

WESTERN SAHARA: THE COST OF THE CONFLICT

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WESTERN SAHARA: THE COST OF THE CONFLICT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Western Sahara conflict is both one of the world's oldest and one of its most neglected. More than 30 years after the war began, the displacement of large numbers of people and a ceasefire in 1991 that froze military positions, its end remains remote. This is substantially due to the fact that for most of the actors – Morocco, Algeria and the Polisario Front, as well as Western countries – the status quo offers advantages a settlement might put at risk. But the conflict has human, political and economic costs and real victims: for the countries directly concerned, the region and the wider international community. This is important to acknowledge if a new conflict-resolution dynamic is to be created.

Based on their own calculations, the parties have deemed the stalemate bearable. As a result, the conflict has become one of those “frozen” ones that draw scant attention or engagement. The estimated costs appear far lower than the costs of a solution that would be detrimental to one party or another. For Morocco, an unfavourable settlement could have very serious domestic consequences since the monarchy has turned the issue into a powerful force for national unity and a means to control the threat to its power from political parties and the army.

An unfavourable settlement could mortally wound the Polisario as a political organisation and force it to compromise with the Sahrawi notables who have made their peace long ago with Morocco. It would also mean that the Sahrawi refugees in the Algerian city of Tindouf would have lived 30 years in camps for nothing. For Algeria, it would involve the loss of leverage in relations with Morocco and the defeat of principles it has defended for over three decades.

And yet, these calculations ignore the very heavy price that all – states, but also and above all, peoples – are paying. The Sahrawis who live in the Tindouf camps have to put up with exile, isolation and poverty; day after day they feel increasingly deserted by the international community. They live under the authority of an exiled state structure (the Polisario and its Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic) that is barely democratic and whose leaders are suspected of enriching themselves

by embezzling aid. The Polisario also has to face the increased discontent of a base whose morale and unity are weakening after years of stagnation.

Those Sahrawis who live on 85 per cent of the territory controlled by Morocco enjoy better material conditions, in particular thanks to important investments made by the kingdom. However, it is almost impossible for them to express opinions that are not pro-Moroccan. Rabat violently stifles any claim of independence, frequently resorting to torture and arbitrary arrests, including against human rights activists. It has repeatedly prevented visits by international delegations wishing to observe the situation and has frequently expelled foreign journalists. Through the numerous benefits it grants, Rabat attracts populations from the north of Morocco to Western Sahara with the effect that the Sahrawis will very soon be a minority in that area, giving them a strong sense of dispossession.

Moroccans as a whole have also had to bear heavy costs. Hundreds of Moroccan troops have been captured and tortured by the Polisario. Most have remained in prison for a long time. Moroccans also have to shoulder an exorbitant financial cost (military budget, investment in the “Southern provinces”, tax breaks and higher salaries for civil servants) that has hampered national development – a situation all the more serious since poverty in the country's slums is generating momentum for a Salafi Islamist movement.

For Algeria, costs have been primarily financial (from aid to refugees and donation of military equipment to the Polisario) and diplomatic (with this commitment sometimes at the expense of other interests), but also have to be measured in terms of the continuing existence on its western border of a major source of tension. Mauritania paid a price for the Sahrawi conflict with the 1978 coup, which ushered in a long period of institutional volatility, and the issue remains a potential source of instability for Nouakchott.

The overall cost of this conflict is also very high for the region as a whole, since it hinders the development of the Arab Maghreb Union, generating delays in economic

integration, low foreign investment and slower rates of growth. Perhaps more serious is the fact that the badly governed area covering Western Sahara, Northern Mauritania and South West Algeria is becoming a zone of trafficking (drugs, people and multiple forms of contraband) that suffers from lack of security cooperation. Finally, the UN has been thoroughly discredited by its attitude in this conflict, while the international community has to pay large sums for an observation force and economic aid.

This report describes the human, social, economic, political and security price the parties need to acknowledge if they are to end the protracted conflict. A companion Crisis Group report issued simultaneously, *Western Sahara: Out of the Impasse*, analyses how a new dynamic might be developed that could produce the necessary diplomatic breakthrough.

Cairo/Brussels, 11 June 2007

WESTERN SAHARA: THE COST OF THE CONFLICT

I. INTRODUCTION

A. QUESTIONS OF VOCABULARY

The Western Sahara conflict has given rise to its own politicised and controversial vocabulary. The Moroccan authorities speak of “Polisario’s hostages” or “captives” to refer to those that the international community calls “Sahrawi refugees”, while the Polisario Front¹ speaks of “encampments” to describe what are generally otherwise designated as “refugee camps”. The Moroccans speak of “Moroccan Sahara” and “territory controlled by the Polisario”, while the Polisario speak of “Western Sahara” and distinguish between the “territories occupied by the Moroccans” and the “liberated territories”. The Polisario call the Berm² the “wall of shame” while Morocco calls it a “defensive wall”,³ “wall of sand” or “security wall”. Some Moroccan officials are quick to call into question the very term “Sahrawi”,⁴ preferring instead “Saharan tribes”, while insisting that each of these tribes holds Moroccan origins. These differences of vocabulary are not simply translations of the inevitable verbal battles inherent in any conflict or deeply contentious issue, but also are evidence of the conflicting ways in which each

party portrays its respective history and identity. The contentious issues examined in this report arise from the manner in which each party represents the problem at hand.

B. THE MOROCCAN POSITION

The Moroccan position on the Western Sahara question centres on several key points. Morocco disputes the international legal basis invoked by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to support its 16 October 1975 Advisory Opinion,⁵ which draws upon an essentially Western conception of law (positive law). Morocco argues that this conception ignores the affected territories’ historical and juridical tradition: its view is that because Morocco has existed for centuries, the source of its sovereignty as well as the path of its borders do not follow from a Western conception of the nation-state. Instead, the historical tie with the Cherifian sultan⁶ – who is also, according to the doctrine of the Moroccan monarchy, “the Commander of the faithful” (amîr al-mou’minîn)⁷ – constitutes the foundation of its sovereignty. The act of allegiance made

¹ Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro, better known by its acronym Polisario Front, was created on 10 May 1973. It grew out of the Front for the Liberation of the Sahara, founded in 1967. For the sake of convenience, the term Polisario is often used to refer to both the Polisario Front and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). The SADR’s creation was announced on 27 February 1976 by the Polisario Front, proclaiming sovereignty over the territory of Western Sahara.

² “As early as 1979, the idea of a defensive wall has been an obvious one for the Moroccan authorities. Constructed in six stages, from 1980 to 1987, five ‘breaches’ along the wall allow Moroccan troops the right of pursuit.... All along the wall, surveillance units relay information to intervention units, equipped with radar and protected by barbed wire.... Over 2,500 km long, the defensive wall is guarded by more than 90,000 men. A strip of several hundred metres of minefields prohibits access”, Karim Boukhari and Amale Samie, in *Tel Quel* n°123, 17-23 April 2004.

³ This report uses the internationally accepted vocabulary.

⁴ Crisis Group interview, El Arbi Mrabet, Governor, MINURSO (UN Mission for the Organisation of a Referendum in Western Sahara) Office of Coordination, Rabat, 14 February 2007.

⁵ On 17 September 1974, Morocco and Mauritania referred the matter to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) with two questions: “Was Western Sahara (Rio de Oro and Sakiet El Hamra) at the time of colonization by Spain a territory belonging to no one (*terra nullius*)? If not, what were the legal ties between this territory and the Kingdom of Morocco and the Mauritanian entity?” The ICJ’s response (advisory opinion) was made public on 16 October 1975. “In its will to please both parties, the Court responded clearly to the first question, saying that Sahara was not a territory without a master, but on the other hand gave an unusable response to the second by declaring that there were no ties of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and Morocco”, Khadija Mohsen-Finan, *Sahara Occidental. Les enjeux d’un conflit régional* (Paris, 1996) p. 41. The opinion highlights existing ties between Morocco and the Sahrawi but does not contradict the relevance of the right of self-determination to the people of the Western Sahara. See www.icj-cij.org/docket/files/61/6194.pdf.

⁶ *Sharifism*, a hereditary form of legitimacy, was established during the Sa’adien dynasty (1509-1659). *Sharifism* is the belief in a direct line of descent from the family of the prophet Mohammed. Since then, the sultan/king of Morocco is a temporal chief who draws his legitimacy from the spiritual.

⁷ Literally, “Commander of the Faithful”.

by subjects to the King (*bay'a*)⁸ was tantamount to a collective recognition that the king is the sovereign, the temporal leader whose legitimacy is at once hereditary and spiritual. Morocco's claim to the Western Sahara is derived from these vassal links between certain Sahrawi tribes and the Moroccan sultans. For Morocco, then, the Advisory Opinion contained a genuine ambiguity: by both recognising historic links between the Sultan and (at least northern) Western Sahara and rejecting Moroccan sovereignty over the territory, it seemed to draw upon two divergent understandings of sovereignty, one rooted in positive law and the other in the affected territory's historico-juridical tradition.

Moreover, Moroccan authorities and historians have presented different types of legal documents that they claim attest to the links between the Saharan tribes and the Moroccan throne. Mohamed Boughdadi, a retired colonel from the Royal Armed Forces (FAR),⁹ showed Crisis Group several documents he had carefully assembled over more than twenty years, which he believes demonstrate such links. These include a decree (*dahir*) by Sultan Moulay Abdelaziz dating from 1904 confirming the Rguibat tribe's rank of *Chorfa*.¹⁰ The documents cited usually are legal (royal arbitration of inter-tribal disputes), religious (accounts of prayers being made in a particular location in the name of the Moroccan sultan), or historic (testimonies by various leaders or notable figures concerning Moroccan sovereignty over the territory of the Western Sahara as well as Mauritania).

