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The Women's Collective of the Black Spring of Kabylia

Greetings Madame Chair, my brothers and sisters, I am Madame Nait Sid Kamira, President of the Women's Collective of the Black Spring of Kabylia, a member of the Amazigh World Congress for the Movement for the Autonomy of Kabylia, and a member of IPACC. I dedicate my talk to the economic situation in my region of Kabylia.

The Amazighs of Algeria

The Amazighs (Berbers) have existed in North Africa since the prehistoric era. A vast and rich territory, the land of the Amazighs became very desirable. Since antiquity, North Africa has experienced many waves of invaders: the Romans would succeed the Phoenicians, followed by the Vandals, the Byzantines, the Arabs (7th century), the Spanish (15th century), the Turks (1515), and finally by the French (1830). The Amazighs, the Indigenous people of North Africa, are dispersed today throughout more than ten countries: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt (Siwa), Spain (The Canary Islands, Ceuta, Melilla), Niger, Mali, Burkina-Faso and Mauritania (Touareg populations). One can count today more than 40 million Amazigh speakers, of which approximately 75% live in Morocco and Algeria. These peoples possess their own language and culture. The Amazigh language benefits from an original system of writing, Tifinah, developed 4000 years ago, and preserved even today. Another, more recent system of transcription in Latin characters also exists, and its use is spreading. In Algeria, the Amazighophone populations represent around one third of the total population, or more than 10 million individuals living primarily in the regions of Kabylia, Aures, Chenoua, M'zab, and in the case of the Touaregs, in the extreme Southern regions. However, Kabylia remains the region that hosts the largest number of Amazighophones (6-7 million people). It is also important to note that in Algerian territory, hundreds of places exist in which people speak Tamazight (the Amazigh language) daily.

The situation of the Amazighs of Algeria

Since the independence of the country in 1962, Algeria has always practiced the same policy of negation and exclusion of the Amazigh identity. Algerian constitutions have regularly reaffirmed the same definition of the nation, one that rests solely on Arab and Islamic constituents, thus excluding the Amazigh constituents. The current Constitution (dating from 1996), if it finally introduces a reference to Amazigh, next to Islam and Arabic, as foundations of Algerian identity, it is only in its Preamble, which later insists on "Algeria, land of Islam (...) and Arab country." Articles 1-2 and 1-3 later raise ambiguity in stipulating that « Islam is the religion of the State » and « Arabic is the national and official language .» Under pressure from street demonstrations in 2002, the Algerian government recognized Tamazight as a national language, but in practice nothing changed. Thus, their existence as a population of several million Algerian Amazighs, along with their history, language and culture dating back many millennia, is simply concealed, denied, and refused.

All of the violations of the political, economic, social, and cultural rights of the Amazigh populations stem from this constitutional negation and thus are practiced in all legality.

In order to emphasize the assimilation process of the Amazighs, the legal arsenal has been strengthened by law n° 91-05 of 01/16/91 « calling for more widespread use of the Arabic language », modified by ordinance n° 96-30 of 12/21/96 and affirmed with force on July 5, 1998. This law imposes fines and even a prison sentence in case of repeat offenses, for authors of all texts, contracts, or public declarations, written or publicly pronounced, in a language other than Arabic. All the documents coming from administrations, public and private enterprises and even associations, are strictly obliged to be written exclusively in the Arabic language. Law 90-31 regarding cultural associations is going to, in the same manner, forbid any publication that is not in Arabic. The Amazigh language is even considered a « foreign language, » which is particularly unjust and aberrant for a language whose presence in Algeria predates the appearance of the Arabic language. Faced with grave injustices, the Algerian Amazighs have on many occasions publicly requested respect for their rights and democratic liberties.

The region of Kabylia

Kabylia is a mountainous region situated 50 kilometers east of Algiers. It stretches the length of the Mediterranean coast over a distance of two hundred kilometers, a total land area of more than 30,000 kilometers. Its inhabitants, the Kabyles, account for the greatest number of Amazighophones at approximately ten million speakers, as well as two million emigrants in France and other countries throughout the world.

Violations of Kabyle rights

As the result of a series of revolts seeking to impose a democratic order in Algeria, Kabylia has found itself isolated in its struggle, marginalized and oppressed.

