The Defense Forum Foundation

"Justice for Africa's Last Colony: The Struggle for Human Rights and Self-Determination in Western Sahara"

Introduction:
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President,
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Kate Kelly,
Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights

Speaker:
Aminatou Haidar,
Sahrawi Human Rights Defender

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SUZANNE SCHOLTE: Good afternoon. If I could have everybody’s attention, I want to welcome you to our program today. I’m Suzanne Scholte. I’m president of the Defense Forum Foundation, and it’s a great pleasure to welcome you to our forum.

Before we begin, I want to acknowledge members of our diplomatic community who have joined us today. We have with us our dear friends from the Embassy of Algeria, Mohamed Benazzouz; the deputy chief of mission, Dr. Yazid Bouzid over here. We also have Ihcene El Naouq and Hafida Djaoud; my brothers from the Sahrawi Republic, Ambassador Bukhari Ahmed; Mohammed Yeslem Beissat from the Sahrawi Republic, which is a government recognized as the Western Sahara by over 70 nations.

I also want to recognize my friend Michael Bee of Nonviolent International. Michael and I have led protests in front of the Moroccan Embassy when today’s speaker was being prevented from going back home. In fact, John Bolton – Ambassador John Bolton joined us at one of them. I also wish to recognize a new friend, Niemat Ahmadi, who founded the Darfur Woman Action Group and is an internationally recognized human rights activist. Niemat is over here. We’re really honored to have you with us today.

It’s very fitting for us to have so many friends from Algeria with us because the lecture today is given to recognize the efforts of a Muslim leader who embodies the spirit of the great Algerian, Emir Abd el-Kader. The emir was a scholar and intellectual, a devout Muslim, a freedom fighter, and a great leader and humanitarian. Not many people know about this great man, but like our speaker today he maintained respect for human dignity despite the horrors committed against his people by those who invaded his country.

For Abd el-Kader it was the French. For Aminatou Haidar it is the Moroccans. Emir Abd el-Kader led the Algerian Muslims in their resistance from 1830 to 1947. Despite his people being massacred and burned alive by the French, he ordered that no prisoner that his army captured be harmed in any way. And furthermore, in respect for their religion, he insured they had access to Christian priests while they were prisoners.

As the author of “True Jihad,” John W. Kiser wrote, “Over 100 years ago, before the signing of the Geneva Convention, the emir demonstrated the meaning not only of the rights of prisoners but also of the innate and inalienable dignity of the human being, whatever his or her religion.” When the emir was exiled to Syria, he saved the lives of up to 15,000 Christians when his followers protected them from an anti-Christian uprising. The French, his former enemies, gave him the Legion of Honor, while Pope Leo IV, President Abraham Lincoln and Queen Victoria all sent gifts of appreciation to him.

With all the atrocities being committed in the world today, we need that same spirit of Abd el-Kader. I’ve worked in human rights issues for nearly 30 years and I have never met a more remarkable people than the Sahrawis of Western Sahara or a more just cause than what they seek: the simple right to self-determination. Having been invaded by their neighbor, they have fought for 40 years for something that was first promised to them by Spain, affirmed by the International Court of Justice, and then promised once again by the United Nations in 1991.

The Sahrawis have relied on the rule of law, the justness of their cause. And despite the atrocities and injustices committed against them every day by Moroccan authorities, they have worked through peaceful, nonviolent means to press their cause. And even furthermore, they have pledged that they would be good neighbors to Morocco. So this is a cause that’s not against Morocco. It’s very pro-Morocco. It’s pro-Maghreb. It’s pro-freedom. It’s pro-advancement in that region and the end of this unjust and illegal occupation of Western Sahara.

Every day Sahrawi human defenders are in constant and terrible danger in Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara, which is why that area is known as one of the world’s worst regions in the world. It is very fitting that today we have with us one of the most known and most admired Sahrawi human rights defenders, Aminatou Haidar, to give us the Abd el-Kader Lecture as her noble actions reflect his same spirit. I’m very honored also
to have with us from the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Human Rights Kate Kelly, who is going to give the introduction of our distinguished speaker.

Kate. (Applause.)

KATE KELLY: Welcome, everyone. And most welcome to Ms. Haidar today. We’re honored to be at her side and to advocate for the protection of human rights in Western Sahara. Aminatou is president of the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders, CODESA, an organization that reports violations of human rights in Western Sahara.

In 2008, Ms. Haidar received the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights Award for her courageous nonviolent work promoting civil, political, social, and cultural and economic rights of the people of Western Sahara, including the rights of freedom of speech, freedom of association, and to self-determination.

