

OBJECTIVE FISAHARA  
**ENGLISH**



# Introduction

## San Sebastian Human Rights Film Festival

The International Sahara Film Festival (FISahara), which began in 2002, is a personal initiative inspired by the President of the State Coordinator of Associated Friends of the Sahara (CEAS), who, without a doubt, discovered how to generate a current of enthusiasm and cohesion among the various active parties within Spanish cinema.

The results are the eight editions of the festival held in the refugee camps at Tindouf, in the Algerian desert, which have grown progressively with the support of different personalities, entities and landmark events of the cinematic industry and the international community at large.

San Sebastian has, in different ways, given its support to this initiative from the beginning. Thus, the San Sebastian International Film Festival (Zinemaldi) made manifest its support for FISahara in its 2008 edition, thereby emphasizing their efforts in the promotion, creation and diffusion of cinema created by filmmakers from the Magreb, Portuguese-speaking African countries, and other developing Arab countries. In this exact line of work, the Donostia International Festival expressed its support for the first and the only festival in the world which takes place in a refugee camp and which contributes in an important way to the creation of a cultural platform for the Saharawi people under difficult organizational conditions.

San Sebastian, European Capital of Culture in 2016, has for the last nine years also incorporated the International Human Rights Film Festival, created in order to offer and provoke a critical, collaborative, participatory and pluralist view of humanity's challenges, flaws, and desires, by defending and promoting human rights, a communal and democratic way of life, the culture of peace and the education in democratic values. This is the only Spanish festival that belongs to the Human Rights Film Network, an association which combines the world's most distinguished human rights festivals.

Our city of San Sebastian, sister-city to Boujador of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic since 1988, desires to redouble its links of solidarity with the Saharawi people by means of the signing of a "Protocol of Collaboration and Brotherhood" between the human rights film festivals of San Sebastian





and FISahara. With this agreement, they hope to, on the one hand, increase the knowledge, development and excellence of the respective festivals, while on the other hand, bringing new forms of support to the just cause of the Saharai people such as raising the awareness of the various intra-state and international organs regarding their existing responsibilities and the causes which have brought about a situation that the totality of the Saharai population has had to endure for over thirty-five years.

This book, which has relied on the sponsorship of Kutxa, support from the directors of *Masasam. Espacios de Creación* (Spaces of Artistic Creation), and the impulse from the Friends of the Saharai People of Donostia, has the objective of bringing the cinematic world in particular, and the human rights community in general, closer to a singular event, one that occurs in a desolate environment and a context of gross injustice.

The following pages reflect through both text and images the impressions, sensations and statements of those who have decided to participate in this project with their presence or support, thus demonstrating that cinema is not merely a means of entertainment, or even a vehicle for the improvement of understanding between the world's peoples and a rich source of culture, but rather a platform for denouncing injustice which today, still, in full 21st century, remains unresolved.

# FiSahara

**Juan Karlos Izagirre Hortelano**

Mayor of Donostia-San Sebastian

From the moment a story, an image, a melody or a song is able to provoke a feeling of rage, shame, happiness, love, hate, solidarity, justice, or any other type of sensation, it ceases to be a simple way to pass the time and becomes something more. If that image, that story and that melody come together, that is when, in a fusion of different styles, a film is born, which when moreover is combined with the feeling brought about by communal viewing, creates something special that, although difficult to explain, definitely exists.

With this intention, that of creating something special, and with a most inexplicable series of sensations, the Donostia International Film Festival was born, our Zinemaldia, one of the most important festivals of the entire world and the epicenter of film-lovers' interest during its celebration. It is a mirror of different historical and global realities encompassing everything from the glamour of the most typically Hollywood films, to the more conventional but no less attractive European cinema, and ending with alternative visions from cultures and origins more remote than those of our own environs, always interesting, and combining among themselves the different formats which celluloid has to offer.

Precisely because it is an open festival, with an openness that sheds a different light than the other festivals of its category; it has been both the refuge and the inspiration for one of the world's most curious cinematographic experiences from the last few years. I am referring to FiSahara, the only international film festival in the world that was born and continues to take place in a refugee camp. But the most important thing about this festival is something else than film, it is rather a scream, a clenched fist that comes from the Algerian Hamada, the most arid and extreme place in the Sahara Desert, an entire people telling us of the injustice for which the kingdoms of Spain and Morocco are responsible by forcing 200000 Saharais to live on stony ground since 1975.

In the same way, and with the aim of offering and provoking a critical, participatory, just and pluralist viewpoint on the challenges ahead and the short-comings of humanity, the International Film and Human Rights Festival of Donostia-San Sebastian was born nine years ago.



Last year, precisely under the auspices of Zinemaldi, the festival consummated its relationship with the FISahara, in the conviction that a common and durable objective established in trust deepens the already existing friendships and represents an important contribution to the international denunciation of the situation in which the Saharai people must still endure.

