FMO Country Guide: Western Sahara
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Summary

Formal name: Western Sahara (disputed territory given present name by the United Nations in 1975).
Capital: La Ayoune or Al-Auin.
Estimated population: 260,000–400,000

Maps
United Nations Department of Peacekeeping Operations, April 2004 - http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/map/dpko/minurso.pdf

New Internationalist - http://www.newint.org/issue297/western.htm

Summary
Western Sahara is the last colony in Africa and is the subject of a territorial dispute between Morocco, which annexed the territory in 1975 and claims sovereignty there, and the Polisario Front, the national liberation movement representing the Saharawis, which calls for an independent state in the territory. Currently, Western Sahara is divided politically, militarily, and geographically by a 2,200 km-long Moroccan-built defensive berm. About a fifth of the territory, lying east of the berm, is controlled by the Polisario Front.

The sixteen-year war that broke out in 1975, when Morocco and Mauritania jointly invaded Western Sahara upon Spain's rapid exit from its former colony, is undoubtedly the single most important cause behind the large-scale displacement of the Saharawi population. Nearly thirty years later, most of them are still refugees in the barren and remote desert of south-west Algeria. They live in camps run by the Polisario Front. The government-in-exile, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), also operates from the camps.

Exact figures for the size of the refugee population are difficult to obtain, and have been a source of contention. The most consistent figure quoted by numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the Algerian authorities is 165,000. Outside of Western Sahara, the refugees are the largest Saharawi community. Significant but much smaller ones exist in Mauritania, mainland Spain, and the Canary Islands.

Morocco's ongoing occupation of Western Sahara (Mauritania withdrew in 1979) is a violation of international law and has resulted in systematic human rights abuses over the years. These have been documented extensively by internationally respected human rights organizations. So far, all efforts by the United Nations (UN) to achieve a long-lasting and peaceful solution to the conflict have been thwarted. The Organization of African Unity–United Nations (OAU–UN) sponsored a Settlement Plan intended to culminate in a referendum for Saharawi self-determination in early 1992, but this has been repeatedly postponed. Morocco, meanwhile, has strengthened its de facto annexation of Western Sahara in the period since the UN brokered a cease-fire and deployed its forces in 1991. Roughly 200,000 Moroccan settlers have been moved into the so-called Southern Province, and active steps have been taken to develop the territory and exploit its natural resources.

Initiatives pursued outside the framework of the UN Peace Plan since 2000 to overcome the impasse have yielded few results. In the first half of 2004, however, the Polisario has made progress in releasing a significant number of long-term Moroccan prisoners-of-war (POWs); and in early 2004, both parties agreed to allow close Saharawi family members, from either side of the berm, to have contact, after three decades of separation. Any future resolution will need to address the repatriation and security of the Saharawi refugees and the demining of the area along the Moroccan berm, believed to harbour between 1 million and 2 million landmines.

Obtaining accurate or reliable information about the situation in Western Sahara is hampered by highly restricted access to the occupied zone. Although Morocco has allowed a limited number of journalists, NGOs, and independent observers to visit the territory since 1998, movement is curtailed and closely monitored, and contact with local Saharawis may put them at risk.

Websites:
CIA World Factbook: Western Sahara -
http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/wi.html

Association de soutien à un référendum libre et régulier au Sahara Occidental (ARSO) -
http://www.arso.org/index.htm

Western Sahara Online - http://www.wsahara.net

Infoplease: Western Sahara - http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0759052.html

1 Overview
1.1 Historical background
1.1.1 Early period
Sanhaja Berber nomads are believed to have started migrating into the area of modern-day Western Sahara around 1,000 BC. After the arrival of the camel from the east in AD 50, the Sanhaja periodically controlled the lucrative trans-Saharan trade routes. But from the seventh century they began to experience fierce competition from Zenata Berbers to the north, who eventually took over the trade routes. In the eleventh century, the Sanhaja rose to dominance again with the emergence of the Almoravids, followers of a fervent Islamic movement who conquered vast swathes of west and north Africa and ruled for a century in southern Spain.

The direct descendents of present-day Saharawis represent a fusion between the Sanhaja Berbers and Arab tribes originating from Yemen. Invasions by the Beni Hassan in the fifteenth century led to the gradual domination and Arabization of the Sanhaja. This gave rise to a new ethnic group called the Beidan or Moors, whose language evolved into Hassaniya. The area they occupied was known as Trab Ab-beidan (the land of the whites), its limits defined mainly by natural barriers such as the Atlantic coast to the west; Ouad or Wad Noun in the north; the Senegal River to the south; and the hostile, barren desert to the east.

Those nomadic pastoral tribes roamed mainly along Western Sahara's coastal area and developed different political structures from those that largely occupied modern-day Mauritania. They did not form emirates as in Mauritania and, when not fighting amongst themselves, regulated their affairs and relations by inter-tribal assemblies like the *djemaa* or *ait arbain* (the council of forty). These would meet to organize collective defense and raids, resolve civil disputes, and punish crimes. Primary loyalties were to family, faction, and tribe. The Saharawis never constituted a nation as such in pre-colonial times (Hodges 1983).

By the eighteenth century, a certain degree of stability was introduced into the region of Saguiat el Hamra, today's northern part of Western Sahara, when it became known as the 'Land of the Saints'. Smara, the first pre-colonial town, was founded as a sacred centre of learning, attracting people from far and wide in search of religious instruction.

1.1.2 Spanish colonialism and resistance

Spain's initial interest in Western Sahara was driven by the desire to protect its nearby Canary Islands and the fishermen that operated from there. In 1884, it proclaimed a protectorate from Cape Bojador to Cape Blanc along the Western Sahara coast and set up a trading post in Dakhla ('Villa Cisneros' in Spanish). This act was then ratified during the carving up of Africa by the European powers in the Berlin Conference of 1885. France, meanwhile, had become the dominant power in north-west Africa and sought to extend its possessions. It took three Franco-Spanish treaties in 1900, 1904, and 1912 to define the borders of Western Sahara.

Until the late 1930s, Spain's rule in Western Sahara was confined to a limited presence along the coast. It did not venture much into the interior nor meddle with the affairs of the Saharawi tribes. Relations with the new rulers were fairly reasonable. In fact it was against France's aggressive colonial agenda that the Saharawi tribes directed their fiercest resistance. Western Sahara's interior became an ideal springboard for launching attacks against French targets in Mauritania and Morocco. These intensified between the years 1923 and 1934, until France threatened to occupy Spain's territories if it did not crush Saharawi resistance activities. This led to the 'pacification' of the Saharawi tribes through joint Franco-Spanish military co-operation. Only in 1934 did Spain finally take full possession of its colony.

In the late 1940s, the discovery of the biggest high-grade phosphate deposits in the world ushered in a new era of deepened colonial interest in Western Sahara. But in 1956, as Morocco gained its independence from France, the spectre of renewed resistance looked to threaten Spain's plans. Members of Saharawi tribes had enthusiastically signed up to join the Army of Liberation, a broad anti-colonial struggle against the French and Spanish. The Saharawis formed their own wing. At this stage, however, it was hardly a nationalist movement, as the primary concern was to drive out foreign rule in the region rather than to build a nation.

