

Western Sahara: The Last Colony in Africa

For more than 25 years the people of Western Sahara have been denied their basic right to self-determination. The Saharawi, the indigenous people of the territory now occupied by Morocco, have watched as other former colonies have gained their independence. They remain a people in exile, trapped mainly in harsh conditions in refugee camps on the edge of the Sahara Desert.



History and background

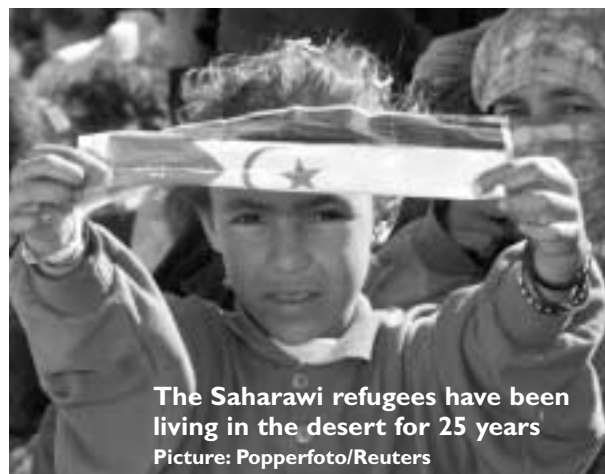
Western Sahara is on the north-west coast of Africa between Morocco and Mauritania, near the Canary Islands. During the colonial occupation of Africa the Spanish colonised the area and it was known as Spanish Sahara. In 1973 the POLISARIO Front launched a war of liberation. Morocco and Mauritania also laid claim to the country.

The territorial claims of neighbouring countries were examined by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) who delivered its verdict in 1975. The verdict confirmed that the Saharawi should be allowed to express their right to self-determination through a referendum. Within months of the ICJ verdict Morocco and Mauritania invaded. Much of the local population fled into the desert. Today, 20 years later, over 150 000 Saharawi still live in refugee camps in a desert area in south-west Algeria.

In 1979 Mauritania withdrew its claim to Western Sahara but Morocco swiftly occupied the whole country. Under the leadership of the POLISARIO Front the Saharawi continued the armed struggle for self-determination. The struggle has been long and difficult and the world largely ignored their claim for self-determination during the Cold War.

Morocco has consistently refused to reconsider the legitimacy of its claim to Western Sahara. There has also been well-documented evidence of human rights abuse against the Saharawi who still live in Western Sahara.

UN Peace Plan and referendum



The Saharawi refugees have been living in the desert for 25 years
Picture: Popperfoto/Reuters

Since 1990 the UN has been striving to implement a peace plan through a UN force, known as MINURSO, and a ceasefire has been in place since 1991. The UN has committed considerable resources to resolving the conflict, proposing a free and fair referendum of self-determination. The referendum would have been based on a Spanish census taken in 1974. Unfortunately, continuous delays in the implementation of the plan, mainly because of Moroccan obstruction and a lack of international political will to push it through, led to an impasse.

In June 2001, UN special envoy James Baker proposed that the UN should withdraw support for a solution based on just a referendum and push a political settlement based on limited autonomy for Western Sahara under Moroccan sovereignty. A referendum might come later but would be based on residency and not on the Spanish census. In other words it would virtually guarantee a Moroccan victory.

Morocco jumped to endorse the plan while Polisario said they would never agree. It is widely seen as an admission that the UN could not successfully organise the referendum and that Moroccan interests have triumphed. Many now predict a return to war.

Arms to Morocco for Western Sahara

In 1999, with the threat of war in the region re-emerging, the British government approved arms firm Royal Ordnance to supply spare parts for 105mm guns to Morocco, in direct contravention of its own guidelines. The guns are actually mounted on a 1000-mile wall that was built by Morocco to guard the territory they took illegally in 1975.

UK government policy clearly states that no arms or spare parts should be exported to a country that might use them to enforce a territorial claim. War on Want is seeking a judicial review of the decision to refurbish the guns, to help ensure that no more arms are sold to help enforce Morocco's claim on Saharawi land.

What you can do

The UK government, with its seat on the UN Security Council, is well placed to help the Saharawis in their struggle for independence. Write to Foreign Office minister Ben Bradshaw, Foreign & Commonwealth Office, King Charles Street, London SW1A 2AH, saying that you strongly support a referendum on the future on Western Sahara and that you want the British government to do all it can to make it a reality.

For more information on the the plight of the Saharawi and the political future of Western Sahara contact War on Want on 020 7620 1111 or www.waronwant.org - or call the Western Sahara Campaign on: 0113 245 4786

War on Want and Western Sahara

War on Want was the first UK agency to support the Saharawi refugees - providing support to the people in the camps near Tindouf in Algeria from the early 1980s. The first assistance was emergency relief, later the refugees were supported in their efforts to grow food in vegetable gardens in the desert. More recently food warehouses have been built, in conjunction with Lancashire Fire Brigades Union, to protect food aid from the heat and sand of the desert.

War on Want will continue to support the Saharawi in their struggle for survival but believe that as a people they should be able to determine their own fate and should not be living in refugee camps dependent on outside assistance.

To find out more about War on Want campaigns and projects, or join, call: 020 7620 1111 or visit: www.waronwant.org or e-mail: stibbett@waronwant.org