I have had the privilege of understanding, on site, from the very desert sands, the reality of the festival, and I am in a condition to affirm that film and FISahara constitute one more weapon with which the Saharai people can show the world the injustice of their plight. For a period of a few days, the light of the desert moon joins with another light, that of the celluloid which allows us to enjoy a stage with a luxurious carpet of desert sand, and the stars as the roof of the most spectacular theater you could possibly imagine.

Those are days in which, between goats, camels, shoeless children, the turbans of the men and the colorful veils of the women, we see some shooting stars that accompany the refugees during these days; these are the movie stars who cast aside the trappings of fame that frequently accompany them, and together with journalists, singers, directors and support personnel, they “come down to earth” enduring the crushing heat of the mid-day sun, the cold night-time temperatures and the occasional visits from the Sirocco, in order to unite with that scream and that fist clenched on high.

FISahara is something more than a few days of cinematic magic in the camps at Tindouf. In addition to the event itself, and the projection of films every night in the open air for the entire population of the camps, the daily monotony is broken by cinematic workshops that have planted the seed for film and art schools, exhibitions related to both cinema and the Saharai reality, for talks, meetings ... all this in the mark of the iconic image of the Sahara, in the hospitality and the company of the people, their dances, their tea breaks, and their good humor. It is definitely both a source of growth and brotherhood with other peoples and their cultures for the Saharais, but more than anything for us, there is a topical yet real sensation that by getting closer to these people, we take with us much more than we contribute.

Euskal Herria, and our city, Donostia, are both companions and accomplices of the Saharai people, not merely in brotherhood in the name of a few official papers, but rather we are peoples, each with their own characteristics, who know how it feels when the powerful do not allow us to decide our own futures. For this reason, our city will continue to scream and to raise our clenched fist with them, denouncing their injustice from every possible setting, putting at their disposition our cinemas as stages for FISahara, in order that they may become

the spokespeople for that scream and that fist.

It has always seemed difficult to me to express sensations with texts and images, but this masterpiece has managed it. And to me one sensation rises above the rest: that of solidarity, something which day by day becomes harder to find in a world that seems less and less inclined to be exactly that, worldly. The journey solidarity entails is all-to-often a deserted trail, but it is still there to show us that justice is no utopia, it is simply justice; it is a trail on which the travelers continue one step at a time, the movements in favor of the Saharai cause, the Saharais themselves and those in support of the liberation of so many peoples the world over.

FISahara, all those who make it possible, and cinema itself, each in their turn also walk that trail shining through celluloid's light, transforming cinematic magic into a reality which allows many of us to become less blind and helps us to see the justice for which an entire people has fought for more than 35 years.

Eskerrik asko FISahara sucran.

## Cinema as an argument for solidarity

**Carlos Ruiz González**

Director of the Social and Communication Area of Kutxa

The utopia of a world which acts in solidarity, without distances or barriers comes crashing down when we take into account situations like that of Western Sahara and the refugee camps of Tindouf.

If it is possible to share something different than just day-to-day necessities, it is the ability to dream. And for this there's nothing like cinema. We share it also as an example of cultural uncertainty, if you can call manifestations such as our Zinemaldia, nearly a septuagenarian now, and the young FISahara by that name. Cinema weaves a thread that allows communication between the lands of the great Sahara desert and our little green Gipuzkoa.



Kutxa tries to strengthen that thread because it sees in those who work for, promote, and make FISahara possible an attempt to transmit the annals of liberty, justice, and most importantly, a future for the Saharai people. We know its voice has only limited power, but we are convinced that it is destined to grow. Moreover: Kutxa sees in FISahara a testimony of hope, even more, limitless hope.

Kutxa is collaborative. It has been so for over a century in its guipuzcoan land of origin, with greater intensity each time. We believe that the advancement of a society should be measured by the level of protection, solidarity and aid provided to others. And also by the possibilities for development society provides its most marginalized members.

We work in our own territory, but with a broader scope: ensuring that no conflict, no tragedy is foreign to us and contributing to make its end possible. We do this despite our limitations, of which we are ever more aware in the current period of economic and financial crisis.

We make a great effort to combine resources so that worthy initiatives such as FISahara can find watts of power in order to support the just demands of a people and to give support and hope to its men and women; in order that this power never weakens.

This is not a paradox: we are convinced that if FISahara and what it represents function properly, it will contribute into making Gipuzkoa a more helpful and collaborative space. And only solidarity can make us better than what we are.

With my fondest memories, affection and gratitude to Nina, Shelek, Khadija, Omar, Selki, Lehib, Demba, ... and all my “others” in Tindouf.



# Walls

Eduardo Galeano

The Berlin Wall made the news every day. From dawn to dusk we read about it, we saw it, we heard about it: the Wall of Shame, the Wall of Infamy, the Iron Curtain...

Finally that wall, which deserved to fall, eventually fell. But other walls have sprouted and continue to do so all over the world, and though they are much larger than the Berlin Wall, little or nothing is said of them.