Ms. Haidar is called the “Sahrawi Gandhi.” This is due to many things, but one of them is her commitment – her lasting commitment to nonviolence – her continual commitment to nonviolence despite the violence that has been perpetrated against her, her family, her friends and her loved ones. She is steadfast in her advocacy for a nonviolent solution.

Since 1975, in defiance of a ruling by the International Court of Justice, Morocco has continuously occupied Western Sahara. Through nonviolent means, Ms. Haidar has denounced the human rights violations against the Sahrawi and advocated for the fulfillment of the right to self-determination.

In 1987, for participating in a peaceful, nonviolent demonstration, Ms. Haidar was arrested and spent four years in a secret prison. There she was brutally tortured and was never charged with a crime or taken to trial. She was kept blindfolded throughout the duration of her detention and suffered permanent health effects. She continued her activism in the defense of the fundamental rights of all Sahrawi people despite these hardships and repeatedly suffered the consequences for speaking out against Moroccan human rights violations.

In June of 2005, Ms. Haidar was brutally beaten and injured by the police during a demonstration in El Aaiún, the capital of Western Sahara. She was arrested at the hospital after receiving 12 cranial stitches and treatment for three broken ribs. She served seven months in 2005 in the Black Prison in El Aaiún. There she and 37 other political detainees began a 32-day hunger strike to demand improved detention conditions, investigations into allegations of torture, and the release of all political prisoners.

In the fall of 2009, upon returning from a visit to the United States much like this one, the Moroccan government forcibly removed her passport and expelled her from Western Sahara to the Canary Islands, in violation of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights. In response, Ms. Haidar went on a hunger strike that ultimately lasted 32 days, garnered international attention, until she was allowed to return to her country, Western Sahara.

I recently accompanied Aminatou to a visit to the European Parliament in Brussels, and while there she showed her strength but also her charity. I saw her take time to be concerned with people who were homeless in the city. I saw her give what very little money she has to a homeless person on the street. Poverty and injustice everywhere are her concern. Aminatou is not only a woman of courage and conviction; she is a woman with inspiring compassion. She is a hero to us all.

Welcome, Aminatou. (STANDING OVATION AND APPLAUSE.)

AMINATOU HAIDAR: Good morning. (Through translator.) Ladies and gentlemen, dear guests, first and foremost I wish to thank the Defense Forum Foundation for having invited me and giving me the honor to
be today amongst you in the United States Congress to make a speech in the framework of the Abd el-Kader Lecture. I am very proud to talk to you in this forum of democracy in the United States, the United States being a country whose revolution was among the first in the world to formally recognize the right to self-determination for all peoples, and which is still, in the 20th century, upholding the rule of law.

And I am speaking today in homage to the great Muslim leader Emir Abd el-Kader, whose noble ideas and human behavior during the colonial era and during the plight that his country, Algeria, lived through continued to guide, for more than a 150 years, generations of Muslim leaders, enlightened in their peaceful fight for the promotion of the values of peace and freedom in their country. And I also have to tell you that I am very touched when I learned that the Defense Forum Foundation qualified my own fight for self-determination of the Sahrawi people as a noble fight inspired by the enlightened ideas of the Emir Abd el-Kader.

Ladies and gentlemen, since the Moroccan illegal occupation of my country, Western Sahara, on October 31st, 1975, Morocco systematically violates all aspects of human rights. Thus the Moroccan regime has terrorized the civilian Sahrawi population.

Thousands of civilians found themselves forced to flee the occupied territories of Western Sahara to save their lives and join the members of their family who were already fighting in the popular freedom army of the Sahrawi people. During their forced march through the desert – they had to march at night to evade the patrols of the Moroccan army – elderly Sahrawi civilians died, and because there was no medical care, several women who were breastfeeding had their babies fall sick and die as well. Their provisional encampments were detected by the Moroccan army and they were bombed by the Moroccan air forces using banned bombs – that is to say, napalm bombs, bombs using white phosphorus, and fragmentation bombs. Dozens amongst those civilians died due to their wounds, and others continue to live with these wounds that are still severe and that will never fully cure. Those that made it to the end (and reached safety) have, for the last 38 years, lived in difficult conditions in the refugee camps for the Sahrawi in Tindouf, in Algeria, so this tore the Sahrawi people in two.

As for the Sahrawi civilians who were not able to flee the occupied territories of Western Sahara, they still continue to live under the strong repression of the Moroccan regime. Hundreds of Sahrawi civilians were kidnapped by the Moroccan authorities, and the times of their incarceration has varied, going from a few months to 16 years. They were sequestered in secret places in Morocco and in Western Sahara, where they suffered corporal torture as well as mental torture. Dozens amongst those kidnapped civilians died under torture, and we still don’t know the fate of 526 amongst them who have been kidnapped since the ’70s.

