp of Guelmim.
- *Bir-Gandus*
It is located in the military zone in the south of the occidental Sahara. The migrants who were sent south through the occidental Sahara were given to the Senegalese authorities here. A dozen of migrants from Cameroon are now lost in Dakar, Senegal.

We may conclude that the Moroccan authorities are willing to prevent migrants from going back north whatever the consequences, even if it leads to death.

What were the conditions of the deportations?

The convoys were made up of a succession of buses rented by Moroccan security forces, and were escorted by the jeeps of the royal military police. The deportees were hand-cuffed. Only when the buses broke down were the migrants allowed to leave it. Because it was Ramadan, the

migrants received neither water nor food during the journey. This included the children. After some children developed diarrhea and vomited, they were given some milk. If adults became ill, they had to make do with bread and water.

Did these conditions change?

Following testimonies from people following the migrants, and the efforts to raise awareness of the issue among the public, the Spanish government had to manage this crisis in co-operation with Moroccan authorities. Following this, there was an improvement in the conditions of deportations. However, they never fully complied with human rights standards. There were only small changes, for example: instead of abandoning migrants in the middle of the desert, Moroccan authorities sent them to military camps while they awaited deportation to their country of origin.

The conditions of detention in these camps were never good, especially since the UNHCR (UN refugee agency) for a long time was not allowed to visit migrants identified as asylum seekers. Moreover, the students, although they had a valid visa to stay in Morocco, were deported to their country of origin. Some migrants were moved from one camp to another. Recently, deportations to Algeria took place again at the border close to Oujda.

Can Morocco be considered a 'safe country' for migrants?

The events detailed above put this into question.

Can the European Union conclude a re-admission agreement with Morocco?

The EU announced after the dramatic events at Ceuta and Melilla that it intends to conclude such an agreement by the end of the year. The events detailed above show that this would expose migrants to flagrant violations of their human rights.

Viaje al desierto