Little is said of the wall that the United States is erecting along the Mexican frontier, and little of the stockades around Ceuta and Melilla.

Almost nothing is said of the West Bank wall, which perpetuates the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and which will soon be fifteen times longer than the Berlin Wall.

And nothing, absolutely nothing is said of the Moroccan wall, which for the last twenty years has perpetuated the occupation of Western Sahara. This wall, mined from end to end, and watched from end to end by thousands of soldiers, is as long as sixty Berlin Walls.

Why is it that some walls are so high-sounding and yet others so mute? Is it because of the walls of concealment that the communication media construct every day?

## Walls I

In July 2004, the International Court of Justice in The Hague ruled that the West Bank wall violated international law and ordered its demolition. At present, Israel remains unaware.

In October 1975, the same Court had ruled as follows: "A link of sovereignty has not been established between Western Sahara and Morocco". It is an understatement to say that Morocco was deaf to this. It did worse: the day after the ruling, Morocco launched the invasion, the so-called *Green March*, and shortly thereafter Morocco took possession of this vast and foreign territory at the point of a gun and expelled the majority of the population.

And there it remains.

## Walls II

A thousand and one United Nations resolutions have confirmed the right of self-determination for the Saharai people.

What purpose have those resolutions actually served? There was going to be a plebiscite, in order for the population to decide its own destiny. To assure victory, the King of Morocco filled the invaded territory with Moroccans. But within a short time, not even the Moroccans were sufficiently trust-worthy. And the King, who once had said yes, now said maybe. And then he said no, and his son, the current occupant of the throne, also said no. This negative is equal to a confession. By repudiating the Saharai right to vote, Morocco has confessed to the theft of a country.

Will we continue to accept things as they are? Accepting that in a universal democracy we subjects can only exercise our right of obedience?

What purpose have the thousand and one United Nations resolutions against the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory served? And the thousand and one against the Cuban embargo?

The old proverb teaches us: *"Hypocrisy is a tax paid by vice unto truth."*

### **Walls III**

Patriotism is, at least in today's world, the prerogative of dominant nations.

When dominated nations use it, they become suspect of either populism or terrorism, or at times simply do not deserve the slightest bit of attention.

The Saharai patriots, who for the last thirty years have fought to recover their rightful place in the world, have achieved diplomatic recognition by eighty-two countries. Among them is my native Uruguay, which has recently joined the vast majority of Latin American and African countries.

But not so Europe. No European country has recognized the Saharai Republic. Not even Spain. This is a serious act of irresponsibility, or perhaps amnesia, or at the very least a falling out of love. Until 30 years ago the Sahara was a Spanish colony, and Spain had the legal and moral duty to back up its independence.

What did imperial rule leave there? Over an entire century, how many university students did it educate? In total, three: a doctor, a lawyer and an accountant. That is what it left behind. And it left a betrayal as well. Spain served up this land and these peoples on a plate in order to be devoured by the Kingdom of Morocco.

From that day onward, the Sahara is the only remaining African colony. It has been seized of its independence.

### **Walls IV**

Why is it that one's eyes refuse to see what troubles them?

Could it be because the Saharais have served as a bargaining chip, offered by corporations and countries that buy from Morocco whatever Morocco sells them even though it is not theirs to sell?

A few years ago, Javier Corcuera interviewed a victim of the bombardment of Iraq in a Baghdad hospital. A bomb had left one of her arms useless. She, who was only eight years old and after having endured eleven operations, said: "*I wish we didn't have any oil.*"

Maybe the Saharai people are at fault because their long coastline possesses the richest fishery in the Atlantic Ocean and because underneath the sands, seemingly so very empty, is home to the world's largest phosphate reserves and there may even be oil, natural gas and uranium.

In the Koran one could perfectly well read, even though it is not actually there, this prophecy:

*"Natural resources are the curse of the world's peoples."*

## Walls V

The refugee camps, located in southern Algeria, are in the mother of all deserts. It is a vast nothingness, surrounded by more nothingness, where stones are all that grow. Despite that, in these wastelands, and in the liberated territories which aren't much better, the Saharais have successfully created the most open and the least patriarchal society in the entire Muslim world. This miracle of the Saharais, who are very poor and very few in number, cannot be explained merely by their stubborn will to be free, which for once abounds in this place lacking in everything else: it can also be explained, in great measure, by international solidarity.

And the lion's share of this aid comes from the cities and towns of Spain. Their fraternal energy, both memory and source of dignity, is much stronger than the comings and goings of governments and the greedy calculus of corporations.