Moroccan officials also insist on the importance of the Sahara question to the kingdom's stability and continuity, emphasising that domestic public opinion unanimously rejects independence – an argument that resonates strongly in Paris and Washington. According to a Moroccan diplomat:

It is not the King who dictates this stance; it is the expression of a deep popular sentiment. No Moroccan politician may equivocate on this question. It's a real national red line. No government would survive calling into question

this national consensus. It is a question of life or death.¹¹

More recently, Moroccans have focused on the risk a new, potentially unstable independent state in the region would pose in terms of the spread of Islamic jihadism. Since the 11 September 2001 attacks and renewed U.S. focus on this threat, Rabat has emphasised this aspect, underscoring the possibility that the region might be infiltrated by al-Qaeda or its followers.¹² Morocco also argues (without offering proof) that the Polisario's leaders are thieves who make a living out of illegal trafficking, that they have converted to a radical Islamist ideology and that they maintain links with some jihadist networks.¹³

Furthermore, as Rabat sees it, the Western Sahara conflict in no way grows out of legitimate Sahrawi nationalist sentiment. Far from considering the Polisario as an independent actor, Morocco describes it as an Algerian tool (for this reason, it is sometimes referred to as "*algérisario*"). Without Algeria's diplomatic, financial, military and territorial support, it argues, there would be no "Sahara Question". Algeria, it believes, uses Polisario and the conflict as a whole to weaken its potential rival in the Maghreb, fend off discussion over its borders and ensure access to the Atlantic via a Sahrawi client state in order fully exploit the potential of the Gara Djebilet mines.¹⁴ Similarly, Moroccans openly doubt the refugee numbers claimed by the Polisario, arguing that these "hostages" include not Sahrawis alone but also Touaregs and Arabs (particularly of Malian and Mauritanian origin) who arrived after fleeing their own countries in the Sahel during the large-scale droughts of the 1980s. Because they do not consider the Polisario a legitimate interlocutor, the Moroccans have long insisted that they will only discuss the issue with Algeria.

⁸ Act of allegiance made to the king by his subjects as part of a ceremony, which today takes place during the royal celebration known as "fête du trône". Customary chiefs, among others, genuflect before the throne and kiss the king's hand as a symbol of loyalty and acknowledgment of his sovereignty.

⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Colonel Mohamed Boughdadi, Rabat, 9 and 10 March 1997. Similar documents are available in numerous publications. See notably, Mohamed Boughdadi, *Le passé et le présent marocains du Sahara* (Casablanca, 1998) and *Le conflit saharien. Une nouvelle lecture* (Rabat, 2001). Boughdadi also kindly entrusted Crisis Group with chapters of a forthcoming publication.

¹⁰ From the singular *Chérif* (Sharif in English), descendant of the prophet Mohammed.

¹¹ Crisis Group interview, Washington DC, March 2007.

¹² Crisis Group interview, senior Moroccan officials, Washington DC, January–May 2007.

¹³ To advance this most recent argument, the Moroccan government has drawn upon the writings and lectures of Western researchers. See, among others, Claude Moniquet, *Le Front Polisario: Partenaire crédible de négociation ou séquelle de la guerre froide et obstacle à une solution politique du Sahara occidental* (Brussels, 2005). See also the lectures and opinion pieces of Aymeric Chauprade, French political thinker, professor at the Sorbonne and the Collège Interarmée de Défense.

¹⁴ Gara Djebilet, one of the largest iron deposits in the world, is located in Algeria, 130km south east of Tindouf, 300km from the Atlantic Ocean, and 1,600km from the Mediterranean. If extracted minerals required transportation via the Mediterranean, the exploitation of those mines would be considerably less profitable.

Morocco also denounces “Algeria’s treachery” with regard to the two countries’ border demarcation. A protocol was signed on 6 July 1961 between King Hassan II and Ferhat Abbas, president of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA), created by the National Liberation Front (FLN) in September 1958. This agreement provided that “the territorial dispute created by an arbitrary delineation imposed by France was ultimately to be resolved by direct negotiations between Morocco and Algeria”.¹⁵ Acting out of “sentimentalism”,¹⁶ Moroccan leaders decided to discuss the border question with an independent Algeria rather than with the French colonisers. However, according to the Moroccans, post-colonial Algeria reneged on this agreement, leaving the Moroccans embittered insofar as they they allowed the FLN to use Moroccan territory as a rear base during the war of independence. Algeria’s possession of part of a territory that Rabat considers “historically Moroccan”, together with the fact that attempts to reach a border agreement have yet to produce a conclusive settlement, remains an open wound for many Moroccans. The Western Sahara question cannot be understood without consideration of this as yet unresolved border dispute between Morocco and Algeria.

C. THE POSITION OF THE POLISARIO

For the Polisario, the Western Sahara conflict is first and foremost a matter of self-determination. It has consistently stated that its only demand is for the proper application of international law, and in particular the right to self-determination; indeed, the UN has repeatedly affirmed that Resolution 1514 (XV)¹⁷ applies to the Western Sahara.

A referendum is a recognised manner for resolving matters of decolonisation. If the Sahrawis decide to be Moroccan, we will obviously respect this

decision, but only a referendum on self-determination can settle this problem.¹⁸

Favouring this path towards settlement of the conflict – which, moreover, was agreed “jointly with Morocco”¹⁹ – the Polisario sees no reason to change its position. This, it points out, is in contrast to the position of Morocco, which, having realised that a self-determination referendum would harm its interests, reneged on prior commitments. As the Polisario sees it, Morocco’s decision to invoke its so-called historical rights is merely a cover for ultra-nationalist ambitions. The Moroccan claim is thus viewed as part of a much broader project, that of “Greater Morocco”,²⁰ first advocated in the 1950s by Istiqlal²¹ and later taken up by Mohamed V and his successors. This ideology:

transforms a *cherifien* kingdom into an expansionist state that has successively laid claim to Mauritania, western Algeria, Ceuta and Melilla, and even a part of Mali, in addition to the Western Sahara. If all countries were to lay claim to territories they maintain they once controlled, we would be headed towards a war of all against all. It’s a very special vision of history.²²

For the Polisario, Rabat has used its nationalist ideology above all for domestic reasons, in order to forge “a sacred union around the throne, chiefly to stave off the threats

¹⁵ Hassan Alaoui, “Droits historiques, territoires marocains spoliés et vérités au Sahara : aux origines du conflit maroco-algérien”, *Le Matin*, 3 November 2006.

¹⁶ This word has been used many times by the Moroccans, including Hassan Alaoui, deputy director of the Casablanca daily *Le Matin*. Crisis Group interview, Casablanca, 7 February 2007.

¹⁷ The resolution was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 14 December 1960. It enshrined the principle of self-determination and the right of colonised peoples to independence. This resolution was declared applicable to the case of the Western Sahara by UN General Assembly Resolution 2229 of 20 December 1966. In its 16 October 1975 Advisory Opinion, the International Court of Justice concluded: “The Court has not found legal ties of such a nature as might affect the application of [General Assembly] resolution 1514 (XV) to the decolonization of the Western Sahara and, in particular, of the principle of self-determination...”

¹⁸ Crisis Group interview, Khalil Ahmed, human rights adviser to the SADR, Tifariti, 28 February 2007.

¹⁹ Beginning in 1988, the UN proposed a Settlement Plan that entailed a transitional period including a ceasefire, repatriation of refugees, exchange of prisoners of war and organisation of a referendum. This plan was accepted by Morocco and the Polisario in 1991. MINURSO was created in 1991 by Resolution 690, two of its principal functions being monitoring the ceasefire and planning and organising a referendum on self-determination.

²⁰ This argument begins with the premise that the Moroccan Kingdom was broken up during the colonial period: divided between Tangiers (an international city), Rif, Ifni and the province of Tarfaya (a Spanish protectorate); between the Rif and the south of the Anti-Atlas, including Tindouf and west Algeria (French colony); Rio de Oro (Spanish colony); Saguiet el Hamra (occupied by the Spanish military); Mauritania and part of Mali (French colony); and Ceuta and Mellila (Spanish enclaves). According to this argument, Morocco’s responsibility is to reunify all these parts into historic “Greater Morocco”.

²¹ The Istiqlal party, created in 1944, was a nationalist, royalist party that advocated Morocco’s independence and fought for the return of Sultan Mohamed Ben Youssef (the future Mohamed V), at the time in forced exile by France. The party split into several entities in 1960. After 1956, the idea of Greater Morocco was taken up by Allal al Fassi, Istiqlal’s leader. He published a map of Greater Morocco later that year.

²² Crisis Group interview, Khalil Ahmed, human rights adviser to the SADR, Tifariti, 28 February 2007.

posed to its power by the Istiqlal party and the army”, allowing it to foster and maintain a sense of Moroccan society under siege, encircled and under threat. By depicting such an environment, the regime is said to have enabled a repressive rule and to have suppressed all criticism by equating it with treasonous attempts to break up the nation. In short, the kingdom is said to have manipulated the Western Sahara issue as a means of avoiding any challenge to its legitimacy and to the legitimacy of its inegalitarian, feudal system.