Spain's colonial hold was under attack, and France's surrounding colonies in Algeria and Mauritania were also threatened, so the two countries once again co-operated to stamp out the destabilizing uprisings. This became possible with the complicity of the newly independent Moroccan government. In February 1958, in a military action known as the Ecouvillion Operation, the Saharawi wing of the Liberation Army was brutally put down. In return for helping to cut off their source of supplies and munitions from southern Morocco, Spain awarded Tarfaya to Morocco a couple of months later, in the Cintra Agreements (Diego Aguirre 1988). This strip, historically inhabited by Saharawis, lay directly north of today's Western Saharan border and had a distinct administrative status from the rest of Spain's colony. Saguiat el Hamra and Rio de Oro, the remaining regions, were then jointly declared a Spanish province and the colony was renamed Spanish Sahara.

Many of those who had fought in the Liberation Army fled to the Tarfaya region and for nearly a decade, Saharawi resistance was laid to rest.

1.1.3 The rise of Saharawi nationalism and the Polisario Front

Spain's mission to exploit the mineral wealth of Western Sahara in the 1950s and 1960s led to crucial changes in the Saharawi socio-economic reality (Seddon 1989). Most importantly, large numbers of Saharawis forcibly settled and urbanized; and coinciding with a gradual decline in their pastoral economy, they became cheap labour to work in the phosphate mines and expand the colonial infrastructure. Saharawis of different tribes and castes alike were living and working together in the growing towns of the territory and were being subjected to

the same conditions of oppression and exploitation. These various processes, by the late 1960s, had sparked renewed anti-colonial sentiments and had created the conditions for the emergence of a Saharawi identity that went beyond traditional kinship ties.

Towards the end of 1967, Harakat Tahrir (the movement for the liberation of Saguia el Hamra wa Oued ed-Dahab) was formed. Unlike previous forms of resistance, it was the territory's first urban-based political movement. Headed by Bassiri, a Koranic teacher in Smara, Harakat Tahrir called for the de-colonization of the territory and demanded wide-ranging social and economic reforms. It also sought radical changes to the Saharawi institution of sheikhs and the ineffective, undemocratic political mechanisms set up by the colonialists to 'represent' Saharawi interests. The movement attracted a broad base of support, particularly from the Saharawi youth, the unskilled and semi-skilled labour force, and, more alarming yet for the Spanish, a significant number of soldiers from the Nomadic Troops.

Under Franco's dictatorship this phenomenon was intolerable. When the movement decided to present its list of demands and grievances in 1970 through a peacefully organized demonstration, it was dealt with in a decisively harsh manner. Saharawis were killed, the leader was never seen again, and many members were arrested and imprisoned for months. Harakat Tahrir collapsed. Nonetheless, these events were to prove key for spurring on developments that were taking place elsewhere.

By 1970, an academic elite of some forty Saharawi students from the Tarfaya region were enrolled at the Mohammed V University in Rabat. They were influenced by radical student politics in Morocco, the rise of Third-World liberation movements, and the events in Spanish Sahara. Seeing themselves as the nucleus for a new liberation movement, they began recruiting Saharawis within Morocco and beyond, in Spanish Sahara, and from the Diaspora in Mauritania and Algeria. Initially, they also sought the support of the Moroccan government in their quest to end Spanish rule, but this changed after anti-Spanish demonstrations, staged in southern Morocco in 1972, led to widespread arrests. This incident, along with contact with former members of the Harakat Tahrir who sought independence rather than integration with Morocco, took the Rabat group in a more strongly nationalistic direction. The new centre of activity shifted to Zouerate in Mauritania, and on 10 May 1973, the Polisario Front declared its birth. It also aimed to build a nation that eradicated all forms of inequality and would use armed struggle to achieve total freedom from colonial rule.

Ten days after its inception, the Polisario Front launched the first of its hit-and-run attacks on Spanish targets. Despite being a small, poorly armed group, the effectiveness of the guerrilla fighters grew over the next two years. The level of support gained from the Saharawi population also grew dramatically.

1.1.4 The UN, the International Court of Justice and the question of Saharawi self-determination

In 1963, Western Sahara was included in the UN list of Non-Self-Governing Territories, which effectively identified those countries to be de-colonized. By 1966, the UN General Assembly had adopted its first resolution, requesting Spain, as administering power, to organize a referendum on self-determination for the people of Western Sahara. At the time, the OAU Council of Ministers also adopted the first of many resolutions on Western Sahara, calling for its 'freedom and independence'.

Spain did not indicate its readiness to implement the UN resolutions until eight years later, in 1974. Pressured by the increasingly emboldened Polisario operations, the Spanish announced plans to hold a referendum within the first six months of 1975. But at the very first signs of Spanish intentions to promote self-rule for Western Sahara, Morocco began to vigorously lobby support for its sovereignty claims over the territory. It even threatened military action if Spain included an independence option in the referendum. Mauritania, for reasons of self-preservation, also made a bid for part of Western Sahara. Tensions rose and the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution at the end of the year requesting Spain to postpone its planned referendum, in order to obtain an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague.

A UN visiting mission to the region in May 1975 witnessed unprecedented support for the Polisario Front, and confirmed in its report that a huge majority of Saharawis wanted independence and rejected the territorial claims of both Morocco and Mauritania. The ICJ's advisory opinion of 16 October 1975 vindicated these sentiments, declaring unequivocally that it had found no historical or legal ties whose nature either established Moroccan or Mauritanian territorial sovereignty over Western Sahara or impeded the application of the principle of self-determination.

Three historical events played an important role in influencing the view of the ICJ. These concerned treaties between the Moroccan sultans and European countries signed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Two of them with Spain, in 1767 and 1799 respectively, clearly indicated that beyond the Wad Noun region (now in southern Morocco) the sultans could not be held responsible for anything that befell Spaniards operating there, as their dominion did not extend that far. And in the nineteenth century, the sale to Morocco of an English trading post in the Tarfaya region was carried out with the understanding that, as it was not under the sultan's domain, it had no right to give any part away without first obtaining explicit consent from Britain.

Website:
International Court of Justice –
http://www.icj-cij.org/icjwww/idecisions/isummaries/isasummary751016.htm

1.1.5 The Greater Morocco Thesis: Moroccan and Mauritanian claims over Western Sahara

Morocco's sovereignty claims over Western Sahara originate in the Greater Morocco Thesis. First promulgated in 1956 by the leader of the Istiqlal party, it asserted that Western Sahara, Mauritania, part of Mali, a big chunk of the western Algerian desert, and even part of Senegal all belonged to a distant, mythic Morocco. This view, endorsed by the monarchy, referred to a period in the sixteenth century when the Moroccan empire held sway over vast stretches of land up to Timbuktu.

In practice, Morocco's numerous claims proved to be full of contradictions and inconsistencies. As early as 1957, a Moroccan delegate to the UN claimed Mauritania and Western Sahara. Yet in 1966, Morocco mysteriously ignored its expansionist dreams and expressed support for the rights of the Saharawi people to exercise self-determination, at a meeting of the UN Special Committee on Decolonization. This position was reiterated quite consistently until 1974. In fact, as late as 1973, in two separate tripartite summits, Morocco joined Algeria and Mauritania in the same pledge of support.

