



BETWEEN THE STRONG SAND AND WHITE
SNOW LIVES MY HOPE FOR A
FREE SAHARA

A NORWEGIAN HOPE JOURNEY

BY ASRIA MOHAMED TALEB

All photos by **Elisabeth Stubberud**, except

the two portrait photos of Asria which are taken by **Øyvind Sundfør Stokke-Zahl**.

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Dedication

My hope for this book is this: That one day I will wake up and be able to say: I am Asria from Western Sahara, I am not from a refugee camp.

I hope that all the Saharawi one day can go back to our country without fear.

I hope one day I can point my finger at the map and people will understand that Western Sahara is a country and not a part of Morocco.

I hope our children will read this book in a free Western Sahara as part of their parents history.

I hope that our children will never live the same life that we have done.

I hope one day we succeed as human beings to build a world based on trust, peace and freedom.

The bomb in Oslo happened during the time I was writing this book and I decided immediately to dedicate the book to the Utøya victims and their families as a step of solidarity. The victims of Oslo and Utøya were facing a new kind of violence. The victims were like the Saharawi people innocent.

For all the innocent souls who were killed at Utøya and to all the broken hearts after this tragedy I dedicate this simple book.

Asria Mohamed Taleb,
Bergen, October 2011.



Foreword

There are more links between Norway and occupied Western Sahara than we usually think of. Every time you eat a Norwegian salmon chances are that some of the fat in that fish will have come from fish caught (illegally) in the occupied areas of Western Saharan waters. Every time you eat a bread chances are that some of the phosphorus came from mines in Western Sahara.

The Rafto Prize in 2002 was awarded the Saharawi human Rights defender Sidi Mohammed Daddach and it was here in Bergen he first saw his mother after more than 25 years in detention. Norwegians have known about the situation in Western Sahara since then. Norway could clearly do more to support the Saharawi people in gaining sovereignty over their own country. A solution should be found quickly. Climate Change is making the life in the Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria even harder.

Here is another link. Asria Mohamed Taleb is the first Saharawi to live in Bergen. After spending a year at Red Cross Nordic United World College (RCNUWC) at Fjaler outside Bergen, she got a job with Médecins Sans Frontières as a fund raiser in Bergen. She has used her time well and in her spare time written this book which gives a rare insight into the life in the refugee camps in Algeria where most of the population of Western Sahara now lives.

After solving the issue of the Indonesian illegal occupation of East Timor, Western Sahara should now have been on top of United Nations priority list of unsolved situations. The case of Western Sahara should be equally clear as the case of East-Timor.

Kai Grieg, Information Officer

United Nations Association of Norway, Western Branch



A Norwegian Hope Journey

Since I arrived here in Norway I have never slept peacefully. Neither have I enjoyed the beauty of this wonderful country because I have felt it as a sin: How can I sleep, eat and breathe comfortably when I know that my people in the refugee camps can not?

Many of my friends have told me that I am lucky since I have been chosen to be part of the Peace Corps exchange project (Fredskorpset), but the reality is totally different. I have a heavy responsibility on my shoulders: I am a messenger. I should tell people about all the sad faces, all the deprived children and all the bored youth back home. I should tell them about the most forgotten people in the world. I should tell people that Saharawis are refugees living in the middle of the Sahara desert, one of the hottest places on earth!

Before I came to Norway I imagined that I could do so many things to bring happiness to all those sorrowful souls. I imagined Norway as the land of my dreams even though I had never heard of or met any Norwegians. I already had a good feeling about this country. I had daydreams about what I could do to make the life of my people better, what I could do to bring hope for a better future for them.

It has been both amazing, interesting and useful to attend the Red Cross United World College in Sunnfjord. Through it I had the opportunity not only to teach and learn about different cultures and people from all over the world, but also a great opportunity to tell two hundred youths from eighty countries about the conflict in our country, about our life as refugees. During this year Galia who also was in Peace Corps programme and I have been to different places to tell about our situation but as I mentioned I never felt that it is enough. Especially when I noticed that only a few people in Norway have heard about Western Sahara. I have spent all this year thinking about something to make me live in peace with my self; I tried to contact organisations because I thought that was the easiest way to inform people,

but I failed most of the times for many logical reasons. However, I never thought that one day I would give up, simply because I felt that the moment of truth would come sooner or later. I should not give up because only a few of us have had the opportunity I now have, and it is my responsibility to be a messenger even though no one told me to be one.