The Polisario’s critique of Morocco’s position further focuses on its “contradictory and unstable” nature, leading it to accept one day what it rejects the next, all for the sake of buying time. As one Polisario spokesman says:

Morocco was one of the proponents of a self-determination referendum until it reneged on its commitment and helped block the definition of the electorate, before it ultimately completely rejected the notion of a referendum to resolve the conflict.²³

D. THE ALGERIAN POSITION

In Algiers, the Western Sahara question is presented above all as a matter of principle. Like the Algerians themselves, the Sahrawis are seen as victims of colonisation who are entitled to the right of self-determination. “It’s a question of decolonisation that must be solved. The premise of the chérifien empire, put forward by Morocco, stems from a chauvinistic nationalism. Arguments proffered by Morocco such as the prayer in the name of the Sultan, etc, are simply anachronistic”.²⁴ Algeria’s opinion is reinforced by references to international law,²⁵ and the situation is, therefore, seen as requiring resolution within the framework of the UN, all the more so because

²³ Ibid. In planning the referendum, the parties quickly faced the problem of defining the electoral body. The Sahrawi wanted to use the Spanish census of 1974 as the basis for defining this body. However, the Moroccans tried to enlarge the electorate by adding people most likely to oppose independence. In 1995, the problem of the “disputed tribes” emerged. This refers to the 25 groups or tribes of southern Morocco who, according to Morocco, have familial links to, or a presence in, the territory of Western Sahara, and who were not counted by Spain in 1974. Since rejecting the Baker Plan in 2003, Morocco has proposed strong internal autonomy for the territory, rejecting a self-determination referendum as a means of resolving the conflict. See Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°66, *Western Sahara: Out of the Impasse*, 11 June 2007.

²⁴ Crisis Group interview, Smaïl Hamdami, president of the Algerian Association of International Affairs, former diplomat and former head of government, Algiers, 25 February 2007.

²⁵ Like the Polisario, Algeria relies on UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV).

all concerned actors have agreed to the organisation of a referendum on self-determination. Former head of government and diplomat, Smaïl Hamdani, remarks:

In 1988, a Moroccan delegation that included Driss Basri arrived in Algiers to meet with the Algerian authorities. Following this meeting, they issued a joint statement affirming that a referendum – “without any restriction” – was the proper solution for determining the outcome.²⁶

In Algerian eyes, the fact that Morocco has since consistently tried to block the process by invoking all kinds of excuses does not justify abandoning this principle.²⁷ “Morocco has rigidly maintained a position that is contrary to international law”.²⁸ In the words of an Algerian official:

the principle of self-determination is sacred. The West would pay dearly in terms of its credibility and legitimacy if it were sacrificed. What’s more, the Sahrawis would never accept it, whatever the external pressures. The resistance would be reignited.²⁹

Algiers has, therefore, always insisted that the Western Sahara conflict has only two “concerned” parties: the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and Morocco; Mauritania and Algeria are merely “interested” parties.³⁰ Algeria is an interested party because the conflict

²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Smaïl Hamdani, Algiers, 25 February 2007.

²⁷ It must also be underscored that when the two parties agreed to organise the referendum, they were both confident in the ultimate outcome. Hassan II made that clear in his 3 March 1998 speech: “As we endeavour with perseverance to promote your development and to improve your standing among all nations, we are also committed, through peaceful means and in conformity with our international legal obligations, to safeguard the unity of your *patrie* and to better ensure its territorial integrity, of which we are historically and constitutionally the guarantors. It is this choice that has led us to accept the organisation of a referendum in our southern provinces to clear the stain of an affair that has been speciously incited to impede our achievement of full territorial integrity. There would be no doubt in any mind endowed with understanding as to the happy outcome of a consultation that will only serve to reconfirm the historic allegiance of these peoples in our provinces to our Throne. And we may assure our loyal subjects, victims of this forced estrangement, that they will soon find again the comfort to which they are entitled in the bosom of their loving mother country”. See www.maroc-hebdo.press.ma/MHinternet/Archives313/html_313/Le%20discours%20royal.html.

²⁸ Crisis Group interview, Ismaïl Debêche, professor of political science and international relations at the University of Algiers, Tindouf, 24 February 2007.

²⁹ Crisis Group interview, Algerian official, March 2007.

³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Saïd Ayachi, former director of the Algerian Red Crescent, current director of the Comité National

“takes place at its borders, and so it remains vigilant. It intends to work towards an easing of tensions between Morocco and the Polisario because this latent conflict harms Algeria through the proximity of a zone of potential conflict and because it hinders its relations with one of its most important neighbours, Morocco”.³¹

Finally, the Algerians often highlight the counterproductive nature of the links Morocco draws between the Western Sahara question and other regional issues, particularly that of Maghreb integration:

The Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) has been blocked by the Moroccan position. In the Treaty of Marrakech of 1989, 36 conventions, covering all aspects of relations between the Maghreb countries, were developed through consultation between the signatories. At present, Algeria has ratified 29 of these 36 conventions, while Morocco has ratified only five. The linkage between these two issues is a mistake. Morocco is in fact going against its own interests by blocking the AMU. The dispute between Great Britain and Spain over Gibraltar has never held back European integration.³²

II. THE HUMAN COSTS

A. ESTIMATIONS

Between 1975 and the 1991 ceasefire, fighting between the Polisario and Morocco led to significant population displacement and the territory's division into two separate entities. During the 1980s, Morocco constructed a series of defensive walls, the outermost of which, commonly referred to as the Berm, runs along a path of more than 1,500 kilometres and cuts the Western Sahara in two. One side, comprising roughly 85 per cent of the territory, is controlled by Morocco; the other side by the Polisario. The Polisario estimates that 50,000 Sahrawis have fled the Moroccan-controlled zone into the area it controls.³³ Today, the bulk of this population is living outside the SADR territory, as the refugee camps are located in Algeria, around Tindouf.

According to the Polisario's further estimates, the camp population stands at roughly 155,000,³⁴ in addition to the 10,000 people in Tindouf. However, Morocco sharply disputes these figures, and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) regularly complains that the Polisario will not allow it to carry out a true population count. There are also roughly 30,000 Sahrawis in Mauritania,³⁵ 3,500 in Cuba and between 12,000-15,000 in Spain.³⁶ The other diaspora communities

³³ Morocco has always contested the Polisario's figures. The 155,000 claimed by the Polisario would mean that their number had tripled in 30 years despite horrendous living and sanitary conditions. International institutions have never been able to conduct a census and officially adopt the Polisario's number. That said, for two years the World Food Programme has been targeting a figure of 90,000 people. Cf. Section III. A below.

³⁴ See the “UNHCR Population Statistics”, 2002, available at www.unhcr.org/statistics/STATISTICS/3f3769672.pdf. UNHCR, unable to perform its own population census, uses the Polisario's figures. The most important camps are in Assouert, Smara, Laâyoune and Dakhla. Other villages also house refugee populations; this is the case, for example, in Rabouni, where there are administrative services and a SADR command centre, as well as the so-called “27 February” camp, where there is also a school. Most camps are named after Western Saharan villages. They are relatively tightly clustered, except for the camp at Dakhla, which is 170km south east of Tindouf, near the Mauritanian border.

³⁵ Given that the same tribes are found in northern Mauritania and in the Western Sahara (primarily the Rguibat), it is difficult to distinguish between “authentic” Sahrawi – those who have dual nationality (Sahrawi and Mauritanian) – and Mauriticians who simply consider themselves Sahrawi.

³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Julien Dedenis, a French researcher who works on Sahrawi issues, Tifariti, 26 February 2007. See also Julien Dedenis, *La combinaison socio-spatiale sahraouie réfugiée. Espace de camps de réfugiés ou territoire de l'Etat sahraoui en exil ?* (Université de Nantes, 2004).

Algérien de Soutien au Peuple Sahraoui., Tifariti, 28 February 2007.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Crisis Group interview, Smaïl Hamdani, Algiers, 25 February 2007. Ramtane Lamamra, secretary general of the ministry of foreign affairs also spoke of the Moroccans' “totalistic approach; [for them] it's all or nothing”. Crisis Group interview, Algiers, 3 March 2007.

are much smaller, with the exception of the Sahrawi student population in Algeria.

Statistics are not available for the Western Sahara villages that, unlike the camps, are not in Algerian territory (to name a few: Agwanit, Amgala, Bir Lehlou, Dougaj, Mehaires, Tifariti, Mijek, Bir Tirrissit and Zoug).³⁷ These villages are chiefly inhabited by Polisario fighters. These areas comprise a small separate civil population, chiefly nomadic peoples who move according to the rains, and a small merchant population, but together they represent only from several hundred to, at most, a few thousand individuals.

B. THE SAHRAWIS IN POLISARIO-CONTROLLED TERRITORIES³⁸

The Sahrawis in both Tindouf and the “liberated” territories have all borne the cost of forced separation from their families. There is hardly a Sahrawi family that has not lost someone to, or been separated by, the war. The experience of separation has become one of the central components of Sahrawi identity, with most Sahrawi refugees coming from the part controlled by Morocco and living far from the land of their birth for up to 30 years. The separation is lived twice over, because many of the refugee families have husbands and fathers serving as fighters far away in the “liberated territories”.

The separation was all but total until the introduction of a family visiting program which, since March 2004, has allowed several thousand camp refugees to meet with family members living in Moroccan-controlled territory.³⁹ In 2005, some 19,000 Sahrawis signed up to the program, but only 1,476 were able to take advantage of it⁴⁰ as the budget was limited. The program also entailed the installation of phone booths in the camps to allow calls to the Moroccan side.⁴¹ In recent years, Mauritania has become a place where families from “each side can meet

together”.⁴² This meagre progress has made some modest gains towards alleviating the suffering, but the pain of separation remains.