Meanwhile, by the early 1960s, Morocco had quietly dropped its claims to parts of Mali and Senegal in exchange for desirable economic and diplomatic outcomes. The claim to Mauritania was upheld throughout the 1960s; but then in 1970, the Moroccan king Hassan II signed a treaty of friendship and co-operation with Ould Daddah, the Mauritanian president, and granted the country full diplomatic recognition. Once again territorial claims were dropped. As for Algeria, Morocco's failed 1963 military campaign to forcefully take part of its neighbour's western desert eventually led to the signing of a convention, in 1972, recognizing the existing borders between the two countries.

When claims to Mauritania and parts of Algeria were dropped, only Western Sahara remained. Although this was strongly resented by the Istiqlal party, Hassan II believed that in the case of Western Sahara, self-determination would lead to eventual integration with Morocco. In 1974, however, when this appeared unlikely, the Moroccan government abandoned its commitment to self-determination and once again asserted its right to direct annexation.

The political survival of the monarchy had, by this time, become inextricably tied to its determination to claim Western Sahara. This was starkly evident when Hassan II defied the landmark ICJ opinion of 16 October and announced on the same day that he would launch the Green March. Some 350,000 Moroccan unarmed citizens would be mobilized to enter into Western Sahara and reclaim the 'ancestral lands'. Although roundly condemned by the UN, Spain, and Algeria, this act decisively set the stage for the ultimate endgame.

1.1.6 Spanish abandonment and the double invasion of Western Sahara

Towards the end of its colonial era, Spain had begun to reap substantial economic benefits from the rich phosphate deposits in Western Sahara; and by 1975, it had become the sixth major exporter in the world. Hassan II's astuteness in pushing his claim to Western Sahara lay in pandering to Madrid's economic interests in the territory while also exploiting the fragile internal political situation that prevailed due to Franco's failing health. Hassan II gambled that with the right kind and amount of threat to the Spanish colony, events would turn his way. It paid off.

Indeed, Spain was very keen to avoid any kind of military confrontation with Morocco. A military incursion into Western Sahara on 31 October followed by the highly publicized Green March of Moroccans crossing into Spain's colony on 6 November broke Iberian resolve. Key Spanish historians believe that had Franco been alive, the Saharawis would have obtained their independence (Diego Aguirre 1988). But from the moment he became incapacitated to make decisions—ironically, the day after the ICJ opinion—different factions in his government took over. The ones willing to negotiate with Morocco ultimately prevailed. For as long as possible, however, Spain kept up the appearance of negotiating the gradual transfer of power to the Polisario. Back in Madrid, a deal was secretly hatching to hand administrative control over to Morocco and Mauritania, and by 14 November, the Tripartite Madrid Accord was signed. Spain was assured a 35 per cent share of the phosphate wealth.

The Polisario, who had come to represent Saharawi aspirations, vigorously opposed the deal, but it was already too late. Spain's rapid evacuation from the colony before the end of the year was coupled with the build-up of Moroccan and Mauritanian forces along the northern and southern borders. The double invasion that followed was resisted by the Polisario forces, sparking armed hostilities that would endure for sixteen years.

By early 1976, Western Sahara was divided and occupied by the two neighbours. Morocco had secured about two-thirds of the northern part of the territory and Mauritania the remaining third in the south. When a defeated Mauritania renounced its claims over Western Sahara in 1979, Morocco annexed the rest of the territory.

Websites:
Western Sahara Online - www.wsahara.net/

ARSO - www.arso.org/

1.3 Politics

The political status of Western Sahara has been complicated and unresolved since the Spanish withdrew in 1975. On 27 February 1976, on the eve of Spain's official transfer of administrative control of Western Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania, the Polisario Front self-proclaimed the creation of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Acting as a government-in-exile ever since, this symbolic move was taken to fill the political vacuum created by Spain's departure. Nevertheless, it did not stop the two new occupying powers from dividing up Western Sahara. Consistent with its integrationist policy, Morocco renamed Saguiet el-Hamra the Saharan provinces of Laayoune, Smara, and Boujdour and ensured the region would participate in local elections controlled by the Alawite Kingdom by 1977. When Morocco subsequently annexed the remaining section of Western Sahara in 1979 after Mauritania withdrew from the conflict and recognized the SADR, it was renamed the Southern Province of Oued ed-Dahab and integrated into the Moroccan polity in 1983.

The civilian population living in occupied Western Sahara is subject to Moroccan law, and only Saharawis whose political views are aligned with the government fill the seats allotted to the Western Sahara in the Moroccan Parliament. Despite pretentions to being a democracy within a constitutional monarchy, the reality in Morocco and the occupied zones reveals absolute intolerance towards views or political parties that promote independence for Western Sahara.

To date, no country in the world has recognized Morocco's de facto annexation of Western Sahara. It has failed in its long-desired quest to legitimize its occupation. If anything, the SADR has achieved a considerable degree of legitimacy. It was accepted as a full member state of the OAU in 1984 and enjoys full diplomatic ties with over sixty-five countries. Nevertheless, the SADR has not yet been recognized by a Western country and the Polisario Front only holds an observer status in the UN.

Website:
Electionworld: Elections in Sahara - www.electionworld.org/sahara.htm

1.4 Culture and society

Prior to the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara, various Saharawi tribes made up the primary ethnic group inhabiting the territory. A Spanish census conducted in 1974 put the size of the overall Saharawi population at just under 75,000. There is no indication of Moroccan settlers in the census.

Although Spanish Sahara was a province of Spain, it did not become a settler colony like French Algeria. Saharawi culture and society remained largely intact and nomadic throughout

most of the colonial period. But in the late 1960s and early 1970s, consecutive droughts forced substantial numbers of Saharawis to abandon animal husbandry and settle in the Spanish-built cities to subsist on colonial handouts. This trend of urbanization had an impact on the culture, especially on young people, who began to adopt Spanish dress and cultural tastes.

Saharawi culture and identity represents a distinctive combination of Berber, Arab, and African traits and shares many similarities with Mauritanian society. The form of dress, music, and dance point to strong African roots, while the spoken language (Hassaniya), the poetic tradition, and the religion have been shaped by the successive Arab Muslim invasions in the region over the centuries. Nevertheless, the Islam practiced by the Saharawis betrays Berber nomadic influences, especially with regard to women, as they enjoy a prominent social status and are able to re-marry freely without social prejudice.

Since the Moroccan annexation, the Saharawis have become a minority within their own land. This is due to a deliberate policy to Moroccanize Western Sahara and make the occupation irreversible. Between 1975 and 1991, large numbers of settlers came from northern Morocco, drawn by strong economic incentives. Following the period of the OAU–UN Settlement Plan from 1991, the Moroccan government brought in more Moroccans as well as tens of thousands of 'pro-Moroccan' ethnic Saharawis from the Tarfaya region. Living like virtual refugees, they have been set up in large *wahda* (unity) camps on the outskirts of Laayoune and Smara and were supposed to participate in the referendum, which has yet to take place.