I talk of solidarity, not of charity. Charity is humiliating. This African proverb is not mistaken:

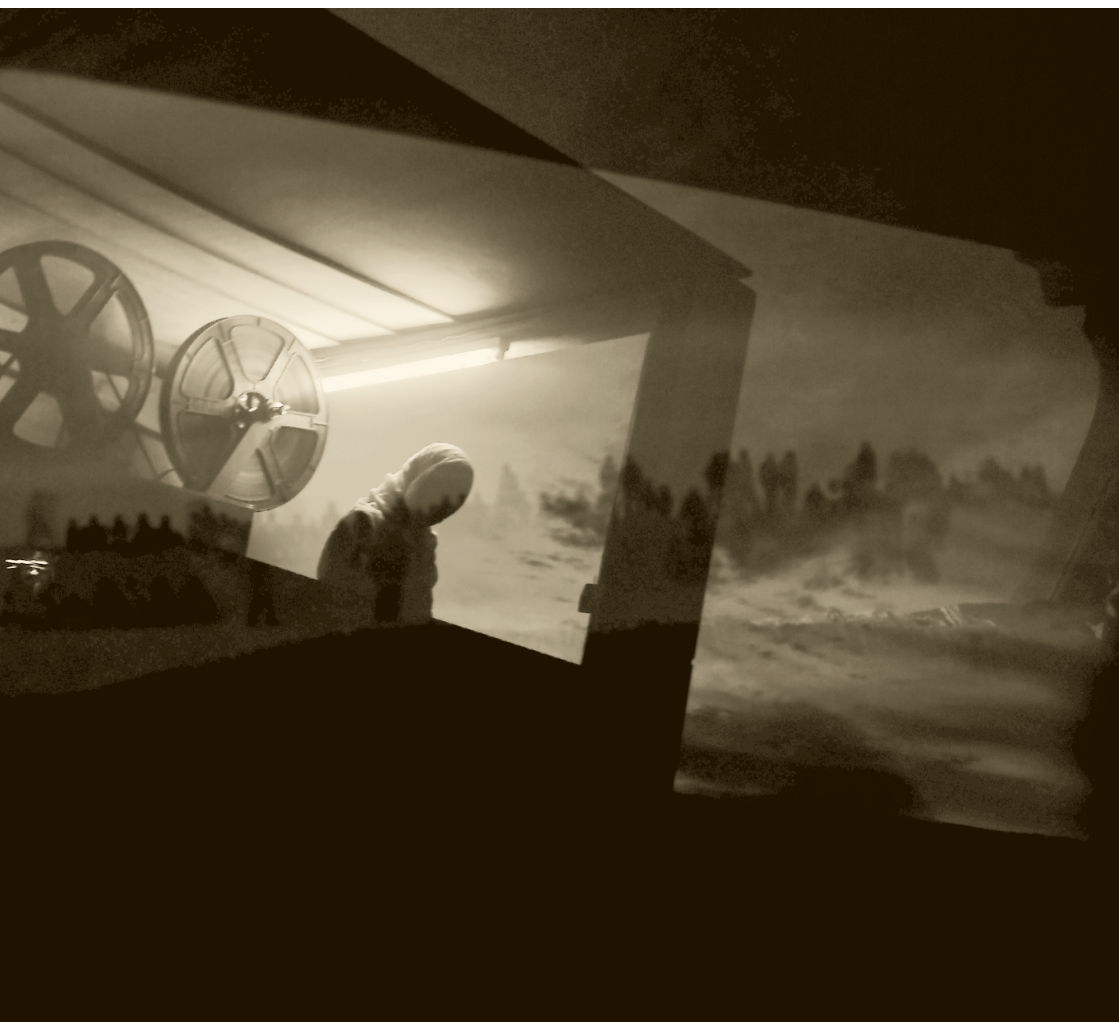
*"The hand that receives is always underneath the hand that gives."*

## Walls VI



The Saharauis are waiting. They have been given a life sentence of anxiety and nostalgia. The refugee camps are named after their stolen cities, their long-lost meeting places and their longings: El Aaiun, Smara... They are called *children of the clouds*, because they are always in pursuit of the rain. For the last thirty years they have also pursued justice, which in today's world seems scarcer than water in the desert.

## Walls VII



**Reach for the sky**  
**First International Sahara Film Festival**  
**20-23 November 2003**

**Paul Laverty**

Wet wipes, football boots, a long list of medicines, 50 DVDs and a torch squeezed into an old rucksack. No dicky-bows this time; the Polisario Front had hinted that formal dress and frilly frocks would not be necessary for the First International Sahara film festival, centered on Smara refugee camp in the south-west corner of Algeria, just across the border from Western Sahara.

At Madrid airport, a mixture of 250 film-makers (mostly Spanish), actors, press and solidarity workers loaded up piles of supplies, including 21 full-length feature films that were to form the heart of the festival. This assembled crew was the brainchild of the Peruvian director Javier Corcuera, who could persuade the devil himself to examine his conscience. But Corcuera faced a tougher task: to persuade a cinema owner to lend him two precious film projectors, and a rock impresario to make up the shortfall in funds raised from local authorities and solidarity groups such as the Polisario Front, which fought the Spanish for independence in the 1970s.