I have spent many nights awake. I have felt bitterness because I know I have the energy. I know I am in the right place at the right time to do something but I could not find my way. I do not have the power, money or contacts to make my mission possible, until one night I remembered what my mother had told me when I was in primary school; "Asria, with your pen you can do anything". At that time my mom meant that education is the only tool to cope with life, because as a non-educated person my mom always tried to make sure that my siblings and I were always at the top in our classes. Indeed, this advice inspired me. In the end I will be able to do something, I told myself. Yes, I replied to myself. Now I have something I own, something I love to do more than anything else in the world. I have my words even though I still need to improve it. But as always I will find my way to reach people's emotions. It's a simple thing to do but it is better than to do nothing; using my own



words, my own experience as a refugee and my own point of view I have decided that I will try to solve this challenge by being a journalist.

In this small book, I will collect from my memories different stories from my life as a refugee to highlight a situation of neither peace nor war. A situation that is definitely forgotten by the media just because there is no war to bring media attention to. However, the media should know that behind the truce there is a lot of suffering and pain, they should know that there are voices that need to be heard.

Maybe just a few people will read this book or maybe no one at all. Maybe it is like that because it is written by a person who is not famous in the world of authors. Maybe no one will read it because it is not a fancy love story. Maybe no one will read it, because it is written in a poor language. But I believe that one day this book will convince one person to try and to help, or work, to solve the situation in my country. Every single word in this book is written with honesty! It is written with the hope that one day someone will use a few moments trying to understand what is behind these simple and poor words. In spite of having different tongues, we humans share the same emotions. Language cannot be an obstacle if we talk through our hearts. I wish that when you read this book, you try to read it with your heart and don't let the language be an obstacle between you and me. I know I should have waited to write this book until I had improved my writing skills. However, I had no choice because someone should start.



My first impressions from Norway

We had arrived in Oslo from Algeria – that was already an adventure! We stayed overnight and then missed our flight to Førde. So we traveled during the night for 10 hours by bus from Oslo to Førde, then drove to Flekke and the RCNUWC where Galia and I would be staying for one year. On the journey I was wondering, “What does Flekke look like?”, “What’s the College like?”, “Can I live with all these people?” - Thousands of questions came to my mind, but the one constant thing in my mind and my heart was that I would always keep in my heart the sufferings of my people.

I spent the time uncomfortable with travel sickness, both on the plane and in the car and I cried many times when I remembered my people, our children, our difficult life. All these sad memories gives me new energy to make the lives of my people better, even though I don’t yet know how - but I am sure I will do it! I will remember my people in every beautiful place I see, in every new and strange food I eat, in every new place I visit. I will always carry my people in my heart. I think that my part in this exchange program came by grace and I wish to say “Thank you!” to The Peace Corps from me, and on behalf of my people. What the Peace Corps does for dialogue, exchange and understanding of other cultures is really wonderful.

When you are born in a desert with nothing, you don’t know anything different - but you are happy because you think that this is the world that every person knows.

Then I discovered that we do not have so many of the things that everyone else have.

The life of the refugee is not like the life of other people: in our difficult life we never play like other children in the world; in our hard life we never eat like other children in the world; in our poor life we never have the chance to buy games.

Once I got to know the way that other people live, I told myself that these things were not really important, but when I came to Norway I realised that we miss so much in life.

In our life we don't know what it means to live an ordinary life.

It is the responsibility of the Saharawi youth to educate themselves and take the opportunities to be in different situations. If we do, maybe we can make the life of our people better, and tell the world about our situation which is the result of long years of colonialism, and long years in exile.

But now I want to describe my first impressions of this beautiful country - Norway. It seems to me to be completely unique - it's a place where you see people of different colours, religions, cultures; it offers an example of the coexistence of civilisations, and the evidence that we can live together, despite the multiplicity of our backgrounds.

We arrived in Førde and there we met our Peace Corps project coordinator Edmund (Galia and I called him 'Dah' ('father' in our dialect) because he took care of us like a father!) When we were on the way to Flekke, Galia couldn't stop talking about the beauty of this country. I was like her but couldn't talk a lot because I couldn't find the words to describe this amazing land. How could I find words to describe something I have never seen before?

It took an hour from Førde to the College and then we were at the school.

Oh! It's not a school – it's a paradise, a magical place! We were very tired, but we didn't feel it because we wanted to explore this place, and we found it so much more than we expected! Everything you could wish you will find it in this College. In those moments we were so excited about the school.

After two weeks at the College – learning about the Project, about the college, about Norway - we traveled to Oslo for a Peace Corps Preparation Course (which is given for all participants of FK exchanges) and it was another interesting experience with this organisation that has given us this chance. We came back to RCN and suddenly all the students arrived - 200 students from 80 different countries! It's a chance to meet the whole world in one year, in one place. What happened with the beauty and organisation of the school happened also with the people - we found them to be so much more than we expected: friendly and with open minds and a great desire to know and to learn from others.

It happened that the first weeks of the term was a special time for us Muslims, as it was Ramadan – the holy month of fasting. We shared this beautiful Ramadan experience with Muslims from many different countries, and we also had the chance to explain Ramadan to people who had never heard about it. I was so happy to have this experience here - it was different for us, and interesting except the 18 hours of fasting required by the long Norwegian days - which is something neither the school nor Peace Corps could do anything about!