For some parts of the territory, disparities in the population growth evidence a continuing and rapid influx of Moroccan settlers. In smaller towns like Boujdour and Dakhla, the rate is 4.8 per cent, whereas the national average is just over 2 per cent. According to the US State Department, estimated figures for the overall population size in the occupied territory range from 260,000 to 400,000. The latter figure was quoted by *Le Monde* in 2002, while statistics offered by local Moroccan authorities suggest something in between. These approximate figures do not take into account the large presence of the Moroccan army in Western Sahara nor the extensive web of security forces.

Exact demographic breakdowns are difficult to obtain. Moroccan authorities have little interest in distinguishing between the native Saharawis and the Moroccan settlers. For the most part the population lives in towns: the range varies from 95 per cent for the Laayoune region to 60 per cent for the Smara part of the Goulimine-Smara region. Based on anecdotal evidence and the initial UN figure of 46,255 eligible Saharawi voters on the occupied side, it is reasonable to extrapolate that there are at least 90,000 indigenous Saharawis in the territory. Various observers and informal sources estimate that the Saharawis are outnumbered by Moroccans by three to one.

There is virtually no integration between the Moroccan settler population and the indigenous Saharawis. Marriages between the two communities have not been known to occur. Any interaction that does take place is almost solely out of necessity. Education, of course, is an inevitable realm of interface and is a site of cultural contest (Shelley 2004). All the schools are Moroccan-run and are overwhelmingly staffed by Moroccan teachers. From early on, Saharawi students experience a divergence between the taught curricula history and the oral history related at home, and become aware of differences in customs and culture. Officially, the school attendance rate is high. But many Saharawi families maintain that the drop-out rate

for their children is steep because of all the corollary costs involved in sending them to school.

Website:
U.S. Department of State: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, Western Sahara, 2003 - http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/27941.htm

1.5 Geography
Western Sahara is located in north-west Africa and covers an area of 266,000 km^2. It is roughly the size of Britain. It shares a 443 km-long border with Morocco in the north, a 42 km-long border with Algeria to the east, a 1,561 km-long border with Mauritania to the south-east, and has a 1,100 km-long Atlantic Ocean coastline.

The topography is mostly made up of low, flat desert with large areas of rocky or sandy surfaces rising to small mountains in the south and the north-east. The lowest point is the salt flat of Sebhet Tah at 55 m below sea level, and the highest (unnamed) point is 463 m. The climate is continental in the interior, with cold, dry winters and extremely hot summers with temperatures reaching 60 ºC (in the shade). Along the coastal area, cold offshore air currents produce fog and heavy dew. Rain is rare, and there are no permanent bodies of surface water.

Western Sahara is divided into two regions, Saguiet el-Hamra in the north and Wadi ed-Dahab (Rio de Oro) in the south. The northern zone is characterized by dry riverbeds. Saguiet El-Hamra (the 'Red Canal'—the most important one) lends its name to the region and gathers rain during the brief rainy seasons, generally in the autumn. But because of the high temperatures, the water evaporates before it reaches the sea. Sufficient vegetation for grazing grows along its banks, and at Smara, barley and corn are cultivated. In Wadi ed-Dahab, the ground is too permeable to retain the autumn waters and too flat to allow it to flow; hence water accumulates in the subsoil, forming numerous wells.

Website:
CIA World Factbook: Western Sahara Government - http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/wi.html#Govt

1.6 Economy
Western Sahara is considered rich in mineral resources. In addition to its extensive phosphate deposits, it is believed to harbour substantial iron ore. Numerous oil-exploration studies also point to the potential of large offshore oil reserves. The territory is renowned for its rich fishing waters off the long coastline.

Pastoral nomadism, once the mainstay of the Saharawi livelihood, has dwindled greatly. No more than 10 per cent of the population practice it today. Trade, historically an important economic activity, has also been largely undermined by the conflict. Movement across the border with Mauritania from the Moroccan occupied zone has been virtually impossible. Saharawis living in the Polisario-controlled areas of Western Sahara, however, are able to move in and out of Mauritania. According to the governor of Smara, Morocco has also begun looking for ways to increase the volume of trade with Mauritania via Western Sahara. In 2002, a border-crossing south of Smara was opened, and another had been opened earlier south of Dakhla at the point where the coastal Route 41 runs into Mauritania.

For the most part, Western Sahara's economic potential has yet to be unlocked. The disputed status of the territory presents an obstacle for the Moroccan government. International law dictates that only a legitimate sovereign state can use and dispose of natural resources. Morocco enjoys neither sovereign legitimacy in Western Sahara nor recognition in the UN list as the administrating power for a Non-Self-Governing Territory. The latter status was not conferred upon Morocco during the Tripartite Madrid Agreement because Spain did not have the unilateral right to authorize such transfer of power. With this status Morocco could exploit resources only if it did not go against the desires and interests of the indigenous Saharawi population.

Regardless, Morocco has persisted with its economic plans for Western Sahara. According to official figures, it has invested at least US$1 billion in the infrastructure since 1976. Over 90 per cent of households have electricity and 80 per cent have drinking water. Both these rates are much higher than the figures given for the Moroccan national average (Shelley 2004).

In recent years, the Moroccan government has been pursuing ambitious plans to develop the fishing industry as part of its overall scheme to boost fish exports. It has invested roughly US$90 million in upgrading existing ports, modernizing the fishing fleets, and building new fishing communities. Seasonally, the fishing industry employs up to 12,000 people, although hardly any of them are Saharawi. The reasons are partly cultural. Saharawis have no experience of fishing as a way of life. Also, most cannot afford the initial capital investments required. In terms of the phosphate industry, a third of Morocco's exports originate from Western Sahara, and the mines at Bu Craa employ the largest permanent workforce, of some 2,000. Again, of these, the Saharawis represent a minority and increasingly have been restricted to low-paid manual jobs.

In the past ten years, Morocco's state oil industry, ONAREP, has entered into contract with various foreign companies for oil reconnaissance and evaluation, but Polisario protests and international campaigning have so far discouraged further steps towards actual exploitation. In 2002, the highest-level UN legal counsel deemed such activities would be illegal. The Polisario is seeking a similar opinion in regard to Morocco's fishing and phosphate-exporting activities. Most recently, in 2004, Morocco signed up with Wessex Oil, a company with offices in both London and Houston, to undertake new oil explorations.

On the whole, the territory is desperately underdeveloped. Its economic activity rate is the lowest for any region under Moroccan control. Due to an almost complete lack of private investment, employment is primarily provided for by the public sector. In 2002, the number employed in the public domain was around 20,000, versus a paltry 2,620 in the private sector. This is very costly, as the salaries paid out are at least 85 per cent higher than in Morocco proper: part of the economic incentive package to lure settlers. Other 'benefits' include widespread subsidies for a range of basic goods, and most importantly, large-scale building has been undertaken to provide free new housing for newcomers and to generate new jobs (Shelley 2004).