Morocco continues to commit these violations to human rights, this under the oversight of the Mission for the United Nations for the Organization of a Referendum in Western Sahara, which has been present in the non-autonomous territory of Western Sahara since the date of the cease-fire in Western Sahara – that is to say, since September 6, 1991. These violations to human rights have continued to be committed even after the creation in Morocco of a National Council for Human Rights, which is supposed to protect both the Moroccan and the Sahrawi society against violations to human rights. This council for human rights was presented by the Moroccan state, and the embassies of Morocco as being a Moroccan mechanism to protect human rights corresponding to the standards of the Paris Declaration on the constitution of national institutions for human rights, but in actuality, this institution is not upholding the principles of the Paris Declaration.

These violations to human rights continue to be systematically committed by the Moroccan authorities against the Sahrawi civilian population, despite constant appeals to respect human rights in Western Sahara that have been presented in the annual reports of the State Department on the situation of human rights in countries of the world, as well as in the reports of various international organizations protecting human rights, such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, The Robert F. Kennedy Center, the International Federation for Human Rights, Frontline Defender, amongst others, and also despite the adoption of resolutions in the Security
Council and regular reports presented by the secretary-general of the United Nations on the situation in Western Sahara directed to the Security Council and calling for the respect of human rights in Western Sahara.

Ladies and gentlemen, to protect the civilian Sahrawi from repression committed by the Moroccan authorities and guarantee that my people can freely live with their legitimate rights, my organization – the Collective of Sahrawi Defenses for Human Rights, CODESA – has constantly demanded the creation of a U.N. mechanism that would be tasked with upholding and protecting human rights in Western Sahara.

So as I was saying, we are constantly demanding the creation of a U.N. mechanism to uphold human rights in Western Sahara, and this has in turn become a demand of international human rights organizations, but there are a few powers that are members of the Security Council that still oppose the will of the international community that demands the respect of the legitimate rights of the Sahrawi people through the creation of a U.N. mechanism to protect human rights.

This was the case in April 2013, when these global powers unfortunately refused to support in the Security Council of the United Nations a draft resolution presented by the United States on expanding the mandate of MINURSO to surveillance of human rights in Western Sahara. Faced with this opposition from these international powers, the Security Council could not pass such a resolution. Therefore, the international community did find a consensus on Resolution 2099, adopted on April 25, 2013, by the Security Council, which appealed to improving the human rights situation in Western Sahara, designing and implementing independent and credible measures guaranteeing the full respect of human rights, keeping in mind the obligations stemming from international law and the promotion and protection of human rights in Western Sahara.

Despite the adoption of this resolution by the Security Council, Morocco continues to violate the most fundamental human rights in the occupied territories of Western Sahara. These human rights violations committed by the Moroccan state against civilians continues to be the concrete proof of the non-improvement of the situation of human rights in Western Sahara – this contrary to the stipulations of Resolution 2099 adopted by the Security Council and the commitments by the Kingdom of Morocco, amongst others, in the implementation of the recommendations of the U.N. Council for Human Rights of 2008 presented in a framework of the report on the working group on Morocco, and also in contradiction to what is presented in the 2012 report on the Kingdom of Morocco.

Even after the adoption of this resolution by the Security Council on Western Sahara, Morocco continues to not uphold its commitments in terms of respecting human rights in Western Sahara, and thus, the Moroccan state continues to use excessive force against those who demonstrate and peacefully claim for their rights, and this use of force has led in some cases to severe wounding.

CODESA did a survey of the violations of human rights committed against the civilian population by Morocco during the period from April 26, 2013, to March 18, 2014, and our conclusion is that it shows no real will from Morocco to respect human rights in Western Sahara. During that period there were 75 peaceful demonstrations that were violently repressed by the security forces and the paramilitary Moroccan forces, which caused many victims among the Sahrawi demonstrators. There were 912 victims, as follows: 458 women, 399 men, 28 children and 27 people with disabilities. I have a report here that I can distribute after my speech.

The Moroccan state is still arbitrarily detaining Sahrawi civilians who peacefully express their political opinion in favor of self-determination and peacefully demand the right by the Sahrawi people to sovereignty over their natural resources. Several of these political detainees were put on trial, but there are many who were arrested, severely beaten, and then set loose without ever appearing in front of a court of justice. When there is a trial, there are often severe irregularities and abuses, so it is not a fair trial, and the Moroccan justice system does not seem to be independent.
I’m still talking about the period after the adoption of Resolution 2099 that goes from April 26, 2012, to March 18, 2013. During this period, one Sahrawi civilian was tried by the court of the Moroccan Royal Armed Forces, despite the fact that the Moroccan authorities had committed to no longer try civilians in military court.