At this college we discussed so many different topics, topics that I never could have imagined that I would talk about! In the college we were learning how to give to people, and receive, all at the same time.

In this college school you don't only discover others, but you also discover yourself.

So, finally "Thank you!" to everyone who helps, even a little, to keep this college a beautiful example of cooperation between human beings, and I hope that Peace Corps will continue this program with my people of Western Sahara. Because without this project it would not have been possible to write this story and shared it with you!



The Fire

I will never forget that very dark and cold night, a typical refugee camp night in the winter. On this specific night I was in our tent with my four siblings and my mother, and we were playing around the light, which was made of a gas bottle, to do our homework.

That night we had dinner and everyone went to bed in our tent. My two sisters and I were sharing the same place and my mum and my baby brother slept there too. My mum asked my brother to take the gas bottle and then turn it off. It was in the middle of the tent but my brother refused to do it. My mum insisted, so he held the top of the gas bottle and suddenly we heard a strong sound and we saw fire, oh! I can still remember that sight very clearly. I can remember the voice of my mum screaming, looking for us inside the burning fire. I do not know how I survived. I just found myself far away from our tent. The night changed to day because of the fire, and in that moment I heard my brother shouting loudly and painfully and I realised what he was saying. I was lost. I did not understand anything in that moment because it happened in seconds. Then I ran back to our tent. People running from all sides screaming loudly: we need water! And others were wondering if there were any survivors. While I was running I saw someone burning and I discovered that it was my mother, who was holding the gas bottle and trying to throw it away. She wanted to protect us and she did not feel that she was burning. She thought that we were still in the tent but thank God my brother and I escaped but my older sister burnt her hair when she came back to save my two younger brothers; Senia and the baby.

My mum did not know all that and she was running around holding the gas bottle until someone took it away from her.

The fire was everywhere, people were crying painfully. Hours later the fire had stopped and everyone had gone to their houses. My mum and my brother went to

hospital and I was waiting for them until I fell asleep. I got up the next day and I found everything had changed, all our belongings had become ash. The picture I will never forget is when I saw the face of my mum. She looked different with burnt and bulging eyes. I did not sit beside her those days and it was the same for my brother who had burnt his face too.

The next summer my mother was lucky, because she was selected to be monitor for kids in Peace-holidays in Spain. My brother had the same opportunity, and they were treated there.

I learned a lot from that day. I learned how people can fear for the people that they love when I saw my mum holding the burning gas bottle. Whatever you face is easier if you have people who care about you.

This experience made me hate the fact that we live in a place where there is no security. If there is no security there is no life.

This memory has always strongly motivated me to study and work to change our conditions and to make other people know about it.

Whenever I remember this story I thank God a million times and I realise how lucky I am.

Under the Bergen rain

Very cloudy day and heavy rain, people from different places in the world, people running away to hide from rain, they hate it, they complain about they cannot enjoy their summer.

Every time it rains I feel contradicting emotions. The first one is how rain inspires me to write and describe all the incredible feelings while I am enjoying the rain. On the other side there are moments I want to cry, moments when I want to see my tears fall down as the rain, it brings me all the sad memories in my life.

Maybe it sounds crazy and I do not know if that has happened to other people, but this is why I love rain; sometimes it makes me a queen dancing in daydreams and other times it makes me a prisoner of my sadness and the bitterness of my life as refugee.

The first time in my life I saw rain was in refugee camps. I remember the confused faces of adults when it seems that it will rain. They were happy to receive rain after a dry year in one of the hardest places in the world to live, but you could also see the fear in their eyes. I did not know why, but it was not long before I discovered the reason. I was nine years old. Suddenly our teacher asked us to run fast to our families. We were very afraid because we did not know what would happen. we were so afraid. The sky was black and the sound of thunder was so strong that day that it became dark very early.

We ran very fast and it was raining heavily. I imagined that it would be impossible to arrive to our tent. hold our hands, said my older brother and his friend, and run fast. We were running so fast I did not know if we were running or flying !

When we arrived we found our family trying to take what they could to bring with us to the top of the hill closest to our camp.

Just minutes later everyone were at the top of the hill struggling to survive. It was not safe there either but we had no other choice.

Moments later everything changed. It was as if the nature was angry; wind, cold rain. I had never seen the sea before at that time and I even did not know what it looks like. But in that time I could imagine it. Flood was destroying all the brick houses taking the tents with it. I was not brave enough to stand and look with the others. Why was this rain taking everything from us? They are simple things but they were all what we owned. I was cold and I stayed in wet blanket. I stayed because I thought that all that we have now are just those blankets. Every second people screamed «That house has gone» but the hardest thing was when everyone went calm at the same time. We feared that some people were still down there because they had not heard what the local police had said about the expected flood. Everyone were praying ; God have mercy ! A lot of men volunteered to help to make sure that no one were still down there .All the people worked together as one hand, and no one died or were injured .