Job opportunities are very limited. Official unemployment rates are dismal. Hovering at 25 per cent and above, it is well over the national average, which in recent years has stood at around 13 per cent. The figure is even higher for the indigenous Saharawis, according to the Association of the Saharawi Unemployed. It claims that 86–8 per cent of available jobs are occupied by Moroccans, and that employment generation is targeted at the settlers, to keep them in Western Sahara. It appears that Saharawis are all but excluded from state jobs with

responsibilities or higher salaries. Such a situation has been the basis for widespread grievances among the Saharawis, and has led to sporadic manifestations and clashes with the Moroccan authorities.

As long as Morocco is unable to reap any significant economic profits from the territory, the costs to maintain its occupation in Western Sahara will remain considerable. The military costs alone amount to US$3–4 million per day. The price for not addressing rampant unemployment among the Saharawis is also likely to generate further social and political costs.

Websites:
Infoplease - http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0759052.html

Western Sahara Online: Legal Opinion of UN Office of Legal Affairs on the legality of the oil-contracts signed by Morocco - http://www.wsahara.net/legalcounsel.html

Centre for International and Strategic Studies: 'The North African Conventional Military Balance in 2000' - http://www.csis.org/mideast/reports/nafricabalance2000.pdf

New Internationalist: 'Western Sahara: The Facts' - http://www.newint.org/issue297/facts.html

1.7 The 'liberated zone'

A brief mention needs to be made of the area of Western Sahara under Polisario control. Since the Moroccans built the berm, the region beyond it in Western Sahara has effectively been under the domain of the Polisario forces. The area, corresponding to about one-fifth of the entire territory, is a narrow strip running along the entire eastern and south-eastern border. It is divided into numerous military regions where the Polisario have carried out their training exercises during the cease-fire period.

All the main towns in Western Sahara are within the Moroccan-controlled part. There is virtually no infrastructure within the 'liberated zone'. In the past few years, a number of Spanish organizations have provided financial and material support to build two hospitals in preparation for an eventual referendum, but apart from that, there is very little else. The area is known to be of great archeological interest, with many cave paintings and Neolithic sites. Between 10,000 and 30,000 Saharawis continue practising a nomadic pastoral life in the area despite the constant danger presented by landmines.

Website:
International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL): Landmine Monitor - www.icbl.org/lm/2003/western_sahara.html

2 Causes and consequences

2.1 Conflict-induced displacement

The events triggered by the Moroccan and Mauritanian invasions of Western Sahara at the end of 1975 are directly linked to the large displacement of the Saharawi population, most of whom live as refugees in south-west Algeria. The major bulk of Saharawis became refugees after Moroccan planes bombed civilian camps in the interior of Western Sahara with banned napalm and cluster bombs in the early months of 1976. At that point, it became evident that

the Polisario resistance forces were ill equipped to protect ordinary Saharawis. The south-western desert region near Tindouf offered a potential safe region in Algeria.

The next Saharawi exodus, although on a smaller scale, took place in 1979 when Mauritania withdrew from the conflict and Morocco annexed the rest of Western Sahara. Exact figures cannot be provided for the numbers that fled the territory in those two waves, but the current size of the population in the refugee camps is believed to be in the region of 165,000. Used by the Algerian government, this figure is the most widely quoted by NGOs and is also used by the UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP) to raise funds for food aid to the refugees. In the 2004 WFP meeting in Rome, the number of refugees was officially recognized at 158,000.

Apart from individual cases of Saharawis successfully escaping the repressive Moroccan occupation, there has been relatively little forced population movement since 1979. According to the Saharawi Red Crescent Society, relatively small numbers have arrived safely to the camps since 1976. Ironically, fear of Moroccan infiltrators and spies meant that these Saharawis were often initially treated with suspicion and hostility.

Website:
World Food Programme (WFP) - www.wfp.org/index.asp?section=7_1

2.1.1 The Saharawi refugees in south-west Algeria

Like the vast majority of refugees in the world, the Saharawis in the camps are mostly made up of women, children, and the elderly. The main difference in this case, however, is that the Saharawi refugees themselves have been the ones running their own affairs and organizing camp life with little outside interference. This has been partly due to the willingness of their Algerian hosts to grant the Saharawis a degree of autonomy on their land. But equally important, the Polisario have, from the start of exile, set out to prepare the population for a future independent Western Sahara. As a result, much emphasis has been placed on developing human resources and striving for self-reliance. The refugees are indeed dependent on food and other essential aid for survival; however, organizations like the UNHCR that provide assistance to the camps have never run any programs there, in contrast to the case in Palestine, for example.

The Saharawi refugees are located in one of the most hostile and barren deserts of the world, in the remote south-western corner of Algeria, near the town of Tindouf. They are organized into four large camps called *wilayas*. Each *wilaya* is named after a main town in Western Sahara. These in turn are divided into six or seven *dairas*, which are each made up of four neighbourhoods. Every *daira* has its own primary school, health clinic, and administration. Between 6,000 and 8,000 refugees live in each *daira*. These days, most of the children are sent abroad to continue their studies after primary school. For the adults, there are numerous vocational centres, including three for women that offer training in subjects such as information technology (IT) and languages. Two centres for mentally handicapped children have been set up in recent years to help them become self-reliant and change negative attitudes towards them in the society. There are also reinvigorated efforts to cultivate food after a period of decline, and several new gardens have been established in the most distant camp, called Dakhla, which is more vulnerable to shortages.

Remarkably, in nearly thirty years of forced exile, the Saharawi refugees have managed to practically eradicate illiteracy, which stood at 95 per cent in 1975. Women have also made

impressive strides. They have played a key role in running camp life from the earliest days when the men were away at the warfront. Over the years, they have acquired skills and training in a wide range of professions that go well beyond traditional female realms. This has been possible because girls as much as boys have enjoyed equal educational opportunities. Many girls have been sent abroad on scholarships, sometimes for long periods of time, to receive university degrees. For a historically conservative, nomadic, Muslim society, this is quite radical.

Websites:
New Internationalist: 'Western Sahara: The Facts' -
http://www.newint.org/issue297/facts.html

Bhatia, M. 'Western Sahara under Polisario Control: Summary Report of Field Mission to the Sahrawi Refugee Camps (near Tindouf, Algeria)' - http://www.arso.org/bhatia2001.htm

2.1.2 Disappearances
The darkest phase of the Moroccan occupation in Western Sahara was unquestionably between 1975 and 1991, when the practice of 'disappearances' was widespread. Men, women (including pregnant ones), children, and the elderly were targeted if they had either any known Polisario relatives or were suspected of harbouring pro-independence or pro-Polisario views. Major human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International (AI) and Human Rights Watch believe that at least a thousand Saharawis were 'disappeared' in that period. The main Moroccan agents responsible for the disappearances have been the Forces of the Royal Army, the Department de Securite Territorial, the Gendarmarie Royale, and the Judicial Police. Following the large-scale wave of disappearances in the early years of the occupation, the last major one took place in 1987, when mostly Saharawi youth staged the first demonstration since Morocco annexed the territory in 1975.