As we descended, I finished off the last of the articles about the area that I had pulled from the internet. Somehow, an average lifespan of 45 for men and 47 for women didn't seem quite so abstract an idea as we were about to land. It's a sobering thought to imagine each new day after the age of 45 as an unexpected bonus.

The trip to Smara refugee camp in a convoy of Jeeps and buses began quite sensibly. Our driver seemed delighted by the attention of two actresses by his side, Laia Marull and Candela Peña (Marull having just won best actress in "Te Doy Mis Ojos" (Take My Eyes) at the San Sebastian film festival). As we left the tarmac and hit sand, he blasted up the music and we weaved in and out between buses and lorries.

We arrived in pitch dark. There wasn't a single light to be seen in a settlement with over 40,000 souls. By torch we were hustled through into an open-air adobe enclosure and the chaos began. You might think it would be a simple task to divide 250 into groups of five - and then for each group in turn to be assigned to a Saharawi family. No... but it didn't matter. It felt biblical: bleating goats, a scramble of kids, a circle of women in bright veils barking orders and

by the gate, a tall, elegant Bedouin figure towering above us, watching in silence. A young boy of nine held me firmly by the hand as he led us (one Scot, one Englishman, one Basque, two Peruvians) through the darkness, skilfully avoiding deep holes dug to extract sand for adobe bricks. What's your name? Mohammed. Another held the hand of Joss, the photographer. What's your name? Mohammed. Nearly all the children speak passable Spanish. (Temperatures in the camps reach a ferocious 55C in the summer, so a remarkable Spanish organisation, Friends of the Saharawi People, take hundreds of children between 7 and 12 and place them with volunteer families in Spain for the two hottest months of each year.)

The kids chatted, laughed and asked endless questions until we reached the family home - two tents and two simple adobe buildings of the flimsiest sort. The father, Tiyb (60), a handsome, elegant man of over 6ft 2in, and his wife, Lamat Ali, made us feel welcome instantly. They couldn't speak any Spanish, but their expressions were warm. Three daughters swarmed around us with their own children. The grandmother, aged 90 - the only old person I saw - was later to make a spectacular entrance, while a five-month-old baby called Sainabo stole the show. Communicating through the children and body language, we managed to find out where we were to sleep - all together on mattresses laid out in the tent - before Mohammed and Mohammed led us back again to the camp for the festival reception.

Many attendees had never seen a film on the big screen in their lives. Some of the tents had black-and-white TVs powered by a car battery attached to a simple solar panel, which also powered the single light inside the tents.

The camp had a few solid buildings, used for meetings. There was a screen inside the biggest hall, which could hold 500 to 700 people, and another outside under the stars - the «desert screen». It was 25ft high and 40ft wide, and a full 35m behind it was a little cabin for the projectionist.

That long beam of light was magical, although often distorted by the Jeep lights, which threw elongated, turbaned shadows on the screen to mix with the film. They were showing *Winged Migration*, a documentary film about migrating birds. Sophisticated cameras followed only a few inches behind flocks speeding over rivers, seas and the Antarctic. After 40 minutes I'm sure I detected a ripple of discontent. Enough feathers; time for a story.

All the films were picked by representatives of the Saharawis. There were animated films for the children, light comedies, tougher social dramas and documentaries. Some made Europe appear rich and exotic, as if everyone was a well-to-do professional, while others examined deep-seated contradictions.



Spanish director Julio Medem brought his latest documentary, “La Pelota Vasca”, which airs a range of views on the Basque dispute and which so infuriated the Spanish government. His countryman Chus Gutiérrez sent “Poniente”, based on the lives of fellow Muslims, mostly Moroccans, who live in shanty towns in the south of Spain and work under hundreds of square miles of plastic sheeting, where a significant percentage of the fruit and veg in European supermarkets originate.

The organisers had also got their hands on the only three films ever made about the Saharawis. The 2am showing of “The Other Side of the Bed”, a saucy comedy, caused controversy among some of the older viewers as the first bare breasts appeared. But all that achieved, in time-honoured fashion, was to guarantee a real fight to see it again the following day in the inside hall. (Rubio, an older activist for the Polisario, advised the organisers that if it seemed like a film wouldn’t fill the hall, they should post two policemen on the door and see the magical transformation.)

We wandered home with Mohammed and Mohammed, still without a single point of reference in the pitch dark, and were met by Tiyb and Lamat, who were entertaining friends and drinking tea at this late hour. What a combination of snores and snuffles; there were at least two babies suckling away. Three hours later, in the darkness, the terrible consequence of all that tea became manifest. Time for a piss, and all those obstacles, some flesh and blood, between my corner and the exit. Terrified I’d flatten a child, I picked my way between bodies, big and small, and noticed Sainabo cuddled up beside her mother. I felt horribly embarrassed to notice that we had been given the best mattresses.