The next day the rain left but it left behind it damage; everything destroyed, everything dirty. People were upset when they saw that the rain had taken all that they had had. This rain had come to other camps too (Laayun), and there it was worse than for us. Many people suffered from cholera because of dirty water after the heavy rain. We were so sad about all the people who died because of this disease and afraid that it might transmit to us too.

As result of these dark memories, I can not manage to forget. How can I forget children's voices crying, how can I forget when my mom told us that if we heard any noise of water in the night to hold her arm and legs. I was not like the others. I was able to understand at that time that my mom was trying to make us feel safe. But actually no one felt safe neither my mother nor her seven children. How can I forget the sad faces of our parents when they could not answer our questions when we asked when we would go back to our home, to our classes.

Hold on to my arms and legs! It has become a joke after that tragedy. But it was always for me an example of sacrifice and a way for my mother to provide protection for her children. Therefore I will fight tooth and nails to provide better and safe future for our children. In addition to this dark memory I am proud to remember the collaboration and solidarity among the people. I am proud to remember how people helped each other, how they gave things even though they needed it to those that were victims of cholera.

This is one of my memories with rain, and every time it rained in the camps it scared me. I remember that misery. After that time, rain in the camps became as a nightmare to me. I hated their sound on our simple roof, their sound on our tent .I did not like it because I knew that it was stronger than them. It is not like here, where everything is built to face water and wind and with a plan for all conditions. All that we had was prayers for God to help us to protect us from the rain and wind.

I did not like rain because I do not like to see my mother worry about how we could find money to rebuild our house and who would do it. She already had many things to worry about ; our daily life.

Apart from the rain , the refugee camps are located in one of the most warmest deserts in the world with 45 to 50 degrees Celsius in the summer and below zero in the winter. The camps are expected to be affected by the climate change with increased temperatures.

I did not write this to make people, organisations and companies offer air condition for these refugees and I will not mind about that since it will make people's life better, but I wrote for all the politicians, the human rights organisations to be aware that we should make steps to solve this conflict !

We should take the baby

While I was presenting the news, my colleagues waived to me to signal that I had a phone call. I had a bad feeling about it. It was very early in the morning and as soon as I finished the news I called back. It was my cousin asking me to go to the hospital with my sister. The national hospital was the nearest to where I was working.

I had many bad thoughts about what might have happened to my sister. She was pregnant. She had lost a lot of liquid. The main questions were if something would happen to my sister, what could we as a family offer her? What could the hospital do for her?

The first time I was in that hospital was when I was 12 years old. I was sick because of Meningitis. I remember when they put me in a room alone and took liquid from my back with a big needle. I hated that hospital because I spent 20 days there with bitter medicines, horrible pictures of children crying and people with strange symptoms. All that was too much for a 12 year old child to see especially when they did not allow my mother to stay with me. I was allowed to see her one hour each day. I am really grateful for the organisations who built that hospital and I am grateful for the doctors who saved my life. I did not know how dangerous the disease was until one year ago. Many times I have asked myself whether that hospital was not built if I would then be alive today to write about it?

But I hated that big yellow hospital because it reminded me about all the nights that I cried. Before that I never slept far away from my mom's arm. They put me with very sick children who just by looking at them were enough to scare me. Part of their hair was shaved, they had needles in their head and feet and there was a very strong smell of diarrhoea. I was so happy when they finally moved me with others but I was counting the days to get out from this nightmare.



Every day my mom visited me, I asked her to take me with her. I said felt better but the reality was totally different. My words were not clear because I had the infection in my tongue. Most of the time I just wrote because of the pain when I tried to speak. Every day my mom brought candy with her, even though she knew I could not eat them. She was putting them beside my bed to make me feel better and know that soon I would be able to eat candy again.

Every day I told my mom what had happened last night; that someone had died, or were in serious situations and she always persuaded me that everyone will feel healthy again because we are in hospital.

Working as a dialoguer with Doctors Without Borders brought this entire memory to me again. Stories every day about children dying and millions of displaced people make me hate the world more, it makes me respect politicians less, because all that we are suffering now is because of political interests.

Back to my sister's story. I was so sad that I would have to face this memory again. It was summer time, and the temperature was 45 degrees. Gynecologic section full of women. I felt like I was on another planet. Maybe some people who live in the camps or have visited the camps will say that this is exaggerated. But I totally disagree with them, perhaps because of my story with this hospital. Perhaps after 12 years I will think that something has changed.

I am so proud that our government succeeds in building hospitals, schools and different institutions and facilities in one of the most isolated areas of the world. I understand that there are things that are hard for them to achieve without help from others.