The cost of separation is compounded by the difficulties engendered by forced displacement, both in terms of the strict control exercised by the Polisario and, even more, in terms of the resulting isolation and dispersal of the population, which generally has very few means at its disposal (financial or material) to travel. The zone containing the camps lies more than 2,000 kilometres from Algiers and from the closest Mauritanian town, Zouerate, but there is no road between them, just as there is no road between the villages of the “liberated territories”. It therefore takes eight hours in an all-terrain vehicle to go from Tindouf to Tifariti, a distance of little more than 260 kilometres. An important albeit modest change that has taken place over the last few years is that, thanks to European agencies (mainly Spanish), thousands of children are now able to leave the zone during the summer in order to escape the desert’s hottest and most languorous season.

Camp isolation contributes to making living conditions arduous. The *hamada*⁴³ of Tindouf is a rocky plateau, one of the most inhospitable parts of the Sahara desert. With an arid climate, the region has very little vegetation. Temperatures frequently exceed 40°C and, in the summer, sometimes 50°C. This environment, together with the refugees’ poverty, has led to numerous health problems. There are grave prenatal care deficiencies, and the maternal mortality rate is 8 per cent.⁴⁴ In early 2005, the Sahrawi Red Crescent announced that 66 per cent of pregnant women and 68 per cent of children under fifteen months suffered from anemia due to delays and shortfalls in humanitarian assistance; malnutrition affected nearly 8 per cent of children.⁴⁵ There are also numerous chronic difficulties linked to the region’s climate: arterial hypertension, lung disease and eye conditions, as well as illnesses connected with cold weather such as flu, throat infections and bronchitis.⁴⁶

Malnutrition often leads to vitamin and growth deficiencies among camp residents. The camps also suffer from

³⁷ For a more complete discussion of the Saharan villages, see Julien Dedenis, “De Tifariti à Tifariti. Périple dans les ‘territoires libérés’”, *Sahara Info* n° 138, March 2007.

³⁸ The “Sahrawi in Polisario-controlled territories” are found in two separate areas: lands in the Western Sahara controlled by the Polisario (called “liberated Western Sahara” by the Polisario) and refugee camps situated in Algeria but controlled by the Polisario.

³⁹ UNHCR estimated at the end of 2006 that roughly 2,500 people had benefited from the program and that by the end of 2007 a further 2,600 refugees would benefit. UNHCR Press service, 3 November 2006. See www.unhcr.fr/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&id=454b229c2.

⁴⁰ See “Report of the U.S. State Department on the Human Rights Situation in Western Sahara in 2006”, at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78866.htm>.

⁴¹ Between 2004 et 2005, this program allowed Tindouf refugees to make 56,000 telephone calls. UNHCR press service, op. cit.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, Julien Dedenis, Tifariti, 26 February 2007.

⁴³ Rocky plateau in the Saharan region.

⁴⁴ See http://ec.europa.eu/echo/information/eye_witness/2002/2002_02_fr.htm; and Crisis Group interview, M. Ayachi, former director of the Algerian Red Crescent, current president of the Comité National Algérien de Soutien au Peuple Sahraoui (Algerian National Committee for the Support of the Sahrawi People), Tifariti, 28 February 2007.

⁴⁵ Sahara Press Service wire story, 5 February 2006, <http://www.spsrasd.info/sps-050206.html>.

⁴⁶ See *El Watan*, 13 February 2007.

insufficient and poorly equipped health facilities. Other than the central hospital in Rabouni, the refugees have access to a single hospital in Dakhla,⁴⁷ the most distant of all the camps. In addition to being poorly equipped and stocked with few medicines, the facilities suffer from water shortages and underpaid staff. Some camps have water, though often of poor quality; others rely on truck deliveries, which are strictly rationed. As for camp lodging, despite some improvements over the past 30 years – including houses made of earthen bricks and sometimes cement – some refugees are still housed in tents.⁴⁸

Landmines pose another risk. According to Pascal Bongard, program director at Geneva Call,⁴⁹ between five and ten million mines can be found around the wall with an additional two to five million throughout the affected region, including Moroccan- and Polisario-controlled areas, as well as Algeria and Mauritania.⁵⁰ He suggests that although the minefields on the Moroccan side presumably have been fairly accurately mapped, this is not the case for mines laid at different stages of the conflict. Not only have they not been marked on maps (or if they have been, only very imprecisely), but they also have been displaced by sand, wind and occasional rain.⁵¹

Despite the risks posed by these mines, several thousand Sahrawi nomads live in affected zones on each side of the wall.⁵² There are no solid figures for deaths due to mines, but Landmine Monitor has estimated them at several dozen since the 1991 ceasefire. More than 350 survivors of landmines live in the refugee camps, with varying degrees of injury.⁵³ MINURSO,⁵⁴ in collaboration with the British NGO Landmine Action, began mapping the minefields in April 2006. Work on removing the mines coupled with the Polisario's destruction of its stockpiles eliminated 3,172 anti-personnel mines and 144 anti-tank mines in 2006 as well as 3,325 mines⁵⁵ on 27 February 2007, in

Tifariti. Polisario signed on to the Geneva Call on 3 November 2005, thereby committing itself to no longer purchase or deploy anti-personnel mines.⁵⁶ Beyond the numbers, the presence of landmines and unexploded ordnance significantly hinders the refugees' movement and activity.

A final issue is raised by several organisations based in Morocco or in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara which accuse the Polisario of having killed or imprisoned numerous Sahrawis. In an 11 February 2007 press conference, the Association des Portés Disparus du Polisario (Association of the Disappeared by the Polisario) produced 294 names of disappeared persons. The list has not been verified and has not been endorsed by international human rights NGOs.

C. THE SAHRAWIS IN MOROCCAN-CONTROLLED TERRITORIES

If the Sahrawis living in Moroccan-controlled territories may be said to have a better material standard of living – chiefly as a result of significant Moroccan investments in the region and because it is the richest part of the territory – the human cost of the conflict is no less significant. Although not forced to suffer exile, they too have been separated from their families, forcibly displaced, and have suffered painful losses. As a result of both combat and the construction of the Berm, many were forcibly relocated. More generally, those living in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara have seen their way of life turned upside down by urbanisation and sedentarisation, which have accelerated since the beginning of the conflict – a process encouraged by Morocco to enhance security and facilitate surveillance. According to El Kanti Balla, a once “disappeared” Polisario member:

It is of course a lot easier to monitor an urban population than a rural, nomadic one. You have what is entailed by the fact that the territories are under occupation. This is a military zone, the army chiefs are the real decision-makers – often behind the scenes but sometimes directly – on what happens in the territories.⁵⁷

⁴⁷ The hospital is financed by ECHO (the European Commission's humanitarian aid agency) and supported by the Italian NGO “Terre des Hommes”.

⁴⁸ The 2006 floods destroyed the homes of more than 12,200 families.

⁴⁹ Geneva Call is an international humanitarian organisation created with the aim of encouraging non-state armed actors to respect the ban on anti-personnel mines.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Pascal Bongard, Tifariti, 27 February 2007.

⁵¹ By the end of the 1990s, 35 types of anti-personnel mines and 21 types of anti-tank mines produced by twelve countries had been categorised. “2000 Report of Landmine Monitor”, www.icbl.org/lm/2000/country/sahara/index.php3#bookmarks.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ MINURSO receives technical assistance from the United Nations' Mine Action Service (UNMAS).

⁵⁵ The total is made up in large part from the Polisario's mine stockpiles.

⁵⁶ The ban only refers to this type of mine, not to anti-tank mines. In addition, the Polisario Front, by signing the Geneva Call, made the commitment to not only cease using anti-personnel mines but also to destroy its stockpile and contribute to the anti-mine effort (demining, assistance to victims, etc).

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, El Kanti Balla, formerly “disappeared” Polisario fighter, Paris, 19 February 2007. El Kanti Balla was arrested in 1987 in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara and spent several years (June 1987 to July 1991) in one of the “secret prisons” in Morocco. He now lives in France.

In addition to the 100,000 Moroccan soldiers present in the territories,⁵⁸ there are also numerous other security forces: the Groupes Urbains de Sécurité (GUS), the Compagnies Mobiles d'Intervention (CMI), the Groupes d'Intervention Rapide (GIR), the Forces Auxiliaires (FA), the Renseignements Généraux (RG), the Direction de Sécurité du Territoire (DST), the police force and the judicial police. No comprehensive estimate of the total number of security forces present was made available to Crisis Group.

Accounts by local activists, foreign NGOs⁵⁹ and international organisations have all sounded the alarm over near constant human rights abuses. For example, at the end of 2006 the international media cited a confidential United Nations High Commission on Human Rights report.⁶⁰ It accused the Moroccan authorities of having “used disproportionate force” in suppressing pro-independence demonstrations in May 2005,⁶¹ reportedly injuring hundreds. Moreover, those arrested lack the guarantees of a fair trial, as the Moroccan justice system reportedly suffers from “serious deficiencies”⁶² – clients denied access to their lawyers, no investigations into accusations of torture, no fair trial – an analysis confirmed by the Association Marocaine des Droits Humains (Moroccan Association of Human Rights, AMDH).⁶³

⁵⁸ See “Armée. La grande bavarde”, *Tel Quel* n°226. www.telquel-online.com/226/maroc2_226.shtml.