There have been 80 political detainees, as researched by CODESA, since Resolution 2099 was passed: 32 in provisional detention, 24 were released under provisional conditions; there were six minors – four of them remain detained, and two provisionally released; and seven prisoners that were released after serving their time. Amongst them is one woman who spent one month in prison on a hunger strike.

I have to remind you that today there are more than 70 political prisoners in the various Moroccan prisons and prisons in Western Sahara, amongst them 21 prisoners who were condemned in 2013 by a Moroccan military court to long sentences going from 20 years to life. These political prisoners continue to live in horrendous conditions in prison – this despite the commitment by the Kingdom of Morocco on improving the conditions of incarceration.

Ladies and gentlemen, torture and degrading treatment continues to be committed against the civilians who are arbitrarily arrested by the Moroccan intelligence services, which goes against the universal principles on torture and is a violation of the Moroccan code as well. In several cases, children and Sahrawi women who were arbitrarily arrested were then subjected to degrading treatment. The Moroccan justice has still not investigated any cases of torture and degrading treatment, despite the numerous complaints presented by the Sahrawi victims. The Moroccan security forces involved in these acts of torture still benefit from impunity and in some cases have been promoted. In this period from April 26 to March 18, there have been more than 80 complaints against the security forces, but no investigation. There has been no follow-up whatsoever. There is one member of the Moroccan security forces who has been the object of 365 complaints to the Moroccan authorities, but he remains in Western Sahara and he still gets promoted.

So I myself have complained several times against members of the Moroccan security forces, but instead of opening up investigations into the matter, the Moroccan government says that I’m at fault because I am inciting the population in violent uprising against the government. The minister of the interior of Morocco actually has accused me personally, on May 6 last year, in the Moroccan Parliament.

In the occupied territories of Western Sahara, all forms of freedom of expression and the forming of associations are still banned by the Moroccan authorities. The main Sahrawi associations to defend human rights – that is to say, CODESA and the ASVDH – still have no right to legal recognition. In the occupied territories of Western Sahara, the socio-economic rights of the Sahrawi civilians are also not respected by the Kingdom of Morocco. This has led to a worsening of the difficulty of living conditions of most of the Sahrawi civilians – this despite the fact that the mining resources of Western Sahara continue to be exploited illegally by the Moroccan state and its Western partners without the Sahrawi people benefiting from this, and this despite the fact that these resources belong to the Sahrawi people. This will certainly affect the economic interests of generations to come in Western Sahara.

On the other hand, the Moroccan state continues to encourage hatred against the Sahrawi in the media. These campaigns are organized by the Moroccan media, by most of the press of the political parties, unions, and by certain sectors of Moroccan civil society. In this climate of intolerance, there have been attacks committed by Moroccan civilians against Sahrawi civilians, which puts at risk upholding peace in the occupied territories of Western Sahara.

The worsening of the living conditions and alarming situations of human rights in the occupied territories of Western Sahara has created amongst the Sahrawi civilian, and more specifically among the youth, the feeling, on the one hand, of a distrust in the promises made by the Moroccan authorities, as well as in the promises made by the international community, as to the improvement of their social and economic living
conditions, as well as the emergence among Sahrawi civilians of a feeling of despair that in the future could be a catalyst for a violent response which could lead to a destabilization in the Northwest of the African continent.

Believe me, it is difficult to hide my bitterness when I think that my country, Western Sahara, is still the last non-autonomous territory in the African continent. This at a time when the free African peoples have celebrated last year the 50th anniversary of the African Union.

Morocco, unfortunately, benefits from the support of certain global powers, including France, and still refuses to respect human rights in the occupied territories of Western Sahara and to align itself with the international rule of law and give the people of Western Sahara the right to self-determination. Therefore the people of Western Sahara are disappointed when they see that certain world powers continue to support the Moroccan political position regarding the conflict in Western Sahara and do not participate as global powers and support the implementation of a peace plan for Western Sahara or support the adoption of the Security Council resolution that would lead to the creation of a U.N. mechanism to uphold human rights in Western Sahara.