In 1991, the 350 officially recognized Saharawi disappeared were released by Hassan II in a royal pardon. Until then the Moroccan kingdom had vigorously denied holding any Saharawi prisoners of conscious, much in the same way it had denied the existence of notorious secret detention centres such as Agdz, Kalaat Magouna, and one in Al-Auin, where hundreds of prisoners are known to have died under terrible conditions. Determining how many disappeared were released before 1991 has been problematic. What is known, however, is that at least 250 disappeared are still unaccounted for. Between 110 and 130 of them are from families that live in the occupied territory, and another 100 or so are from families who only have relatives in the refugee camps. The number is constantly being revised as more and more Saharawi families have begun to break the silence and speak about their disappeared relatives.

After 1991, the Moroccan authorities considered the question of disappearances a closed chapter. But the persistence of various campaign groups and organizations, such as AI, Bureau des Droits de l'Homme au Sahara Occidental (BIRDSO), and Asociación de Familiares de Presos y Desaparecidos Saharauis (AFAPREDESA), finally led to a small breakthrough in 1998 when the Moroccan government provided a list of 112 names of Saharawi disappeared. In no way did it admit to any wrongdoing or explain the reasons and circumstances for their disappearance. It was also wholly unsatisfactory in providing information about what had become of them. More recently, because of the efforts of a small group of Saharawi human rights activists in the Occupied Territories (OT), who are all former political prisoners, over 200 names were adopted by the UN agency Working Group

on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances (WGEID) in 2002. Due to its rigorous standards, it had not previously taken up many Saharawi cases for lack of precise information. This channel has been yielding some results in getting more substantial responses from the Moroccan government about the fate of the Saharawi disappeared.

In 1998, Morocco pledged that forced disappearances would not recur. Indeed, since the new king, Mohammed VI, took the throne in 1999, there have been signs of positive developments in regard to Morocco's willingness to address the claims of former disappeared Saharawis and to disclose as much information as possible on past cases. In the wake of setting up the Arbitration Commission of the Royal Advisory Council on Human Rights to provide preliminary compensation payments to affected Saharawis, the king approved the creation of the Justice and Reconciliation Committee on 6 November 2003. This is a non-judicial body to pursue out-of-court settlements of human rights abuses related to forced disappearances and arbitrary detention prior to 1999. The Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH), the more progressive of the two national Moroccan human rights organizations, also included in its latest report the names of 118 Saharawi disappeared who remain unaccounted for. This figure only takes into account those persons whose families live in the OT.

Website:
Asociación de Familiares de Presos y Desaparecidos Saharauis (AFAPREDESA) - http://www.derechos.org/afapredesa/

2.1.3 Human rights abuses

After 1991, the pattern of human rights abuses in occupied Western Sahara shifted from long-term imprisonment and disappearances to one of repeated arrests and shorter-term prison sentences. Indeed, no more than three cases of disappeared Saharawis have been reported since 1992. Nevertheless, the practice of torture during detention is still known to take place on a regular basis, and according to AI, the number of reported incidents appears to have risen sharply between 2002 and 2004. Many human rights abuses are believed to take place during the period of *garde-a-vue* (pre-arraignment detention). Human rights activists, both in Morocco and occupied Western Sahara, assert that the Moroccan state practices the policy of criminalizing all political activity.

Hundreds upon hundreds of Saharawis have been arrested since 1991 as a result of staging protests against high-level Moroccan visits to the territory or demanding improved economic conditions, which then became political in nature. The most prominent instances were in 1992, 1995, 1999, and 2001. In many cases, Saharawis have been tortured in order to extract false confessions and have been given prison terms of one to ten years. Vigorous international campaigning, especially by AI and other campaign groups, have often been effective in pressuring Morocco to release Saharawi prisoners well before the end of their terms. In 2001, the longest-serving Saharawi prisoner of conscious (for twenty-three years), Sidi Mohammed Daddach, was released and awarded the Norwegian Rafto prize in recognition of his sacrifice to the Saharawi cause of independence.

More subtle forms of human rights abuses, such as the lack of freedom of expression, association, and movement, are a constant feature of the Saharawi experience under occupation. Numerous Saharawis who are considered troublemakers, such as known human rights activists, are deprived of travel documents. The US State Department Country Report on Human Rights acknowledges that Saharawis are under much heavier surveillance than the

rest of the population, and that access to the territory and to Saharawis remains highly restricted in many instances. Also, there is substantial evidence to suggest that Saharawis are systematically discriminated against in the workplace and in terms of obtaining job opportunities.

Morocco has consistently accused the Polisario of holding the Saharawis hostage in the refugee camps in south-west Algeria. The Polisario deny this, and no organization that has worked in the camps has corroborated this claim. Serious human rights concerns do exist, however, in regard to the Polisario's ongoing detention of Moroccan POWs, some of whom have been held for more than twenty years. The third Geneva Convention stipulates that all POWs should be released upon the cessation of armed hostilities. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), AI, and the UN have vigorously condemned the situation. The criticism has led the Polisario to release 843 Moroccan POWs, although, as of June 2004, 414 are still being held.

Websites:
US State Department Human Rights Country Report: Western Sahara - http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2003/27941.htm

Canadian Lawyers Association for International Human Rights (CLAIHR) - http://www.claihr.org/

International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) - http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/4CD4BDD827B7B464C1256C050045A252/$File/TUNIS_AR_2001.pdf?OpenElement

2.1.4 Moroccanization
One of the major results of the occupation has been the overall trend of Moroccanization in Western Sahara. Aggressive integrationist policies have ensured that an overwhelming Moroccan presence is installed in the territory and dominates the sociocultural, political, and economic life.

Credible sources estimate that up to 200,000 Moroccans have settled in Western Sahara since 1991. The Moroccan government is adamant in treating Western Sahara as one of its southern Saharan provinces and tries to ensure, with each step it takes, that its de facto annexation is irreversible.

Saharawi human and political activists claim there is a process of gradual cultural genocide taking place. Hassaniya, primarily spoken at home, is dominated by the Moroccan dialect spoken in the streets, workplace, and schools. Cultural output is controlled and defined by the Moroccan authorities in collaboration with the pro-Moroccan Saharawis. The dispersal of Saharawi youth into the interior of Morocco for work opportunities and tertiary education is also perceived as an attempt to dilute and destroy Saharawi identity.

2.1.5 Militarization
Over the course of the sixteen-year conflict, the Moroccans built up a massive military presence in Western Sahara, which continues to date. This process began in earnest in 1981, when war tactics changed and the Moroccan army undertook the construction of the first of six defensive walls, known as berms, which would stretch over a distance of 2,720 km (2,200 km of the which lies inside Western Sahara). With the final section of the wall completed in

1987, Morocco had consolidated all the areas held from the north to the south. The berm originates in south-eastern Morocco and ends near the tip of Mauritania's north-western border. Built with substantial military and financial assistance from the USA and Israel, the berm has been fortified with an estimated 1–2 million anti-tank and anti-personnel landmines, and is manned by 100,000–200,000 soldiers. Stationed along the berm at around 10-km intervals are 240 heavy artillery units equipped with sophisticated surveillance equipment.

