ADVOCACY DOSSIER

YAHYA MOHAMED ELHAFED IAAZZA

يحيي محمد الحافظ إعزة

At liberty **Western Sahara**

Known as 'the father' among Sahrawi political prisoners for his support work, Yahya Mohamed El Hafed Aaza has endured enforced disappearance, solitary confinement, and repeated transfers to prisons hundreds of kilometres from his family in Tan Tan. He served the full 15-year sentence imposed on him in 2008 and was released in March 2023.

HuMENA.

Prepared by HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement · 8 November 2026

Case reference HM-EH-2026-034

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THE CASE AT A GLANCE

Known as 'the father' among Sahrawi political prisoners for his support work, Yahya Mohamed El Hafed Aaza has endured enforced disappearance, solitary confinement, and repeated transfers to prisons hundreds of kilometres from his family in Tan Tan. He served the full 15-year sentence imposed on him in 2008 and was released in March 2023.

STATUS	**At liberty**
ARRESTED	**3 Jul 2021**
COUNTRY	**Western Sahara**

WE CALL ON THE AUTHORITIES TO:

WHAT WE ASK

01 Quash the conviction and drop any charges that remain on record against Yahya Mohamed El Hafed Aaza in connection with peaceful human rights work.

02 Confirm publicly that Yahya Mohamed El Hafed Aaza faces no residual travel, financial, or professional restriction arising from this case.

03 Guarantee that Yahya Mohamed El Hafed Aaza can resume that work without surveillance, summons, or further reprisal.

04 Provide effective remedy for the period of deprivation of liberty already served.

Latest updates on this case
Scan the code or visit:
https://humena.org/defenders/yahya-mohamed-el-hafed-aaza/

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DOCUMENTED VIOLATIONS

	INTERNATIONAL STANDARD
Arbitrary detention	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 9
Denial of family visits	UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules), Rule 58
Denial of medical care	UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules), Rules 24 to 27
Enforced disappearance	International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, Article 2 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 9, 16
Inhumane detention conditions	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 10 UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules)
Torture	Convention against Torture, Articles 1, 2 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 7
Unfair trial	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 14

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HOW THE CASE UNFOLDED

29 February 2008

ARREST

Arrested in Tan Tan

Yahya Mohamed El Hafed Aaza was arrested in Tan Tan without a warrant on the evening of 29 February 2008 (the government gives 1 March), two days after a protest he was accused of organising but says he did not attend. He says he was tortured in police custody until he was brought before the prosecutor in Agadir on 4 March 2008.

9 October 2008

CONVICTION

Sentenced to 15 years in prison

The criminal chamber of first instance at the Agadir Court of Appeal sentenced him to 15 years in prison for incitement to rebellion leading to violence that caused death, after a protest in which a police officer was fatally injured. He was not convicted of murder.

24 June 2009

FINAL JUDGMENT

Appeal chamber upholds the 15-year sentence

The criminal appeal chamber of the Agadir Court of Appeal upheld the 15-year sentence. No appeal to the Court of Cassation was filed.

13 October 2020

START OF ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE

Moved to an unknown place while in prison

While serving his sentence, Yahya was moved from his cell in Bouizakarne prison to an unknown place after exposure to COVID-19. His family and lawyer could not find out where he was.

9 December 2020

REAPPEARANCE IN CUSTODY

Reappears in Bouizakarne prison

Yahya called his family for the first time since October, from Bouizakarne prison in southern Morocco, far from his family in Tan Tan.

5 March 2021

CONTEXT

First family visit in one year

His family was permitted a fifteen-minute visit, monitored by guards. Yahya appeared severely weakened, in a wheelchair, and dependent on an oxygen nebulizer.

3 July 2021

START OF ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE

Transfer to unknown location

Yahya was transferred from Bouizakarne prison to an undisclosed location. His family was not informed and his whereabouts remained unknown for nearly two weeks.

3 July 2021

HUNGER STRIKE BEGINS

Begins open-ended hunger strike

Yahya commenced an open hunger strike, demanding transfer to a prison closer to his family in Tan Tan.

15 July 2021

REAPPEARANCE IN CUSTODY

Location confirmed: Asfi prison

His brother was allowed to visit him in Asfi prison, approximately 630 kilometres from Tan Tan. Yahya remained on hunger strike.

12 August 2021

TRANSFER BETWEEN PLACES OF DETENTION

Transferred to Khouribiga prison

Yahya was moved to Khouribiga prison, 820 kilometres from his family. After forty days on hunger strike, his health was described as alarming.