Because of my sister's situation I quit my job temporarily, which I adored then. I was the oldest sister after her, it was my responsibility, because my mom travelled at the time to be with her own sister for an operation for breast tumor.

When I was in the hospital, I felt the same feeling that I had when I was 12. The only difference was that before I was sick physically and now I was sick psychologically.

Every day women lost children. Often many women fell down because of anemia. Every day I saw dozen of women waiting in long line to see doctors and many times they would wait for a long time but then the doctor decided to stop working.

Always when I talk about the refugee camps where I come from I make sure that I say this; If you hear the word “refugee camp”, do not imagine it like other refugee places. It is organized, we have a government and good health care. But many times I forget to mention that all those good things depend on humanitarian aid.

I am like all the Saharawis grateful to Cuba as a country, which has offered hundreds of places for Sahrawi to study medicine, sent hundreds of doctors who have worked for a very long time in hard weather and bad conditions there.

The only gynecologic doctor was from Cuba. However, many times I did not agree with him when I saw him taking serious cases very lightly. It was his job and he knew but many times I hated the way that he treated the patients. I understood that he was in a big depression.

He didn't care about the women when they tried to talk with him with their poor Spanish. Many times he would order the nurses to not tell anyone where he was. I tried to translate to the women but I did not know that my poor English would catch his attention. He always wanted to talk with me to practice his English, as he said, because he wanted to go to other countries in Africa later. To be honest, I found it useful too, to practice my English before I should travel to Norway. This is one of the reasons that I love the English language, that I can translate to people who really need help. I was with him when he did his doctor's rounds. I hated this position but if I did not do it no one would.

Day after day I was living in that hospital. I discovered that it is a great job to be a doctor or a nurse. I even applied at the time for a scholarship to study medicine in

Venezuela. I was accepted. Today I am glad that I did not take the place of others who really wanted this job more than me.

It was in the middle of the summer. You can never imagine how warm it is until you are there. Because of the temperature the air condition stops all the time. The only way is waiting until 17:00 to go outside in the shadow of the hospital. But also the desert sand is not that kind with us. If you walk without shoes the sand will burn your feet. The only hope is the night but the moon is as strong as the sun. Others try to sleep in the shadow of the cars.

The main issue was water. Many times the electricity went and the fridge stopped working. Pregnant women cannot drink very warm water in summer, so I had to walk every day for 3km to bring ice water from where I was working so that we could shared it with the others.

This is just a general view of the health condition there. Maybe it is not as bad as other places in Africa. I think even though we have different health conditions we suffer from the same, but since we achieve more then others we deserve more. What we need is our independence.

I have cried many times because of what I have seen in that hospital. I remember one night I was waiting with some people. I did not know them but I did know that the woman was younger than me. I saw her grandmother crying and praying for her because just one hour before the woman gave birth to a child that had died.

My sister's situation was stable, until one day she lost a lot of liquid after she had ultrasound. We had some hope that the child could survive, but the doctor came to me and said that we should take the baby the next day.

I tried to convince him to wait since the child was alive. But he had already made his decision. The hard part was how I could explain to my sister after I told her the day before that everything was alright. She would never trust my translation again.

After I told my sister she did not refuse what the doctor had said. He said that her life could be in danger. I told him that it was not the right decision because the child was still alive. He decided to perform the operation on my sister and one other woman. But there was no oxygen in the hospital. Oh my God, how could that be possible! They had to get it from Algeria. I was happy that we had still more time left.

I believe in science but I also believe that some times, they have no power to face the nature. That night a miracle happened. My sister gave birth and the child was smaller than normal weight but he was healthy. He was born two months early and he needed an incubator. The doctor told us do not wake him up because what my sister felt was just imagination. He did not believe us until my aunt saw the head of the baby. Then I knocked on the door and I shouted until everyone woke up.

When we told him he looked at me and said that the baby would not survive more than 24 hours. The doctor was so slow and lazy to write the paper stating that we needed to take the baby to the nearest Algerian city hospital to get proper treatment.

We took the child in our hands, even before my sister saw him. We did not have much time . My aunt held him in her arms and gave him oxygen and I was holding the oxygen bottle which has the same shape as a gas bottle.

In the morning we were ready to leave the hospital. We were happy. Through the windows I saw the people that had shared their sad moments with us waiving at us. I wished that I could stay and make sure that everyone felt better. Then I waived at them. This was just a few days before I came to Norway. I promised myself that I would share their stories with others, that I would work to make sure that my nephew and the others who were born while I am away will live in better conditions.

Because of what I have seen there I would hate to get married and I do not want to have children, since I know I can risk my own life and theirs in those hard conditions. I would not like to bring children into the world if I cannot protect them.

I saw Norway that time as magical, a place that would make all my suffering disappear. Maybe this was because it was the first Western country that I could visit. I should make sure that I make this people understand our suffering.