The berm was meant to protect the economic interests of the Moroccan occupation. It also aimed to undermine the effectiveness of Polisario strikes that had succeeded in reaching the Western Sahara's Atlantic coast, and to deter fishing activities. Nevertheless, the guerrillas learnt how to penetrate the wall and stage simultaneous attacks. The sitting-duck situation was demoralizing for the Moroccan soldiers, and many defected. A military stalemate developed. By the late 1980s the costs of the war and the limited effectiveness of the wall eventually convinced King Hassan II to seek a peaceful solution. From this emerged the OAU–UN-sponsored Settlement Plan, agreed to by both parties in1988 and adopted in a 1991 UN Security Council resolution.

Websites:
ICBL: Western Sahara Mine Ban Policy - http://www.icbl.org/lm/2001/western_sahara

United Nations Security Council: Report by the Secretary-General, 'The Situation Concerning Western Sahara' - http://membres.lycos.fr/tomdsm/s22464.pdf

La Nouvelle République: 'Séparant les territoires occupés de ceux libérés par le Polisario' - http://www.lanouvellerepublique.com/actualite/lire.php?ida=11594&idc=13

2.1.6 Settlement Plan

Had the OAU–UN Settlement Plan been implemented by now, the Saharawis would almost undoubtedly be an independent nation. A UN-organized referendum scheduled to take place in early 1992 was designed to give the Saharawis a choice between independence or integration with Morocco. The electorate would have been based on the Saharawi population as identified in a Spanish census of 1974. But this referendum has never taken place, and the UN mandate to continue the mission, known as United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), has been extended countless times. A mission that was projected to cost around US$200 million has now run over three times the original budget.

Morocco's categorical unwillingness to consider the possible existence of an independent Western Sahara has presented endless obstacles to the process. Its intransigence, however, has also been coupled with a general lack of international will to enforce its own UN Security Council resolutions and pressure Morocco to co-operate with the Settlement Plan. For years the process was stalled; first, on interpretation over voter eligibility, then on appeals eligibility. When in 1997 former US Secretary of State James Baker came on board as Special Envoy, he got the two parties to sign up to the Houston Agreements, which entailed a code of conduct for the identification phase. A provisional list of eligible voters was finally published at the end of 1999, and the referendum seemed imminent. But Morocco, which had been opposed to the publication of the list, began clamouring for another lengthy round of appeals. The UN at this stage agreed to let Baker explore solutions outside the framework of the Settlement Plan in 2000.

Websites:

Human Rights Watch: 'Keeping It Secret: The United Nations Operation in the Western Sahara' - http://www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Wsahara.htm

MINURSO
http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/minurso/

González, Ángel Pérez, 'The Sahara Issue and the Stability of Morocco', 2002 - http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/155.asp

The Washington Institute - Policy Watch No. 401 (1999)
http://www.washingtoninstitute.org

2.2 Current situation and latest developments

Initially, in 2001, Baker came up with a vague one-page proposal known as the Draft Framework. It effectively subverted the letter and spirit of the referendum process, as it would allow the addition of Moroccan settlers to the voters' rolls. The Saharawis rejected it outright. Experts, and certainly the Polisario, regarded it as a flagrant attempt to legitimize Morocco's occupation.

In 2003, Baker returned with a fleshed-out version of the Draft Framework. This time, the main difference was a clarification that at the end of a transitional period of autonomy, under provisional Moroccan sovereignty, eligible Saharawis and the bulk of settlers would vote for either independence, continued autonomy, or complete integration. Also, both parties to the conflict would be barred from intimate involvement in the referendum process. To everyone's surprise, Polisario accepted this revised Baker plan with some reservation. Now called the Peace Plan for the Self-determination of Western Sahara, it was also approved by the UN Security Council. Morocco, however, rejected it on the basis that it would lose control over the process and that independence had been included as an option. In mantra-like fashion, Morocco has since openly stated that it will only work towards a solution which does not either affect its national sovereignty or territorial integrity. This, of course, is a very different tune to the one it played for years when it appeared to go along with the OAU–UN Settlement Plan.

The latest moves have been to embark on confidence-building measures between the two sides. Under the auspices of the UNHCR, a five-day exchange of visits between close family members from both sides of the berm began in March 2004, to be continued under review for a period of 6 months thereafter. A phone service was also set up between the camps and the Moroccan-occupied territory, and there are plans to have a mail service too, if the Moroccans agree. The hope is that all these steps will generate a favourable climate for both sides to work towards an agreement based on the latest plan that the UN Secretary General considers the best way forward.

Baker's resignation as Special Envoy to Kofi Annan, in June 2004, has cast yet more uncertainty onto the future of the UN mission in Western Sahara. Alvaro de Soto from Peru has been appointed to take his place. Various indications suggest efforts are being made by France, Spain, and Morocco to frame the conflict in Western Sahara as a bilateral problem that needs to be resolved between Algeria and Morocco. This approach is unlikely to succeed, as it would exclude the Polisario voice in negotiations and echo the distant events leading up to the Tripartite Madrid Accords in 1975.

Websites:
ARSO
http://www.arso.org/S-325-2004e.htm

Middle East Report Online
http://www.merip.org/mero/mero080103.html
http://www.merip.org/mer/mer227/227_zoubir.html

2.3 Disaster-induced displacement
To the knowledge of the author no disasters apart from severe droughts in the late 1960s and early 1970s have affected population movement in Western Sahara. At that time, significant numbers of Saharawi nomads, whose herds had been wiped out, were forced to settle in semi-squalid slums in the Spanish-built colonial cities to survive.

2.4 Development-induced displacement
There is no indication so far that any development projects in Western Sahara, either in the occupied area or the liberated zone, have forced the population from their homes.

3 Needs and Responses
3.1 Aid and development in the Saharawi refugee camps
Dire political developments in Algeria and overshadowing events in the world since 1991 have affected the flow and reliability of vital aid to the refugee camps. The OAU–UN Settlement Plan and the uncertainty of its outcome have also had a negative impact. Humanitarian agencies have been reluctant to commit any substantial long-term aid for badly needed development projects because of the possibility that the Saharawis would be returning home. Significantly, as the Polisario could no longer rely on Algeria for the bulk of aid—it had its own economic crisis—it had to turn mostly to Europe for the survival needs of the refugees. This presented an opportunity for Morocco to influence European sources and politicize a humanitarian reality.

Indeed, food aid has been precarious over the past decade, and malnutrition has skyrocketed. In 2002, the WFP claimed that the refugees faced the prospects of obtaining only 11 per cent of their daily nutritional requirements; and a study showed that 35 per cent of the children suffered from chronic malnutrition, while 13 per cent were acutely malnourished. Stunting of children's growth was widespread. The special needs of pregnant and lactating mothers were also severely affected. As an example of a protracted refugee situation, the Saharawis are susceptible to being overlooked by the international community, and the budgets for vital food programs like WFP, UNHCR, and the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) have been subject to slashes at a time when the population is growing. The alarm bells in early 2004 were finally heard, and food aid has been boosted temporarily.