The desert sky took my breath away. The Milky Way was dazzling - there it was in all its overwhelming beauty, with not a single earthly light to dilute it. I couldn’t help but feel our efforts to bring a projector and rolls of celluloid were puny, almost laughable, by comparison. Shooting stars, one after another, shot across a miraculous screen.

Breakfast time was a treat, for we were joined by a relative who had studied in Cuba and could translate for us. Here in this tent, we realised, we had a snapshot of recent Saharawi history. Lamat, the mother, had lived in a proper house in a little village in Western Sahara, which before 1976 was a Spanish colony. Tiyb had joined the the Polisario Front, which was founded in 1973. In 1975 the International Court of Justice declared that the people of Western Sahara should have the right to self-determination, but on November 6 of the same year, King Hassan of Morocco promised 350,000 poor Moroccans a better life if they crossed the border into Western Sahara - just as the Indonesians had done with East Timor.



So the “green march” took place while Spain, ignoring the International Court of Justice, agreed to hand over the southern part of the colony to Mauritania and the northern part to Morocco - keeping important fishing rights and access to rich deposits of phosphate for themselves, and totally ignoring the indigenous Saharawis. As Spain pulled out in 1976, the Polisario declared the existence of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, and the liberation war against Morocco and Mauritania began.

Lamat, and her entire village, were forced to flee. Some refugees were napalmed as they ran. They crossed some 600km of desert, ending up some 30km south of Tindouf, Algeria, the site of the present camp. Most of the men were in the army, so the women, with young children and the elderly, had to survive by themselves. The first years were terrible, with many dying of hunger, Lamat recalled, until the aid infrastructure was established. Bit by bit, with their own hands, these women built the camp.

Before schools were established, Cuba offered to take children out of the camps and educate them. By this time, Lamat had discovered that her husband had been captured. (Later, having been taken ill, he escaped from a hospital after five years in prison.) She spoke of tense meetings as mothers faced a terrible dilemma: keep their children close and have them suffer the privations of the camp, or send them to the other side of the world. Many chose the latter and hundreds of children left, many as young as nine. They headed for Cuba, only returning after finishing their university degree. (One of Cuba’s best-known actors - Jorge Perugorría, a big star in Spain too - was in our group. He almost dropped dead when a young Saharawi came up to him and started quoting line for line the dialogue of his best-known film, “Strawberry and Chocolate”, shot in

Havana. Another gang of Saharawis arrived and the actor roared with laughter as he heard a string of jokes from home.)

Twenty-eight years later, Lamat and her descendants find themselves in the very same camp. Despite its wonderful organisation, including some excellent schools, it is still dependent on aid for survival. And living here is hard as hell. It was clear from Lamat's tones that she was as desperate as ever to go «home» to Western Sahara.

Hopes were raised in 1991 when there was a ceasefire monitored by the UN. Many UN resolutions have been passed calling for a referendum with complicated debates about who should be eligible to vote, but it seems clear that Morocco has no intention of implementing them without international pressure. On the other side of a 1,500km wall that divides Western Sahara in two - strange how we never hear of this one, as it is longer than the great wall of China and guarded by 120,000 Moroccan soldiers and more than a million landmines - Morocco enjoys the fishing rights, guards the top-quality phosphates and has recently allowed the oil companies Kerr-McGee (US) and Total (France) to look for oil. Meanwhile, some quarter of a million people are deprived of their homes, stuck in the desert for almost 30 years and forgotten by the international community agenda setters.

This is one of the reasons the festival was created in the first place: to remind the world that the Sarahawis still exist. But there was a more simple reason - the joy of watching a film by those who never had that chance; the unique experience of thousands sitting in the dark together, sharing the same 110 minutes and letting imaginations fly.

The audience's curiosity was infectious. Over the next three days we showed our films and met to discuss them. The organised encounters were as you might expect; sometimes sharp and irreverent, sometimes arid and rhetorical. But there was a palpable hunger for other worlds.

I met an 11-year-old girl who said she loved the films but couldn't hear them very well. I was confused at first, as the technicians had done a wonderful job. With several young siblings under her care, she had managed to spy on the big screen from some half a kilometre away. That got me.

Another night a young boy clasped me - I just couldn't shake him off - and begged me to get him into a film after he had got a knockback at the door from the police. What age are you? 16. Liar. What's your name? Mohammed. He clasped me even tighter and I could see the desperation in his eye. We fought

through the scramble. The police stopped him again. «Mohammed's with me,» I said, and we steamed on through. The wonder on his face as he sat in a corner was quite special.

This festival reminded me of another of cinema's great joyous aftermaths: listening, talking, arguing and trying to figure out how the same material can be interpreted in so many different ways. I met a 14-year-old boy who, unasked, began to speak about Sweet Sixteen. It was beyond his imagination how a mother could take drugs and not care for her children. Here he was, born in a refugee camp (with a very clear idea of his future - he was determined to go to Cuba and study medicine), struggling to understand the sense of loss and lack of love in a Scottish housing scheme. How can that happen, he asked. Alongside all the talk there was a lovely sense of celebration. They cooked up some beautiful meals for us, danced for us, sang for us, and gave us an absolute tanking at football on the biggest pitch I've ever played on.