All that we need is more support to get our independence, all that we need is more voices with us, more serious actions.

Time is going fast, a lot of people are suffering in silence, the time is going and people are suffering in refugee camps and in the occupied area just because of selfish political interests!

I could understand France's point of view on our conflict but I cannot understand why Norway does not support and recognize us, because Norway for me is the land of Thorolf Rafto and the Nobel Peace Prize, and it should support the rights of peoples.

Sultana, the eye of victory

Summer 2010

Western Sahara is a country that is divided into two parts. We are forced to live separated. After the war with Morocco the Saharawi succeeded in liberating parts of our land that are known as the liberated areas, but the biggest and most important part of our country is still under Moroccan authority. The two parts are separated by a wall full of anti-personnel land mines. Because of this many of families are still separated.

In the occupied area, many human rights violations and crimes against humanity were done by the Moroccan colonisation; a lot of people are in prison while others are forced to live in exile. In addition to this there is discrimination in schools, universities and work opportunities.

Just as we suffer in the refugee camps from the hard conditions and from the neglect of the world, people in the occupied areas suffer from human right violations and the media block about what is happening there.

Because of my job as a journalist in the national radio, I was closer than the others to see what was happening in the camps. We always tried to talk to people from the occupied areas to get information. We phoned and sent emails to get as much information as we could. Still you can't imagine the situation until you see or meet the persons who witnessed or were victims from the Moroccan human right violations.

In the summer of 2009, I was lucky enough to meet a group of Saharawi human right activists who were visiting the refugee camps. It was a honour to meet persons like Sidi Mohamed Daddach, Sultana Khaya and others.

Since I knew that Sultana Khaya and nine other female human rights activists were

coming to visit the camps, I was very excited to make my next weekly program about their experiences as female human right activists. Since they had just a short time in the camps I was forced to interview them while they were having their lunch.

It was a warm and hard day even compared to the normal in the camps in Algeria. But not as warm and hard as Sultana Khaya's story.

Sultana Khaya was a victim of the Moroccan police. She lost one of her eyes while she was participating in a demonstration in her university against the Moroccan colonisation.

While she was telling me her story, I was looking at her eyes. I was taken away by my thoughts and my imagination. Now, I had not heard about this in the news. I was face to face with the Moroccan crimes. I was angry and full of hatred to all the world who chose to be silent about this. I was listening to her, but it was her eyes that told me all of her story; she has beautiful black eyes. But it was easy to distinguish between the artificial eye and the other one. I was listening to her story crying without knowing why. Was it because of her story, was it because of the world silence, was it because of our destiny to live in suffering and without a clear picture about the future?

After they hit her eye they took her in an ambulance, which was the place for further torture instead of treatment. After the ambulance personnel asked her where she felt pain she pointed to her eye and he hit her again and again saying words of discrimination against the Saharawi people.

Many other people in the occupied area are like Sultana. Every day they face the same torture. Sultana described the hospital as a prison, a place where every moment we hear discriminating words like "you deserved that" and "all Saharawi should be dead so that we can live a life in peace".

In that demonstration a lot of Saharawi students were arrested and faced the same

kind of torture. One of the things that I still remember Sultana said with tears was; we felt insulted and humiliated when we saw them beating and torturing naked men.

In her answer to my last question; is there anything special that you want to say to the audience, Sultana said: I lost my eye and I am not sad about it, I am ready to give everything to freeing our country, losing my eye made me stronger and more determined to continue our struggle.

That radio programme was the most important programme in my career, but I felt useless, because it was for the radio of the refugee camps, a radio where not lot of international audience could hear it.

Sultana's story and those of many others Saharawis, are always absent in the international media. Therefore all the criminals who committed these crimes are never punished.

My belief is that the only way to stop these crimes is through the media, which can report about it and make politician move and force the international community to finally respond.

After what happened to Sultana Khaya, many songs were written about her eyes, many paintings were showing her face. She was and still is the most beautiful woman with victory in her eyes.

Rafto, sweet home

The first time that I visited the Rafto house was in the second month after I had arrived here in Norway. I did not really know if it was dream or reality. Rafto is a word that I have read in books, in the news, in reports or at my studies. When I was writing my bachelor thesis, I devoted one chapter to Sidi Mohamed Daddach, the Rafto Prize winner of 2002. My thesis is called "Human rights violation in the occupied area of Western Sahara". My favourite part of writing this chapter was when I had the chance to interview Sidi Mohamed Daddach myself. At that time I just used books and the Internet to find information about the Rafto prize. I never could imagine that one day I would actually visit the Rafto house and meet those people whom I will always consider as my heroes.