15 November 2021

UN OPINION OR DECISION

UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention finds his detention arbitrary (Opinion 46/2021)

March 2023

RELEASE

Released after serving his 15-year sentence

19 March 2023

PHYSICAL ASSAULT

Stopped at a checkpoint and assaulted after his release (alleged)

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THE FULL STORY

Background and Work

Yahya Mohamed El Hafed Aaza co-founded the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders (CODESA), a network documenting violations against Sahrawi activists in Morocco and advocating for political prisoners. He served as president of the Tan Tan provincial branch, where his work centred on monitoring detention conditions, supporting families of the imprisoned, and recording cases of abuse that rarely reached public attention.

Among Sahrawi political prisoners, Yahya became known as 'the father', a nickname reflecting his role in helping newly detained activists navigate the isolation, fear, and physical hardship of incarceration. His support ranged from practical advice on surviving interrogation to emotional reassurance during the first days inside. His work made him a target.

Enforced Disappearance

On 13 October 2020, while serving his sentence, Yahya Mohamed El Hafed Aaza was moved from his cell in Bouizakarne prison to an unknown place after exposure to COVID-19. Neither his family nor his lawyer could locate him. Authorities provided no information about his whereabouts or his condition. The enforced disappearance lasted nearly two months.

On 9 December 2020, Yahya called his family for the first time. He informed them that he was being held in Bouizakarne prison, in the south of Morocco. The prison is located far from Tan Tan, where his family lives, making visits prohibitively difficult and expensive.

Detention Conditions and Health

Yahya was held in solitary confinement for nearly twelve weeks. By early 2021, his health had deteriorated sharply. On 5 March 2021, his family was permitted to visit him for the first time in a year. The visit lasted fifteen minutes and was monitored by guards throughout. His wife and son reported that he appeared in severely weakened physical condition, unable to walk without assistance and reliant on an oxygen nebulizer to breathe. He was brought to the visiting area in a wheelchair.

On 3 July 2021, authorities transferred Yahya from Bouizakarne to an undisclosed location. His family was not informed. His whereabouts remained unknown for nearly two weeks. On the same day, Yahya began an open-ended hunger strike, demanding transfer to a prison closer to his family.

On 15 July 2021, his brother was allowed to visit him in Asfi prison, approximately 630 kilometres from Tan Tan. The transfer had moved him even further from his family. Yahya remained on hunger strike.

On 12 August 2021, Yahya was transferred again, this time to Khouribiga prison, north-west of Marrakesh, 820 kilometres from his family. By that point, he had been on hunger strike for forty days. His

health was described as alarming.

Legal Proceedings

Yahya was arrested in Tan Tan on 29 February 2008, two days after an annual Sahrawi protest that he was accused of organising but says he did not attend. A police officer was fatally injured during the protest. He was arrested without a warrant and says he was tortured in police custody until he was brought before the prosecutor on 4 March 2008. On 9 October 2008 the criminal chamber of the Agadir Court of Appeal sentenced him to 15 years in prison for incitement to rebellion leading to violence that caused death; he was not convicted of murder. The appeal chamber upheld the sentence on 24 June 2009, and no appeal to the Court of Cassation was filed. He served the full sentence and was released in March 2023.

International Response

Front Line Defenders called on Moroccan authorities to disclose Yahya's location, ensure his access to family and legal counsel, and transfer him to a facility near his home. In November 2021 the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, in Opinion 46/2021, found his detention arbitrary and called for his immediate release.

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SAMPLE LETTER

Copy it, adapt it and send it from your own address.

Your Excellency,

I am writing about the case of Yahya Mohamed El Hafed Aaza, co-founder and former president of the Sahrawi branch of the Collective of Human Rights Defenders (CODESA); advocate for Sahrawi political prisoners in Western Sahara, who has been released. I am writing to ask that the case be closed properly and that no further reprisal follows.

In brief: Known as 'the father' among Sahrawi political prisoners for his support work, Yahya Mohamed El Hafed Aaza has endured enforced disappearance, solitary confinement, and repeated transfers to prisons hundreds of kilometres from his family in Tan Tan. He served the full 15-year sentence imposed on him in 2008 and was released in March 2023.

I respectfully urge your authorities to:
1. Quash the conviction and drop any charges that remain on record against Yahya Mohamed El Hafed Aaza in connection with peaceful human rights work;
2. Confirm publicly that Yahya Mohamed El Hafed Aaza faces no residual travel, financial, or professional restriction arising from this case;
3. Guarantee that Yahya Mohamed El Hafed Aaza can resume that work without surveillance, summons, or further reprisal;
4. Provide effective remedy for the period of deprivation of liberty already served.

I will continue to follow this case until the record against Yahya Mohamed El Hafed Aaza is cleared and no reprisal remains.

Respectfully,

[Your name]
[Your city, country]
8 November 2026