⁵⁹ Numerous accounts can be found in the United Nations press release CPSD/315, “La quatrième commission entend des pétitionnaires sur le Sahara occidental”, 7 October 2005, at <http://www.un.org/News/fr-press/docs/2005/CPSD315.doc.htm>.

⁶⁰ See *Le Monde*, 7 November 2006. A copy of this report was given to Crisis Group.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ “The AMDH reported that the trials of the demonstrators growing out of the May 2005 disturbances were unfair because charges were never clearly articulated, lawyers were denied access to their clients and allegations of torture by Moroccan authorities were not investigated”. See “Western Sahara Country Report on Human Rights Practices, 2006”, U.S. State Department, at www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78866.htm. See also Human Rights Watch’s 2007 Annual Report: “In cases with a political color, courts routinely denied defendants a fair trial, ignoring requests for medical examinations lodged by defendants who claim to have been tortured, refusing to summon exculpatory witnesses, and convicting defendants solely on the basis of apparently coerced confessions. For example, in December 2005, a court in El-Ayoun convicted seven Sahrawi human rights activists in connection with the sometimes-violent protests that had broken out sporadically in the region since the previous May. The evidence linking the seven to acts of violence was dubious and in some cases appeared fabricated. Authorities appear to have targeted these Sahrawis because of their human rights activism and outspoken pro-independence views. The seven got prison terms of up to two

The most frequent human rights abuses involve impediments to freedoms of assembly, demonstration and membership in pro-independence political organisations,⁶⁴ as well as the disproportionate use of force and resort to torture.⁶⁵ According to several sources, these procedures have intensified since the outbreak of the 2005 intifada, the name given to the numerous demonstrations that rocked the Moroccan-controlled territories since May 2005.⁶⁶ A pro-independence Sahrawi intellectual confirms that since the intifada, the security forces regularly crack down on inhabitants suspected of pro-independence sympathies, beating them up before dropping them at town entrances.⁶⁷ There also are reports of detention of activists or of demonstrators under harsh conditions and at undeclared sites.⁶⁸ El Kanti Balla, who was detained in the Kalaat M’Gouna jail, 100 kilometres from the town of Ouarzazate,⁶⁹ states that around 350 Sahrawis were imprisoned there while he was in custody and that several of them had died, essentially from lack of care and ill treatment. A UN Working Group mandated to investigate the forced disappearances concluded:

The majority of the 249 reported cases occurred between 1972 and 1980. Most of them concerned persons of Sahrawi origin who reportedly disappeared in Moroccan-controlled territories because they or their relatives were known or suspected supporters of the Polisario Front. Students and better-educated Sahrawis allegedly were targeted. The disappeared persons were allegedly held in secret detention centres, such as Laayoune, Qal’at M’gouna, Agdz and Tazmamart. Cells in some police stations or military barracks and in secret houses in the Rabat suburbs were also said to be used to hide the disappeared.⁷⁰

years but by April all had been released.”, <http://hrw.org/english/wr2k7/docs/2007/01/11/morocc14714.htm>.

⁶⁴ See the 2006 report by Freedom House, www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&country=7106&year=2006.

⁶⁵ See Amnesty International’s 2006 Annual Report, at <http://web.amnesty.org/report2006/>. Morocco adopted a law against torture in February 2006.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Gaël Lombart et Julie Pichot, “Peur et silence à El-Ayoun”, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 2006.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, Ali Omar Yara, co-director of the *Ouest Saharien*, Paris, 4 February 2005.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, El Kanti Balla, Paris, 19 February 2007.

⁶⁹ A tourist town in the Moroccan south east, between the Atlas and the Anti-Atlas Mountains.

⁷⁰ “Report of the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances”, United Nations Economic and Social Council, 60th Session of the UN Commission for Human Rights, Geneva, 16 March–26 April 2004, at [www.unhcr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/0/bdaddc96a7c76632c1256e6000460b9b/\\$FILE/G0410397.pdf](http://www.unhcr.ch/Huridocda/Huridoca.nsf/0/bdaddc96a7c76632c1256e6000460b9b/$FILE/G0410397.pdf). See also, “The ‘Disappeared’ in Morocco”,

In addition, foreign observers and journalists trying to conduct ground investigations face repeated constraints and obstacles⁷¹ and human rights activists face abusive legal action and arrests.⁷²

Finally, as in the case of the Tindouf refugees, the widespread presence of mines represents an undeniable cost to the population, Sahrawi or not, living in these territories. According to Landmine Monitor, even though Morocco welcomed the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty in principle, the kingdom has still not ratified it, announcing that it neither produced nor sold mines and that its only condition to ratify the treaty was for it to respect the country's "territorial integrity"⁷³. The report also emphasises that in 2006 Morocco still had not provided MINURSO with information required to begin a genuine mine clearance process.⁷⁴ The Swiss NGO Foundation for Landmine Victim Aid counted in 2006 alone 38 victims in Tan Tan and Assa Zag provinces, of whom ten died.⁷⁵

Amnesty International, MDE 29/01/93, at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ENGMDE290011993>.

⁷¹ For example, the Moroccan authorities cancelled the visit of an ad hoc delegation of the European Parliament due to visit Western Sahara on 5 October 2006, *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, 19 October 2006. They also questioned and deported three Norwegian journalists in 2004, "Maroc - Rapport annuel 2005", Reporters Sans Frontières, www.rsff.org/article.php3?id_article=13300.

⁷² Notable cases include those of Aminatou Haïdar and Ali Salem Tamek. See "Rapport annuel 2006 pour le Maghreb", Fédération Internationale des Droits de l'Homme, pp. 40-42. www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/fidh-imp_maghreb.pdf.

⁷³ The Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Morocco to the United Nations Office in Geneva stated: "Morocco, which has signed and ratified all international disarmament instruments, sees its ratification of the Ottawa Convention as a strategic objective. However, the achievement of this objective is temporarily adjourned for one single reason, the requirement of safety of its Southern provinces. This obstacle to the Kingdom's joining of the Convention will disappear as soon as the artificial conflict which is imposed on it has been definitively settled". See www.mission-maroc.ch/fr/pages/112.html.

⁷⁴ There has been no investigation in Morocco. The Polisario but not Morocco provided the necessary maps and data to MINURSO in 1991. "Morocco Landmine Report 2006", at www.icbl.org/lm/country/morocco/. In the report provided to the UN under Article 7 of the Convention of Ottawa on a voluntary basis (as Morocco has not ratified the Convention), Morocco responded to the question concerning the location of mines: "As for the defensive walls: the Royal Armed Forces are ready to eliminate the mines disseminated around the defence walls as soon as the artificial conflict which is imposed on it has been definitively settled". This report was given to Crisis Group by Pascal Bongard, of Geneva Call.

⁷⁵ Ibid. See also, "Le Maroc 'découvre' ses victimes de mines", in *Bulletin de la campagne suisse contre les mines antipersonnelles*, www.stopmines.ch/pdf/pdf51.pdf; and "The largest prison in the world: landmines, walls, UXOs and the UN's

D. THE HUMAN COST FOR MOROCCANS

Among Moroccans, soldiers have been the primary victims of the conflict. Besides landmine victims, the most significant human cost for the Moroccan people has been the taking of military prisoners by the Polisario. The Polisario has detained hundreds of soldiers (2,400 according to Human Rights Watch),⁷⁶ some of whom were held for over twenty years and subjected to torture, mistreatment or forced labour. In 2003, a mission undertaken by a French NGO, Fondation France Liberté, called them "the oldest prisoners of war in the world" and described awful conditions of torture, forced labour, abuse as well as other violations of the Geneva Conventions.⁷⁷ The report also listed the 120 Moroccan prisoners of war who died or were presumed to have died in captivity. The last remaining Moroccan prisoners of war were freed by the Polisario in 2005.⁷⁸

Ali Najab, held prisoner by the Polisario for 25 years (1978-2003) and today president of the Association Marocaine des Ex-Prisonniers de Guerre de l'Intégrité Territoriale (Moroccan Association of Former Prisoners of the War of Territorial Integrity), described his detention conditions. Not long after being captured, he was taken to the headquarters of the Algerian army in Tindouf and interrogated. He claims to have been handed back to the Polisario, tortured multiple times and forced to work alongside other prisoners, often seven days a week.⁷⁹ In a statement before the Fourth Commission of the United Nations in New York on 10 October 2005, Ali Najab further stated that some Moroccan military prisoners (460

role in the Western Sahara" *Colaboraciones* n° 1641, Grupo des Estudios Estrategicos, 17 April 2007, at www.gees.org/articulo/3867/.

⁷⁶ See "Western Sahara. Keeping it Secret. The United Nations operation in the Western Sahara", Human Rights Watch, vol. 7, 1995, at www.hrw.org/reports/1995/Wsahara.htm.

⁷⁷ See "Les conditions de détention des prisonniers de guerre marocains détenus à Tindouf (Algérie)", Paris, July 2003, p. 53, at www.mission-maroc.ch/pdf/Sahara/RapportPOWFRanLibertes.pdf.