Presenting "Sweet Sixteen", dubbed in Spanish, to some 2,000 Saharawis under the desert sky was quite surreal. A light wind had picked up and fine sand swept over us. Right in the middle of the crowd I could see our colleague Martha's torch hovering over her portable computer, which was attached to a 50-yard flex. She and her colleagues had been up all night and had just finished subtitling our film into Arabic, a mere half-hour before the screening. Her computer was attached to a video, and on recognising the Spanish dialogue she would hit a key, and if all went well, Arabic would flash up on screen. She would repeat this throughout the whole film. It was a colossal effort - all done for free. Yet it's always such nonsense that goes through your head at these moments. I saw this sea of veils and expectant faces, and I just hoped to hell they hadn't translated Pinball's «cock-sucker», which is sprayed on the wall 25 minutes into the film. Nobody left, so I suppose that was a good sign. And then they watched another film, and very few left. And then they watched another film, three in a row, and this time their eyes shone; Tales from the Sahara War. I tried to imagine what it felt like, to see their own images up there, in a camp in which I had not seen even one mirror. In moments like these, despite the exceptions, I'm reminded that film is still a rich man's game, and the sharing of stories, values and lives is in one direction only. For this reason, a key element of the festival was to plan further visits so that young Sarahawis could learn to make their own short films, and then - who knows...

The closing night outshone Cannes. All the participants received a beautiful «rose of the desert» (a delicate, crystal-like formation forged in desert storms) from the Saharawi minister of culture, a vibrant and entertaining woman who participated in many of the debates. She asked the band to sing a song while the

jury met to discuss “a special mention”. Five minutes later they reappeared to award a Galician animation, “El Bosque Animado”, the best film of the festival. The Saharawi band was followed by a rip-roaring performance by Fermin Muguruza and his 11-piece band from the Basque country, who had the place bouncing in seconds.

And then something very beautiful happened. Many of the women, though veiled, moved in beside the mass of visitors and male Saharawis. For the next hour we all jumped around together. I don’t know how it started, but a conga began weaving its way in between us... and then grew longer and longer, so that we were all mixed together, veiled, turbaned, hairy and bald.

Publicity back in Spain was fair. The organisers had high hopes for that «human interest» spot that tags on at the end of the two biggest news bulletins on national TV. Unfortunately, “Snowflake”, a 40-year-old albino gorilla, had died in Barcelona zoo and we were squeezed out. Sometimes that 10 miles of water separating Africa from Europe seems as long and as broad as the Milky Way.

> For further information see [www.gn.apc.org](http://www.gn.apc.org)  
(*Sweet Sixteen* was directed by Ken Loach and written by Paul Laverty. It won best original screenplay at Cannes Film Festival in 2002).





# The Screen of the Desert

Javier Corcuera

Director of FISahara

Ten years ago, my Saharai friends invited me to get to know their camps in the *mother of all deserts*, as they call the place in which they have been exiled for over three decades. I traveled there with the idea of filming a movie, my first feature film had just premiered and I was eager to know that reality up close. On that trip we spoke of various possible plots and of putting cinema at the disposal of the Saharai people, it was during those conversations that I first met my brother Ahmed “the blond”, a Saharai who accompanied us in this adventure from the very start. Through talking to Ahmed and to other comrades, we got the idea of bringing cinema to the camps, training new film-makers in order that they themselves tell their life stories. Thus was born the idea of creating a film festival and a school to train the creators of new stories. This appeared to be a pipe-dream, something impossible, but since a major characteristic of the Saharai people is doing the impossible, by the next year we were inaugurating the first international film festival to take place in a refugee camp and the workshops that would eventually give birth to the film school.

During those eight years of the festival we shared so many things I would love to tell but which do not fit in these few lines, many refugees saw movies for the very first time, actors, directors, writers and musicians visited us and left their hearts as good-bye gifts for the Saharai brothers and sisters who have created a country full of future promise. I will never forget everything I lived and all the affection that I received from this people whose flag symbolizes dignity and love for one’s neighbor. On the screen of the desert they saw stories that opened their windows unto the world and it also became a screen on which the rest of the world saw and learned the story of the Saharais. On the screen of the desert were projected the first efforts of their film-makers, which one day will surely be shown facing the ocean. Because this is the only festival in the world that has the eventual goal of disappearing, of moving, with its people to a free Sahara.

# Together for the Sahara

**Javier Bardem**

The truth is I always wanted to go to FISahara, the only film festival to be held in a refugee camp. Finally in 2008, I was able to attend this miracle by starlight; there, in the middle of the desert, in the middle of a nothingness, I found a people who survive, who resist and who do not surrender, in addition to preoccupying themselves with culture and cinema, a true miracle.