When I started to work with Médecins Sans Frontières I didn't know that my work would be in the Rafto house itself. I was so excited and felt so lucky. Human rights issues and human rights activist were always on the top of my interests. In addition to this I got to live in the house next door to the Rafto House. It is the first time I had the opportunity to say this is my house, it is the first time for me to sleep under a safe roof. So if Thorolf Rafto gave the humanity the inspiration for this great prize, there is proof that his wonderful achievements is continuing. I have experienced it myself. The house where I live is owned by Rafto House Foundation. I am grateful and want to say thank you to Jan Ramstad and all the other people in the Rafto Foundation. This is the greatest gift I could get in my life and I will spread the word.

Every time when I sit alone by myself I believe that all of this could not happen by chance. It is a sign for me to do something or to learn something. Maybe it is imagination. But still I believe the opposite.

Every time I come to the Rafto house I see Sidi Mohammed Daddach's picture at

the wall of the building. I feel that I am at the top of the world! Every day I see in his picture a hope for a free Western Sahara. In his picture I can see his eyes telling me: I did my part and now it is your duty as part of the new educated generation, the new generation, to do yours: - You can convince the world about our right to live in peace in our home land Western Sahara.

What I think is good about the Rafto Human Rights Prize is that it gives other people inspiration and strength. When you see the courage of those people, who challenged all the obstacles and succeeded in making the world hear their voices

Rafto or other human rights prizes. Everyone should be grateful. Those prizes are great examples of solidarity between human being against violence. I choose to write about the Rafto prize because everything in my life now is related to it; my work, my home and my dream.

I am writing about the Rafto prize because it is one of few organisations that highlight our situation.

Giving Sidi Mohammed Daddach the Rafto prize is actually a huge support for our cause. It is great step to inform about the Western Sahara issue in Norwegian society. However I was so surprised that some Norwegians did not know about Sidi Mohamed Daddach or the conflict.

I was wondering why everything in my life was related to Rafto. Now I know the answer. Sidi Mohamed Daddach must be part of my stories. I met Sidi Mohamed Daddach in the refugee camps. He told us how important it is to be united against colonization and to fight as a new generation. That is all I want now after this book. I want Mohamed Daddach to know that I learnt his advice by heart. I want him to be proud of me as one of the new generation that will continue the struggle until independence. On the other hand, I choose to quote what was written about him in Rafto web page. I thought it is worth to be repeated again:

Sidi Mohamed Daddach was awarded the 2002 Rafto Prize for representing the Saharawi people in their struggle for human rights.

Sidi Mohammed Daddach is a Saharawi human rights defender and former political prisoner. Imprisoned for more than two decades by the Moroccan authorities, Daddach has become an important symbol of Western Sahara's struggle for self-determination. He has spoken forcefully about Morocco's human rights violations, and drawn the world's attention to the hundreds of Saharawis who have "disappeared" after the Moroccan invasion in 1975.

Daddach was again arrested in 1979, and sentenced to death for having attempted to join the Polisario Front, Western Sahara's liberation movement. His sentence was commuted to life imprisonment in 1994. In 1999, he was released by royal amnesty, after years of campaigning for his liberation by Amnesty International and other human rights organisations.

Peaceful demonstrations since the summer of 2005 have led to harsh repression and an uprising in the Occupied Territories of Western Sahara. Daddach is one of very few leading human rights activists who have not been jailed during these political protests. Demonstrators have been arrested in large numbers, some receiving long prison sentences, while Daddach remains pressured and harassed by Moroccan security services.



The Wall of Shame

April 2009 was the first time I witnessed something I had previously only heard people who had participated in the war talk about. We were demonstrating against the Moroccan wall, which divides both the land of Western Sahara and its people in two. This wall of shame was built between 1981 and 1987 and is 2700 km long (the distance from North Cape to Lindesnes and then to London).

It is so strange to witness this wall of shame when we see the pride the world took in having successfully destroyed the Berlin Wall. It is a wall full of land mines, which are killing innocent people. How can this crime against humanity go without judgement or even notice?

Many people have heard about the wall in the Palestine, however it is strange that only a few people know about the wall in Western Sahara. Where is the UN and where are the Human Rights organisations?

Then in April of 2009, Ibrahim, a 18 year old boy, lost his leg when one of the mines exploded. There were more than a thousand people participating in an annual demonstration. It is called Colonne del Mil, where people come from different places in the world to witness this crime. Most of the people come from Spain.

I had previously only seen war and mines killing people in the movies. I never imagined that witnessing it myself could be so scary. It is hard to describe the feeling I had at the time. The sound when the mine exploded was loud and really scary. No one understood or could imagine that it could happen in a peaceful demonstration. All the people ran to the place where the sound had come from. Everyone was screaming, praying and cursing Morocco, who is responsible for our sadness. I could not look for more than a few seconds. I could not look at all that blood and the broken leg. I kept looking at his face. He was young, and braver than all the Moroccan soldiers who were holding their guns. Strangely enough he seemed

happy about what had happened. He was shouting: "Free Sahara!". It was a very hard lesson for us as youths to witness this. The boy had suffered in the same way as so many Saharawis.