⁷⁸ "In a communiqué, the Polisario Front said it had taken this decision in response to 'appeals' and 'to challenge Morocco to free the Sahrawi prisoners of war (more than 50 fighters) whose existence it has always denied and to shed light on the fate of more than 500 Sahrawi whom Morocco has 'disappeared' since the beginning of the conflict". "The Polisario frees its last Moroccan prisoners of war", Associated Press, 19 August 2005. The Moroccan authorities confirmed that these were the last remaining prisoners. See "Le Maroc se réjouit de la libération des 404 derniers détenus depuis plusieurs décennies en Algérie", in *MAP*, Rabat, 18 August 2005, at www.map.co.ma/mapfr/retour/retour.htm.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Ali Najab, Rabat, 14 February 2007.

in total) were held in Northern Algeria – in Blida, Boughar and Boufarik.⁸⁰ He also told Crisis Group:

The fate of the Moroccan prisoners of war has been doubly moving because many families went without news of their loved ones for many years and believed that they were dead. Husbands found their wives remarried, others found their parents had died and their inheritance already gone; many suffered psychological problems.⁸¹

There also is the issue of landmines, the victims of which were obviously not solely Sahrawi. The numbers cited above refer to those living in Moroccan-controlled territories, of which some are Moroccan.⁸² Moroccan soldiers are counted as a separate group. Moroccan authorities say they have recorded 51 victims of mines and unexploded ordnance (UXO), of which seven died, in the territories of the Western Sahara between March 2000 and March 2001.⁸³ More recent figures are unavailable.

⁸⁰ “Témoignage de Ali Najab ex-prisonnier de guerre marocain à la 4^{ème} Commission des Nations Unies à New York sur les traitements inhumains que le Polisario a fait subir aux prisonniers de guerre marocains à Tindouf et en Algérie”, document provided to Crisis Group by Ali Najab.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interview, Ali Najab, Rabat, 14 February 2007.

⁸² It is very difficult to count the number of inhabitants of Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara because the area the kingdom calls the “provinces du sud” (“Southern provinces”) does not encompass the same area. The Oued Eddahab-Lagouira province (fully within Western Sahara) has a population of 99,196 according to the 2004 census. The province of Laâyoune-Boujdour-Sakia el Hamra (almost entirely within Western Sahara, except for the area of Tarfaya) has a population of 255,615. The province of Guelmin-Smara (of which only a small part falls within the Western Sahara), has 462,276 inhabitants: some small fraction of these can be assumed to be living within Western Sahara (chiefly in Jdiriya and Smara). In total, the population counted in the 2004 census that lives within Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara probably exceeds 360,000, including both Sahrawi and non-Sahrawi. The influx of people from the north has led to significant demographic changes. For example, the population in Oued Eddahab-Lagouira province could not have grown from 36,723 in 1994 to more than 99,000 in (an annual increase of 10 per cent) solely through natural population growth.

⁸³ “Landmine Monitor Report 2004”, op. cit. p. 1,072.

III. THE ECONOMIC COST

A. THE SAHRAWIS IN POLISARIO-CONTROLLED TERRITORIES

The economic cost of the conflict is without doubt the most difficult to measure due to the absence of reliable data. However, a number of issues should be considered.

The widespread planting of landmines, mentioned above, has had a significant economic impact. According to a researcher:

Numerous parts of the territory under Polisario control were given up because of the presence – or suspected presence – of mines or unexploded ordnance. This has an economic consequence in that pastoralism, which is one of the foundations of traditional Sahrawi economy, is obviously forbidden in these zones and is rigorously avoided by the population. When a person or vehicle has the misfortune of setting off a landmine, the whole zone is then declared out of bounds, as is any grazing land or wells therein.⁸⁴

In addition, Sahrawi refugees are highly dependent on international aid, which, as highlighted by the “Motion for a resolution on humanitarian aid to Sahrawi refugees”,⁸⁵ has reportedly diminished and become very irregular.⁸⁶ This assessment is shared by agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP), which stresses that the population regularly suffers from acute food shortages.⁸⁷ The problem, recurrent since the beginning of the 1990s, hit with intensified gravity in 2005 when WFP and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) declared that the number of people entitled to assistance would thereafter be reduced to 90,000 from the original 155,000 (158,000 in 2004). This decrease

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, Pascal Bongard, Tifariti, 27 February 2007.

⁸⁵ Tabled by the Greens/European Free Alliance in January 2005 at the European Parliament in Strasbourg and adopted on 14 April 2005.

⁸⁶ While the camps ultimately depend on international aid, “the camps saw the arrival of hard currency from 1991, notably income from Sahrawis who had migrated to Europe (primarily to Spain) or to Mauritania. From the 1990s onwards, pensions were paid to a number of retirees of the Spanish colonial administration. All in all, businesses began to flourish in the camps in the mid-1990s. Some are now craftsmen, while the few individuals who were slightly more wealthy had the chance to increase their herd of camels”, Crisis Group interview, Julien Dedenis, Tifariti, 26 February 2007.

⁸⁷ World Food Programme (WFP), April 2007, at http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/op_reports/wfp110572.pdf.

of more than 40 per cent attracted considerable and often contradictory commentary.

Morocco saw the reduction in the target population as confirmation by the major UN agencies that the number of Sahrawi refugees had been overestimated and that part of the aid had on occasion been siphoned off by the Algerian army or by Polisario leaders, chiefly to subsidise the SADR. This aid, principally in the form of foodstuffs,⁸⁸ medicine and machinery, was reportedly “regularly sold by means of networks in the Algerian south (Tindouf, Bechar, Laabadla, Oum Laassal, Adrar) and in the Mauritanian north (Bir Mogrein, Aïn Ben tili, Lehkira, Zouerat, Nouadhibou, Choum and Atar), and even in Nouakchott”.⁸⁹

Polisario and Algeria strongly disputed this interpretation:

The current situation is deplorable; the back-up stocks of basic commodities are exhausted. The UN agencies say that there are no more donors. It's usually support from Algeria and ECHO [the European Commission's humanitarian aid agency] that enables budget targets to be reached. The tales of embezzlement are unproven: an inquiry by the World Food Programme showed that 2 per cent [of aid] was lost. The Sahrawi camps are the best organised in the world, with a rotation of officials. Are Moroccan authorities' repeated claims of embezzlement responsible for the international community's current lack of interest? It's a question that I ask myself.⁹⁰

Neither the WFP nor UNHCR offered a reason for their downward revision. Rather than referring to a “target population” they now refer to the “most vulnerable populations”, without ever clearly explaining the difference between their data and that offered by the Polisario and Algeria, whose numbers they frequently continue to use in their own official documents. Different UN agencies have long complained of being unable to conduct a proper refugee census. In Mauritania, notably in the town of Zouerate, evidence gathered in 2002 suggested the presence of items originally sent as part of international aid packages to the Sahrawis, thereby indicating the possibility of aid embezzlement.⁹¹ However, according to a French researcher:

One should be wary of these words. It is true that some of what is provided is resold, notably in Algeria or Mauritania. But, on the one hand, it is

quite a marginal amount and, on the other hand, items that are resold in order to purchase other goods, principally to vary one's diet, cannot be considered embezzlement or trafficking.⁹²

B. THE SAHRAWIS IN THE MOROCCAN-CONTROLLED TERRITORIES

In these areas, too, the precise economic cost is very difficult to measure, as it is necessary to compare the current situation with what would have occurred without the Moroccan presence. Nonetheless, two observations are necessary. On the one hand, like their brethren on the other side of the wall, the Sahrawis (for the most part nomadic people practising pastoralism and trade) have become settled as a result of the fighting, the existence of mined areas and the construction of the Berm, but equally because of a Moroccan policy that favours sedentarisation and urbanisation. The traditional economy and way of life thus have been fundamentally transformed. Pastoralism has very much become a minority activity, as has trade, owing to difficulties in mobility caused by the Berm to the east and the closing of the border with Mauritania between 1979 and 2002.

On the other hand, independence activists regularly condemn Morocco's exploitation of Western Sahara's fishing and mining riches as a violation of international law. Among the territory's principal resources are phosphates (extracted at the Boucraâ mine) and the very rich fishing waters off the Sahrawi coast. One of the most significant phosphate production zones exploited by Morocco, after Khouribga and Gantour, is the Boucraâ mine. According to the Office chérifien des phosphates, the agency charged with managing Morocco's phosphate resources, its annual capacity is 2.4 million tons, with reserves of 1.13 billion cu. m⁹³ The extracted ore is transported to Laâyoune on a 100-kilometre-long conveyer belt.

The Saharan fishing grounds account for a major part of the kingdom's fishing industry. Small-scale inshore fishing in the Western Sahara is carried out by a fleet of some 3,400 boats that brought in some 700,000 tons of fish in 2005, valued at two million dirhams (around \$242 million), four times more than ten years before.⁹⁴ Most of the merchants come from the north of the country, and Moroccan soldiers have made a fortune by obtaining and

⁸⁸ Between September 2002 and August 2004, WFP delivered the equivalent of \$30 million in food aid (66,000 tons).

⁸⁹ See *L'Opinion*, 19 March 2004.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interview, M. Ayachi, Tifariti, 28 February 2007.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interview, Mauritanian journalist, Zouerate, September 2002.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, Paris, 15 March 2007.

⁹³ See <http://www.ocpgroup.ma/jsp/metiers/boucraa.jsp>.