We must protect ourselves against an eventual violent retaliation by my fellow countrymen of all generations and any situations of despair pushing the youth of my country to demand that the people of Western Sahara benefit from self-determination and sovereignty over their natural resources through extremist ideas leading to destabilization of peace in the Maghreb region. As a citizen of Western Sahara and as a defender of human rights, I am informing the U.S. Congress on the human rights situation in Western Sahara, and I’m solemnly calling on the Congress to do more to allow my country to benefit from self-determination and sovereignty over its human resources.

Ladies and gentlemen, one has to note that these violations to human rights committed by Morocco against the civilians of my country do not respect international law, generally speaking. And these violations of human rights directly stem from the political and military conflict in Western Sahara since its occupation by Morocco on October 31st, 1975. And I believe that these violations to human rights will only end after peace has been established in Western Sahara and the Sahrawi people have been allowed to live under self-determination.

Given the fact that the situation of human rights is worsening in the occupied territories in Western Sahara, given the fact that Morocco continues to not respect its commitments to improving the situation, given the commitment by the U.S. Congress to promote human rights, and given the influence that the United States Congress can have on the foreign policy of the United States, I am calling upon the U.S. Congress to concern itself more with the situation of human rights in the occupied territories of Western Sahara – so I am asking Congress to concern itself more with the situation of human rights in the occupied territories of Western Sahara and concern itself with the exploitation of the mining resources of Western Sahara. In particular, there are U.S. companies which continue to prospect for mining and oil resources and which continue to date to import hundreds of thousands of tons of phosphates from Western Sahara. This continues despite the fact that Western Sahara has clearly been excluded from the free trade agreements between the United States and the Kingdom of Morocco.

I’m also kindly asking the U.S. Congress to more effectively commit the United States to getting involved with respect to the human rights in Western Sahara by the adoption by the Security Council of a resolution guaranteeing that a U.N. mechanism will be tasked with monitoring the situation of human rights in Western Sahara and the creation of a U.N. mechanism on the monitoring of natural resources of Western Sahara and to find a peaceful and lasting solution to the conflict in Western Sahara guaranteeing the right to self-determination of the people.

Ladies and gentlemen, to conclude, I would like to take advantage of my presence here to thank the United States government for having presented on April 2013 in the Security Council of the U.N. a draft
resolution on broadening the mandate of MINURSO to monitor human rights in Western Sahara. I thank the United States for all of its efforts to successfully conduct the negotiations between the Kingdom of Morocco and the representative of the Sahrawi people, the Polisario Front, to find a peaceful solution to the conflict in Western Sahara, allowing the Sahrawi people to vote on self-determination. I continue to believe in the will of all the free countries, the will to put an end to the suffering that the Sahrawi people have been living through for the last 38 years. I thank you. (Applause.)

MS. SCHOLTE: I want to give her this certificate. I want to read it to her. This is to acknowledge with great appreciation the delivery of the Abd el-Kader lecture on Capitol Hill on Monday, March 24th, by Aminatou Haidar, the Sahrawi human rights defender.

The Abd el-Kader lecture is an honor given to a Muslim leader who has worked for freedom and human rights in the same spirit as Abd el-Kader, who won praise from world leaders, including Queen Victoria and President Abraham Lincoln, for his noble actions through the French occupation of Algeria, and for his compassion and humanity while in exile when he saved the lives of Christians.

Haidar was chosen to give the Abd el-Kader lecture because her noble actions in the face of great injustice and persecution embody the same spirit as Emir Abd el-Kader. We recognize this remarkable woman and award-winning activist, Aminatou Haidar, known as the Sahrawi Gandhi, for her peaceful advocacy for self-determination and human rights in Western Sahara, despite her torture and imprisonment in Morocco’s prisons. (Applause.)

Now, I also want to let her know that I was trying to think of: what can you do to help a human rights activist? And Michael (Beer) knows the one thing you can do to help a human rights activist is give them support. So I’m pleased to say that we raised a thousand dollars for the CODESA that we’re going to present Aminatou later on today.

I just want to acknowledge some of the people that helped support this donation. They were Mary Lynn Qurnell, who helped make a donation, Gare Smith, who helped make a donation, Jeb Carney, who’s not here today. But I want to point out that, for those of you who are as old as I am, Mary Lynn was a long ago – worked for Senator Jesse Helms; Gare Smith worked for Senator Ted Kennedy and also served in the Clinton administration in the State Department. And this shows the depth and breadth of support for this cause, that it goes across party lines, and that we have to remember that. (Applause.)

In conclusion, Sahara libre! (Laughter, applause.) Thank you.

I also want to say we’re making a recording that’s going to be shown in the refugee camps, so they will hear everything that was said today.

Thank you all for coming. (Applause.)

(END)