Many foreigners were angry. They said that they were in danger. I didn't like that a few of them were selfish while everyone else were sad and crying because of this boy who will face life with one leg.

What happened that day was a big loss for the Saharawi and the boy. On the other hand this was a strong evidence that these mines were still killing innocent children and adults. This wall has been dividing families for more than 35 years and no one cares!

Ibrahim's future became darker after that day. Like a dozen Saharawi he is now living in the War Victim's Center with no hope of changing his life. Most of the people there have been there since the seventies!

I can never forget his face. I will never delete the picture of his leg from my mind. Inside me there is always a dream to help the people who have forgotten what life could look like!

My plan is this: If I succeed to sell many copies of this book, all the money will go to the War Victim's Centre. I will personally see to that the people there will get better conditions and therapy.

Tusen takk ... Norge

Because of the tragedy in Oslo 22 July I am still under shock and I cannot believe that something like this would happen in a country like Norway!

Most people in Europe see the immigrants as people who just want to take advantage of European countries and other seeking security that they never had in their own countries. This can be true sometimes. However with time most immigrants become citizens by heart with their different appearances, with time they share moment of victory, happiness and moments of failures with their host country. With time they become the first fans of the football team of the country that they live in. With time they find themselves enjoying the music, poetry and culture of this country as if it were their own. The real evidence of this can you see if you visit their homes. Sometimes you will find the flag of their host country but they never dare to show that because the society will always look at them as foreigners !

When I arrived in Norway everything was different; amazing nature, wherever you look it is green, water and mountains, it is such a great painting full of life and inspiration. Whenever I want to describe Norway I can not find the words. Especially when you come from a place where you are a prisoner of sand, wind and the strong sun. That is a big difference compared to Norway.

I was born in a refugee camp in Algeria as thousands of other Saharawis as result of the war in 1975. When thousands of Saharawis were forced to flee from their land because of Moroccan Invasion of Western Sahara. This conflict has lasted for more than 36 years. While I was putting out candles for the memory of the Utøya victims on the blue stone in Bergen, I did not know what I should do to stand with the Norwegian sadness? I wished I had blue eyes and blond hair since it is hard to make them see the sadness in my heart. I wanted to be Norwegian more than any time before.

I will leave Norway soon but I will always wish the best for all the Norwegians. I will go with a good picture of this country. But before I leave this beautiful country I have two messages for all the terrorists in the world. Norway is the last country in the world that anyone should hurt and I have much evidences for this. I am sure if you give yourselves one minute you will come to the same conclusion.

So please let this be always the land of peace and love. This is my first message for anyone in the world who might think about one day to attack or threat peace of this country.

It's true that every society has positive and negative sides. Until now I have seen only the good things about the Norwegian society. I will always try to look at it this way.

Some of you may think this is a silly statement. For me this is the right time for us to show the Norwegians how kind they are and how grateful we all are for all what this country has done for us. It is the right time to remind Norwegians that even if we do not have the same blood we have the same love for this country. That is my second message.

I want to thank this country that has given me the best experience of my life. The country that has given me inspiration for a better future for my country.

Tusen takk Norge! For making me proud every time I see the picture of the Saharawi activist when I go to work in the Rafto house.

Tusen takk! For giving me security and confidence that I never had before.

Tusen takk! For the opportunity that you gave me to see the real world through your eyes.

Tusen takk! For giving me the opportunity to test your brown cheese.

Tusen takk! For making me taste how delicious potatoes with salmon fish is.

Tusen takk! For giving me the opportunity to climb your mountains and ski in your magic snow after having spent my life skiing in one of the harshest places in the world: The refugee camps in Algerian desert.

I will always be the bird who sings: «Norway is a land of peace and love» wherever I will be in the future.

I have not been in Norway for a long time. I am leaving soon but one year was enough for me to fall in love with this country. Before I leave I want to share this feeling with every single Norwegian. I wish that many of you after this article will see in our black eyes the big love that we have for Norway. I will be happier when the Norwegians know that they have people across the world who cares about them and are ready to help any time it is needed.

Tusen takk store lille Norge!

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About the author

Asria Mohamed Taleb was born in the 27th of February Camp in Tindouf, Algeria. She studied journalism and communication at Alarbi ben Mheidy University in Algeria. She has worked for several years in the Saharawi National Radio and Television as a radio programme presenter and producer. She is also an executive member of the board of Saharawi Youth Organisation for four years. She came to Norway in 2010 as part of the Peace Corps programme and stayed a year as an arabic teacher at the Red Cross Nordic United World College in Fjaler in Sunnfjord. She is currently working as a dialoguer with Médecins Sans Frontières in Bergen.



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