⁹⁴ See “Mer d'abondance”, *Jeune Afrique* N°2389, 22 October 2006.

then reselling fishing licences.⁹⁵ Separatists also denounce the 2005 fishing agreement between Morocco and the European Union as illegal, insofar as the kingdom's sovereignty over this stretch of coastline is not internationally recognised.⁹⁶

C. MOROCCO

The very notion of an "economic cost" is sharply disputed by Morocco, which considers all funds spent in the Western Sahara as an investment. Still, although difficult to quantify, rising security costs, clearly linked to the ongoing conflict, are extremely high. They grow in particular out of the construction of the 2,500 kilometre-long Berm, equipped with radars and other sophisticated electronic surveillance devices and requiring 130,000 soldiers to guard it.⁹⁷ Given that the Moroccan Royal Armed Forces comprise approximately 250,000 men,⁹⁸ it can be roughly estimated that around half the kingdom's military budget is devoted to the Western Sahara.⁹⁹ According to evidence gathered in Morocco, tens of thousands of additional personnel more or less directly

linked to the maintenance of order and security also should be counted. However, a Moroccan journalist maintains that these costs must be put into perspective:

...because Morocco receives a lot of help from countries in the Gulf, driven by "dynastic solidarity". For example, the recent purchase of weapons from Spain and the likely purchase of aircraft from France reportedly will in part be paid for with Saudi help.¹⁰⁰

Morocco also has invested over \$2.4 billion in basic infrastructure over the past 30 years, including "two airports (Laâyoune and Dakhla), three airfields (Guelmim, Tan Tan et Essemara), four sea ports (Tan Tan, Tarfaya, El-Marsa-Laâyoune, Dakhla), 10,000 kilometres of road – 35 per cent of which has been paved – and a rate of connection to electricity and drinking water in the region of 82 per cent".¹⁰¹ More broadly, investment projects in the region during the period between 2004 and 2008 amount to \$870 million.¹⁰² The question is whether this ultimately represents an opportunity cost for Morocco, insofar as spending on the Western Sahara inevitably has come at the expense of the development of other regions, many of which suffer from poverty and insufficient state investment.

The economic burden is made heavier by the fact that bonuses are granted to Moroccan civil servants sent to the Western Sahara. They enjoy a raise in salary of 25 to 75 per cent and, in addition, have access to subsidised basic commodities (food and others), benefits the government justifies by invoking the long distances and harsher living

⁹⁵ See "Armée. La grande bavarde", *Tel Quel* N°226, at www.telquel-online.com/226/maroc2_226.shtml.

⁹⁶ The agreement "covers 119 vessels, mostly from France, Spain and Portugal, although it also includes a 60,000 ton quota for industrial pelagic fishing for several northern European fleets. The financial contribution is set at €6.1 million per year.... Several MEPs [members of the European Parliament] had been troubled by the inclusion of Western Sahara waters in the fishing agreement. They were concerned that by signing an agreement with Morocco giving the EU fishing fleet access to waters off the Western Sahara coast (i.e. south of the 27.4 degree line), the EU would be breaking its commitments to the UN. Several amendments were therefore submitted to prohibit fishing in these areas, but they were voted down". "European Parliament: Morocco Fishing Agreement gets Parliamentary Approval", 16 May 2006, ref: 20060512IPR08050. For Afifa Karmous, of the Fondation France Liberté, "a colony's territory or any other non-self-governing territory possesses, according to the Charter [of the United Nations] a separate and distinct status to that of the administering territory. This separate and distinct status exists for as long as the people of the colony or non-self-governing territory are unable to exercise their right to self-government in accordance with the Charter and more particularly with its purposes and principles". "International conference on the rights and obligations with regard to the protection of natural resources in Western Sahara", Brussels, 24 May 2002. The same principles apply to the oil exploration permits that Morocco has granted to multinationals.

⁹⁷ Estimates of the Moroccan military presence in Western Sahara fluctuate between 130,000 and 160,000 men. *Tel Quel* n° 226, op. cit.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Morocco's military budget rose to \$1.7 billion in 2004. See "L'Année Stratégique 2004", Institute of International and Strategic Relations, 2004.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, Moroccan journalist, Rabat, 7 February 2007.

¹⁰¹ These numbers come from an internal document of the Fondation Andromède (bureau d'étude d'intelligence économique marocain), which was made available to Crisis Group by its president, Moulay Abdelmalek Alaoui, also president of the Comité national marocain du Forum francophone des affaires. Crisis Group interview, Rabat, 8 February 2007.

¹⁰² In 2002 Morocco set up the Agence pour la promotion et le développement économique et social des Provinces du sud du royaume (Agency for the promotion and economic and social development of the Southern provinces of the kingdom), which works in the Oued Eddahab-Lagouira, de Laâyoune - Boujdour - Sakia el Hamra, et de Guelmin – Smara provinces (only a small portion of the territory of the latter lies within Western Sahara). See www.lagencedusud.gov.ma/index.php. This agency has significant funds to invest in the development of facilities and services in the three Southern provinces. According to Ahmed Hajji, director general of the agency, work on human development will be one of their next priorities. Crisis Group interview, Rabat, 13 February 2007. "The upcoming construction of 140,000 new lodgings will be the first step in bringing human development up to standard". *Ibid.*

conditions involved.¹⁰³ Additionally, people from the north who come to settle in the Sahara enjoy numerous tax exemptions.¹⁰⁴ Finally, “the lifelong allowances paid to some eminent Sahrawis must be taken in account, notably for the most prominent *ralliés*”.¹⁰⁵

All in all, for more than 30 years, several percentage points of Morocco’s annual GDP have been absorbed by the conflict. For Fouad Abdelmoumni, “the cost of this issue is quite simply Morocco’s non-development”.¹⁰⁶

IV. THE POLITICAL COST

A. THE SAHRAWIS IN POLISARIO-CONTROLLED TERRITORIES

Since the outset of the conflict, the Polisario’s command structure has remained static, as have those of the SADR. Mohamed Abdelaziz has been head of the Polisario and president of the SADR since 1976, and a sizable part of the Polisario’s leadership is made up of its “historic” figures, leaving little room for a new political elite. This situation, which is due in part to the failure to reach a settlement as well as to the realities of exile, has led to what many Sahrawis denounce as the concentration of power in the hands of a few, political stagnation and lack of transparency, all of which are blamed for the defection of some members of the Polisario and SADR.

On 31 October 2006, Baba Sayed, the brother of El Ouali Ould Mustapha Sayed, the Polisario’s first secretary general, expressed serious misgivings about the current leadership.¹⁰⁷

Many Sahrawi cadres, alongside hundreds of simple soldiers, fled to Morocco because they could no longer stand the chaotic, static, and unjust status quo... Some even say that this exodus towards Morocco and other destinations suits the Polisario’s leadership and that, in some way, they encourage it. This is because the Polisario’s leadership refuses to change its practices, review its policies and positions, or respond to the totality (or at least the majority) of its critics’ claims – admittedly increasingly numerous and demanding – and therefore has opted for the *politique du pire* [a politics of the worse].¹⁰⁸

The criticism extends to the moral integrity of the leaders, who are taking advantage of their status for personal gain and/or to help their allies. The concentration of power is sometimes also denounced as tribal in nature – particularly with regard to the predominance of the Rguibat (or more precisely of certain factions within the tribe)¹⁰⁹ – which

¹⁰³ See Khadija Mohsen Finan, op. cit., p. 93.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interview, Ahmed Hajji, Rabat, 13 February 2007.

¹⁰⁵ Crisis Group interview, Fouad Abdelmoumni, member of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH, Association Marocaine des Droits Humains), Rabat, 13 February 2007. These sums are regularly disbursed to reward the most prominent *ralliés* (members of the Sahrawi community who now support Rabat).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ El Ouali, first secretary-general of the Polisario, died in combat on 9 June 1976 in Mauritania at the age of 28. A charismatic figure, he remains the symbol of the Sahrawi struggle. The anniversary of his death is still observed as “Martyrs’ Day”.

¹⁰⁸ “Arrêtons l’hémorragie”, at www.arso.org/opinions/BabaSayed38.htm. ARSO stands for l’Association de Soutien à un Référendum Libre et Régulier au Sahara Occidental (the Association for a Free and Fair Referendum in the Western Sahara).

¹⁰⁹ The confederation of the Rguibat (demographically the largest Sahrawi tribal entity) is subdivided into two entities, the Sahel Rguibat and the Charq, which are themselves subdivided

leads to clientelism, particularly concerning the distribution of international aid.¹¹⁰ Moreover, a recent United Nations High Commission for Human Rights report suggested that the Sahrawi leadership denied certain refugees the right to visit their families on the other side of the wall;¹¹¹ in 2003 Amnesty International made a similar observation.¹¹² One's freedom of movement, in short, appears to depend on one's loyalty to the leadership.

The internal debate took a more organised and political turn with the 2004 creation of the Front Polisario Khat al-Shahid.¹¹³ Under the slogan "Only one hero: the people; only one leader: the martyr", this still little-known organisation was formed by the European Sahrawi diaspora, as well as by those in the camps at Tindouf and the part of Western Sahara controlled by Morocco. In a text entitled "A Call to all Sahrawi Nationalists", the Khat al-Shahid denounced the Polisario's autocratic and clientelist drift:

Point n°9: The charade of the Congrès Populaires has become patent; its [Polisario's] aim is to hold on to power and resist all attempts to build a more participatory way of running citizen affairs.

Point n°10: The exploitation of positions of responsibility by certain members of the current leadership for personal ends and the absence of any accountability.¹¹⁴

between different factions (Oulad Moussa, Souaad, T'Halat, Oulad Cheikh for the Sahel Rguibat / Loubeïhat, Sallam, Fogra for the Charq Rguibat). The predominance of the Rguibat in the Polisario and SADR is beyond doubt. See Sophie Caratini, *Les Rguibats 1510-1934* (Paris, 1989).