I was in Dakhla, FISahara's headquarters, one of the refugee camps in which there is a humanitarian drama which gets worse with each passing year, in which the peace process is blocked, and this especially affects the weaker members of society. In all there are 200,000 people in the camps, who were once Spaniards and who have been abandoned in the desert for 35 years, for whom our country has a special responsibility.

Despite this, it was impressive to observe the level of organization, taking into account that these people, the Saharai people, live on Hell's back porch. Over there, where you do not think there could possibly be the least sign of life, there is a country. It seems impossible that a people so isolated could have respect for others, when other people would have gone crazy and committed many atrocities over much less.

Maybe the most noteworthy and important sign, and the one you take back home deep in your heart, is just living with their families. You walk into these houses, these haimas, you share everything with them and you leave full of the mutual respect that has been established, and the way that relationship has been offered to you, and how these people carry themselves. In addition, they have a truly noteworthy affection for the Spanish language and our civilian population. I think these are the only people who have such a deep and cordial relation with their colonizers.

Something else you see there is the enormous and constant help given by Spanish civil society to the Saharai people. For that reason, what one desires is that the government of a country that has such dignity within its civil society would not forget the permanent help in humanitarian affairs, education, health and culture, and that it is worthy of that civil society and that they grant to the Saharai people nothing more and nothing less than what is already theirs: that land.

# Objective FISahara

**Sandra Maunac and Mónica Santos**

Masasam. Spaces for Artistic Creation. Curators

In May of 2009, the director of the International Sahara Film Festival (FISahara) Javier Corcuera and the Association of Friends of the Sahara of San Sebastian proposed us the idea of creating a photographic exhibition whose principal objectives were to, on the one hand tell the story of a festival which, with much effort and after eight editions, has brought cinema to one of the most desolate places on Earth, and on the other hand, counterbalance the international and communicative banishment in which the Saharai people have lived in for more than 35 years of exile in the south of Algeria.

Thus “Objective FISahara” was born, an exhibition in which stories are woven together, narratives are super-imposed and the paths of many people cross, those people who persist in their belief that expressions such as photography, the written word or cinema reflect and transform the multiple realities in which we survive.

The exhibition was composed of two elements: a text and images, both printed on large canvases. Eduardo Galeano’s *Walls* thus serves as a uniting thread throughout the exhibit, shedding a clear and lucid light on the unjust situation of those who have been robbed of their land and who have been forced to live in refugee camps. It is a text whose political background is combined with the images donated to us by six photographers: Per Rueda, Sergio Caro, Joss Barratt, Manuel Fernández, Xavier Gil Dalmau and Casper Hedberg. Attracted by the challenge the festival poses and without any other objective than to document this epic event, they managed to breathtakingly capture its magic.

These photographs allow us to feel the sand, the proximity and complicity between those who live there and those who have traveled there, the heat of the sun, the projections in the open and cold night air, a shaft of light in the middle of desert darkness, the magic that comes from a generator, and the achievement of what is apparently impossible. They are images which talk of the capacity to illuminate human faces with emotion, either with smiles or tears, something which continues to be both mysterious and essential, something which shows us that there is still a sacred enigma above and beyond all the spectacle, something common to all of us, something which unites us in art, in that expressive silence.



This exhibition first opened as part of the 2009 San Sebastian Film Festival in the galleries of the Kutxa Boulevard and later traveled to many other film festivals, not only in Spain but also abroad. After all this time together, we came to the conclusion that the time had come to find another way of keeping the journey alive. The way to do this, so the exhibition was not forgotten, has been to turn it into a book. A book that in its essence continues to be the prolongation of the exhibit, as the canvases where the images were once printed on, have now been recycled into the sleeves of a great number of the books. We have also isolated the images into a foldout that refers back to the layout of the exhibition. The idea, therefore, is that one can continue to enjoy the images at the same time as one reads the testimonies of individuals, personalities or entities that have been eye-witnesses to the magic of this festival and who have made it possible for cinema to travel to the Sahara desert, to a people who continue to struggle honorably toward their independence.





## **Edition and Production**

*Association of Friends of the Saharawi People of San Sebastian Masasam. Spaces of Artistic Creation.*

## **Coordination**

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## **Texts**

*Human Rights Film Festival of Donostia-San Sebastian*

*Juan Carlos Izaguirre Hortelano. Mayor of Donostia-San Sebastian*

*Carlos Ruiz González. Director of the Social Department of Kutxa*

*Eduardo Galeano*

*Paul Laverty*

*Javier Corcuera. Director of the International Sahara Film Festival*

*Javier Bardem*

*Mónica Santos and Sandra Maunac. Masasam. Curators Exhibition Objective FISahara*

## **Translation**

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*Paul Ruffner (Spanish-English) / Iciar Bollain (English-Spanish)*

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