For those Saharawi refugees with financial means, food shortages have been supplemented by burgeoning markets in the camps. This is a relatively new phenomenon. All kinds of small shops and services are available, and making money has become a driving force. The downside, of course, is that a gap is emerging between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' in a way that was not evident before. Until the early 1990s, there was no economy and no circulation of money in the camps. Affairs were conducted on an exchange basis: the refugees received their essential food and housing needs through the Polisario, and had access to free education and health care. In return, they worked without salary according to their capacity in the

various sectors of camp life. With the need to prepare for independence, however, it has become important to reintroduce and develop an economic system, albeit a limited one.

Websites:
WFP
http://www.wfp.org/index.asp?section=7_1

3.2 Repatriation and landmines

The repatriation of the Saharawi refugees to Western Sahara to vote in the referendum has been amongst the sticking points of the OAU–UN Settlement Plan. The main concern for the refugees has been their security in the territory. Anxiety stems from the large military presence (some 65,000 members of the security services) that would continue to exist during the voting period, as well as from the history of Morocco's repression against the indigenous population. Ideas to repatriate the refugees initially to the liberated zone have also been problematic. Firstly, there is a very limited infrastructure, and the logistics of providing food and water for over 129,000—the number of refugees pre-registered for repatriation—would be a huge burden on Polisario resources. The refugees would also be within striking distance of the Moroccan troops behind the defensive wall. Indeed, in a last-ditch attempt to prevent the implementation of the cease-fire in 1991, Moroccan troops and planes bombed sites in the liberated zone, where the Polisario had built schools and a hospital in preparation for the referendum.

On a chronic and pervasive level, the question of landmines remains an endemic obstacle to repatriation. After years of colonial and post-colonial conflict, mines and unexploded ordinance (UXO) litter the territory. The UNHCR estimates there may be up to 10 million landmines in Western Sahara. The most mine-affected area is thought to extend 10 km east of the berms; and the location of UXO, found throughout the whole of Western Sahara, is largely unknown. To complicate matters more, the desert conditions of sand, wind, and occasional heavy rain make mine-shifting a constant phenomenon.

The scale of the problem is huge, and MINURSO have not had the adequate funding, expertise, or equipment to tackle the situation effectively. The uncertainty of the political process has affected efforts too. For a brief period, after Baker revived the Settlement Plan in 1997, there was a small flurry of mine clearance and mine-awareness projects initiated in Western Sahara and the refugee camps. Norwegian Peoples Aid provided mine-awareness education for some 90,000 Saharawi refugees over two years, and the Swedish Demining Unit did a two-and-a-half month stint with MINURSO. Morocco and the Polisario also agreed, in 1999, to fully co-operate with MINURSO to provide all available data on mines and assist in addressing the situation, including mine-disposal operations. The non-governmental Saharawi Campaign to Ban Mines (SCABAM) was established in early 2000 to monitor and document the situation.

Initiatives so far have fallen way short of requirements, yet no further landmine-related activities by NGOs have been pursued since 2000. The Global Landmine Survey initiative (a group of mine action-related NGOs and the UN Mine Action Service), which deemed Western Sahara a top priority to survey, never followed up on a preliminary visit made in 1999. Under the present circumstances, the repatriation of Saharawi refugees remains highly risky, if not improbable. The UNHCR have clearly indicated that without proper prior mine clearance it would be impossible to run a smooth repatriation operation.

Website:
International Campaign to Ban Landmines
http://www.icbl.org

3.3 Saharawis in exile

Compared to the size of the Saharawi refugee population, the communities in exile are small. The most significant ones are in Mauritania, the Canary Islands, and mainland Spain. A tiny community has historically also existed in and around Tindouf in Algeria.

The communities in Spain and the Canaries are highly unstable. Many of the Saharawis there are either studying or earning some money to support family in the camps or OT. Since the mid-1990s, in particular, a relatively steady influx of Saharawis has been going from the refugee camps to seek work in Spain. In a very rough manner it is possible to say that a higher proportion of Saharawis in the Canary Islands are from the OT, due to its proximity.

Apart from those Saharawis who have escaped the OT for human rights reasons and have sought asylum, few migrate with the intention of settling down permanently. Due to strong cultural and historical links, the community in Mauritania is the most permanent one. There is also a sizeable community of Saharawis in southern Morocco in the Tarfaya region, which was once part of Western Sahara. Numbers for the size of the different exiled communities again are very difficult to determine. Polisario sources involved with maintaining contact with the exiled Saharawis estimate that the largest community is Mauritania.

3.4 Vulnerable groups

3.4.1 Civil society

For more than two decades of Morocco's occupation in Western Sahara, there was no room for the existence of a Saharawi civil society. Towards the end of the 1990s, however, two key events helped create the conditions for the fragile, tentative beginnings of one: the assumption of a new Moroccan king to the throne and a mini-Saharawi intifada at the end of 1999 in La-Ayoune. A small core of Saharawis that set out to protest peacefully against the economic conditions turned, to everyone's surprise, into a movement of unprecedented scale and breadth. Saharawi groups representing a wide spectrum of interests came together, somewhat spontaneously, to confront the Moroccan authorities. Initially a group of activists amongst ex-political prisoners, it grew to include groups representing the unemployed, ex-miners, Saharawis seeking compensation for destruction of property and livelihood, etc. Widespread arrests, reports of torture, and prison sentences followed.

Significantly, in 1999, the Sahara section of the Forum for Justice and Truth was also legally established. For a few years the Saharawi activists campaigned with relative openness and made contact with numerous outsiders and human rights organizations like AI. The Moroccan authorities, however, became increasingly nervous about the political impact of the Saharan branch and closed it down in 2003, on the grounds that it was a front for the Polisario and other subversive foreign elements. It is broadly believed that following two more Saharawi uprisings in Smara and Al-Ayoune in 2001, the authorities were overly alarmed at the growing boldness of the Saharawi population and saw the activities of the Forum members as central to this trend.

The remaining various Saharawi civil groups do not enjoy official recognition from the Moroccan authorities, but their existence is nevertheless an important historical development. The terror of the first decade or so of the Moroccan occupation largely stamped out any

visible Saharawi resistance, and the notion of a Saharawi civil society was almost impossible to conceive. These civil groups, however, do not have any legal protection and can be targeted at any time under any pretext.

3.4.2 Students and youth

Saharawi activists in the OT claim that many Saharawi youth who have dropped out of the educational system and have few prospects of employment are often encouraged by Moroccan agents to turn to drugs and drink, or are lured into petty crime. They assert this is an insidious method for rendering them politically inactive. On the other hand, Saharawis who manage to go on to tertiary education and attend Moroccan universities are often regarded by the authorities as potential political liabilities. Indeed, Saharawi university students and even secondary students have become more politicized over the past few years. Around forty Saharawi university students sparked off the development of large-scale peaceful protests in El-Ayoune in 1999. They have also increasingly played an important role in linking up Saharawi activists with supportive Moroccan elements in the society and media. The fact that they are dispersed within Morocco and are few in number makes them vulnerable to harassment and worse.

4 Other resources

4.1 Electronic news and publications

Africanewswire.com- http://www.africanewswire.com/

allAfrica.com - http://allafrica.com/westernsahara

El Karama - http://www.arso.org/08-2.htm

Nouvelles Sahraouies - http://NouvellesSahraouies.cjb.net/

ARSO news links - http://www.arso.org/01-3.htm

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