In the course of the past twenty years, one can remember, in particular, the revolt of the population of Kabylia during the Berber Spring of 1980, the school boycott of 1994/95 taken up by students of all ages in order to express their disapproval of the exclusion of Tamazight from Algerian schools, the popular revolt that followed the assassination of singer Lounès Matoub on June 25, 1998 (on the eve of the enforcement of the Arabization law), and finally, the Black Spring of 2001 that marked a total rupture between civilian Amazighophone Algerian society and Kabyle in particular, with the Algerian authorities and its practices which combine injustice, misunderstanding, arrogance, and violence. For three months, the usage of war weapons (exploding bullets) against the civilian populations resulted in more than one hundred dead and more than 3000 wounded, of which more than half would experience the after effects for life. The region of Kabylia is particularly targeted by the Algerian authorities, who look to subjugate or marginalize it because it refuses to cease denouncing the abuses of power, deterioration of public services, institutionalized corruption, monopolization of the riches of the country by the clans in power, and pauperization of society; and because it immediately demands the institution of the citizen's right to live in dignity, justice, peace, and to pursue the equitable enjoyment of his or her rights. Moreover, conformity to these principles is expressed by the United Nations Charter, by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and by the United Nations International Pact, which emphasize economic, social, and cultural rights.

Economic situation of Kabylia

Pre-economic rights

Although Algeria is a wealthy country, predominantly due to its petroleum and natural gas resources, the living conditions of a large majority of the population continue to deteriorate because the energy revenue is monopolized by the clans who share power at the State level. The pauperization particularly affects the mountainous zones like the regions of Aures and Kabylia, where the unemployment rate is much higher than the national average (national average of 30%, 50% in Kabylia). In the wilaya of Tizi-Ouzou, for example, not a single industrial investment of any significance has occurred in the past twenty years. On the other hand, the two principal factories of Cotitex (textiles) and Eniem (household electrical appliances) have seen their revenues decline astonishingly. Private investments are particularly discouraged in Kabylia by a large number of legal and administrative obstacles, the goal of which is to preserve certain monopolies. These investments are then diverted to other regions of the country. The unemployment and hardships that result from these obstacles affect young people more severely, as they tend to flee their painful realities by turning to the consumption of alcohol and drugs, exile, and as a last resort, suicide.

Since the State is the country's sole owner and banker, it is able to exert, for its own benefit, economic and financial blackmail on any group, or on any collectivity of its territory. It is thus that Kabylia finds itself in a situation of grave economic depression due to the disengagement of the State, which refuses to introduce any of its capital into our region, as it remains politically hostile. This situation was aggravated by the revolt in Kabylia in 2001.

The aggression of April 2001 (the Kabyle revolt of the Black Spring), was a ploy aimed at destabilizing the region, and remains consistent proof of the central authorities' desire to drown Kabylia in a bloodbath. This diabolical strategy was sanctioned by a most macabre death toll: more than 126 youths assassinated and thousands wounded. In addition to this genocide, there were also consequences that were not at all minor, among others, the total paralysis of economic development in our region. The central administration's political resolve was expressed by a delay that set a record in the annals of the execution of public facility programs. At the moment, the execution of the normal public facility program in our region is characterized by persistent obstacles, while the government endows the rest of the country with multiple special programs financed by ongoing subsidies that reflect the importance of the petroleum deposits (natural riches that should belong to all Algerians). With their revenue from the deposits, the government launched a special Greater South program, a special High Plateau program, and a special Greater Algiers program; if one attempts to situate these programs geographically, one remarks that it is practically only Kabylia that is excluded.

The government is not satisfied only with disregarding and blocking investments in Kabylia, it even relocated large projects designated for Kabylia for the first time, as in the case of the insulin factory. Furthermore, the Tizi-Ouzou sports complex in Kabylia was deferred to the Greek calendar despite the performances of our team, the JSK (The Athletic Kabyle Youth), on a national and continental scale. Another grave discrimination is seen in the layout of the East-West Highway that barely grazed Kabylia due to the cancellation of many interchanges and access roads that existed in the preliminary study, in particular, throughout the Soummam Valley; this was a government strategy designed to neutralize the port of Bgayet, a principal economic sector.

The autonomy of Kabylia as a solution to the crisis

The Kabyles request :

- A statute providing for the comprehensive autonomy of our region as the ultimate solution to this crisis that has persisted since the independence of the country in 1962.

In order to remedy the Algerian authorities' obstruction of the development of Kabylia, we believe that through autonomy, our people will reclaim economic initiative, which guarantees economic development.

The autonomy of our region will allow us to avoid the Algerian authorities' obstacles and lack of understanding, from which we have suffered for decades. It will also allow us to shelter our children from the violence of the State and to take charge of our language, our culture, and our identity.

We also request :

- The prosecution of the assassins of the 126 martyrs of the Black Spring.
- The cessation of the intimidation and harassment of Kabyle and Amazigh militants.
- The termination of the politics leading to the deterioration of Kabylia.
- The equitable distribution of the riches of our country (petroleum, natural gas, and other deposits)
- The cessation of the obstruction of investment projects in Kabylia.

In conclusion, I would like to pay homage to all the martyrs of the Black Spring of Kabylia, to all the victims, and to all those who continue peaceful civilian resistance.

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