¹¹⁰ See, for example, Olivier Pierre Louveaux, "Le Sahara occidental aujourd'hui", 20 November 2003, at www.medea.institute.org. The article takes an aggressive stand against the Polisario, often without qualification. It is nevertheless one of the rare first-hand testimonies concerning this aspect of the Polisario. Some inside sources are equally denunciatory of the same practices. See www.fpeluali.org/communiqued.fr300107.html.

¹¹¹ *Le Monde*, Paris, 7 November 2006.

¹¹² "In the Tindouf camps in south-western Algeria, over 100,000 Sahrawi refugees are reliant on humanitarian assistance for survival. This group of refugees does not enjoy the right to freedom of movement in Algeria and Amnesty International continues to express concerns about human rights abuses in the camps, particularly related to the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of association and to the ongoing impunity enjoyed by those responsible for grave human rights abuses committed in previous years", "Algeria: Asylum-seekers fleeing a continuing human rights crisis. A briefing on the situation of asylum-seekers originating from Algeria", Amnesty International, at <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engmde280072003>.

¹¹³ This organisation is sometimes also known as the *Jat Achahid* or the "Ligne du Martyr".

¹¹⁴ Available at www.arso.org/opinions/FPelualiffr.htm. See also www.fpeluali.org/lejournalebdo.html and <http://en.wikipedia.org>

The controversy became fiercer still when, on 1 June 2006, protests erupted in the wake of an arbitrary arrest.¹¹⁵ The Moroccan press, of course, largely echoed these dissenting voices. However, columnists, with only a few exceptions, only mentioned Khat al-Shahid's attacks against the Polisario leadership, neglecting the fact that it also denounced the movement's defeatism and lack of initiative. The call emphasised, in particular:

1 – The use of a defeatist, defensive and negative discourse as opposed to a positive, offensive one;

2 – Weakness before the UN and the fact that the enemy has offered the latter the possibility to continue its intransigence and blocking tactics;

3 – The loss of any initiative, which has led us to be at the mercy of events, even though they came about as a result of the blood of our martyrs and our sacrifices;

7 – The planned annihilation of the Sahrawi military force despite its being the crucial element in order to end the conflict.¹¹⁶

This radicalisation of the Sahrawi population represents another political cost of the impasse. Therefore, while denouncing the lack of "political breathing space" and leader's resistance to internal reform, the Khat al-Shahid, which claims to be a component of the Polisario, adopts a far more militant position and does not rule out the possibility of resorting to arms to "unblock" the situation.

Khalil Ahmed, responsible for human rights in the SADR, implicitly recognises this: "The Sahrawi population is disappointed and exasperated. It no longer believes in the UN. The Polisario is experiencing strong pressure from the rank and file, but its leaders know what war is and we want to avoid it".¹¹⁷ At a February 2007 press conference attended by Crisis Group given at the close of ceremonies marking the 31st anniversary of the SADR's founding, another Sahrawi leader, Mohamed Sidati, made no attempt to conceal this pressure: "As a result of deliberate attempts to exacerbate the situation, led by certain actors in the conflict and as shown by the recent sale of arms to Morocco by Spain, the situation is becoming irreparable".

[/wiki/Front_Polisario_Khat_al-Shahid](http://wiki/Front_Polisario_Khat_al-Shahid).

¹¹⁵ "These events were triggered by the protest against the arrest of Habbadi Ould Mohamed Lamine Ould Hmimed, who belongs to the 'laâyaycha' tribe, and his beating by Polisario militants in front of women and children. Seventeen young Sahrawis were wounded in subsequent demonstrations", *Le Reporter*, 11 June 2006, at www.lereporter.ma/article.php3?id_article=1273.

¹¹⁶ "Appel à tous les Nationalistes Sahraoui(e)s", op. cit.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, Khalil Ahmed, human rights adviser to the SADR, Tifariti, 28 February 2007.

B. THE SAHRAWIS IN MOROCCAN-CONTROLLED TERRITORIES

The perpetuation of the conflict and the tensions generated among Sahrawis have contributed to increased resentment towards the Moroccan state and those Sahrawi elites considered to be its accomplices. At the heart of Sahrawi society, frictions have emerged between, on the one hand, a pro-Moroccan bourgeoisie and, on the other, an economically fragile middle class as well as a burgeoning urban underclass. This latter group, unemployed and in effect denied the benefits afforded to the elite, believe that the region is being developed without them. As one Moroccan newspaper remarks, “urban politics in the Sahara has essentially been centred on the enrichment of a bourgeoisie allied to local representatives of the state.... This intrusion by representatives of the Moroccan state in a speculative market is resented by the Sahrawi middle class, which sees it as another benefit from which they are excluded”.¹¹⁸

This feeling of marginalisation and dispossession can also be explained by the influx of populations from the north. In certain towns, such as Laâyoune (El Aaiún), the Sahrawis have become a minority living in the poorest and most heavily monitored areas which have become “ghetto-like”.¹¹⁹ The area’s rapid urbanisation (the fastest in the country) cannot be explained by the sedentarisation of nomadic populations, which by now has largely been completed,¹²⁰ nor by mere demographic growth. Rather, it is due to the arrival of new inhabitants.¹²¹ Some Sahrawis denounce this

“colonisation”, which marginalises native populations both economically and demographically.

In the absence of a settlement to the conflict, Morocco has engaged in clientelist practices, stirring up tribal tensions at the heart of Sahrawi society by favouring its most docile elements. Even among the most “loyal” tribes, disputes arise due to large disparities between tribal elites favoured by the state (by means of lifelong allowances, the allocation of import and fishing licenses, permission to sell oil, access to the lucrative property market and so on) and the rest of the population.¹²² As a Moroccan newspaper writes “in managing the elites, the interior minister has granted allowances and wealth according to affiliation and the tribes’ degree of loyalty”.¹²³

The conflict also hinders the establishment of genuinely representative institutions. Created in 2006 by King Mohamed VI to play the role of intermediary between the Sahrawi and the Moroccan state as well as to be a consultative authority on questions concerning the Southern provinces (in particular the autonomy plan), the Conseil royal consultatif des affaires marocaines (CORCAS, Royal Consultative Council on Moroccan Affairs) is composed of 140 members selected by the king, of whom fourteen are women.¹²⁴ Although its

¹¹⁸ *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, 19 October 2004.

¹¹⁹ Crisis Group interview, Ali Omar Yara, Paris, 4 February 2005.

¹²⁰ In 2004, Smara’s population was 40,000, ten times greater than in 1975. See “Un rêve marocain”, *Jeune Afrique*, 21 December 2003.

¹²¹ Khadija Mohsen-Finan, an expert on the Western Sahara, writes: “Accommodating around 160,000 people, Laâyoune is in a sense playing the role of a pioneer town. The two thirds of the population who hail from the ‘North’ of Morocco moved to Laâyoune to work there. Teachers, civil servants, technicians, engineers and construction workers come seeking a better quality of life and greater material advantages than those found in the ‘North’.... The monarchy’s encouragement of this ‘internal migration’ forms a part of the ‘integration of these provinces into the kingdom’ and can be explained by the will to develop the region while providing it with the workforce necessary for its economic and social success. The aim of the operation also was to intermingle populations in such a manner that the Sahrawi, or natives of the region, should not be the only ones living in the cities, gradually ending Sahrawi hegemony over the region”. Khadija Mohsen-Finan, *Sahara occidentale. Les enjeux d’un conflit régional* (Paris, 1997), p. 93.

¹²² “Essentially, a local population, which is primarily young, poor, ravaged by unemployment, marginalised and frustrated, takes to the streets to vent its anger against social and economic insecurity and to proclaim loud and clear its right to expression against a ‘security regime’ that has been in place for over 30 years. It calls into question the style of government that has been adopted regarding the affairs of the southern provinces. Conceived by Hassan II, this style of government created a local elite according to criteria based essentially on tribal balances. Khatri El Joummani, Khelli Henna Ould Rachid, and later Hassan Derham and Rachid Rguibi, among others, became the powerful men and *makhzen* [a Moroccan political institution that is the most traditional, even feudal, element of the Moroccan political system] in the region. For a long time, they had privileged access to the palace, which favoured these ‘notables’ and their families to the detriment of the rest of the local population”. *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, 31 December 2005. Also Crisis Group interview, Fouad Abdelmoumni, 13 February 2007.

¹²³ *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, 19 October 2004.

¹²⁴ “As for the council’s composition, the royal decree stipulates that the president and members, who enjoy a deliberative authority, are appointed by HM the King for a four-year mandate. They are chosen among members of parliament, presidents of regional councils, presidents of provincial assemblies, and presidents of professional chambers of the southern provinces. The council will also include members who were elected to the former council by their tribes, sheikhs of tribes, members of associations belonging to the civil society and youth organizations in the southern provinces, representatives of Moroccan natives of the southern provinces living abroad, representatives of the

president, Khallihena Ould Errachid, claims the council is representative because “it represents all tribes proportionally and includes sheikhs, young leaders, businessmen, women, members of civil society and even former prisoners”,¹²⁵ none of its members favours independence, “which is a curious kind of representativity”.¹²⁶

CORCAS’s first year has been marked by serious problems: some members accused its president of ignoring them.¹²⁷ For the time being, the institution has only very imperfectly fulfilled its role. For El Kanti Balla, “the people at CORCAS are not credible because they are not representative. The people who control it are those the Moroccan state has pressured for decades in order to control Western Sahara”.¹²⁸

According to Rabat, Morocco’s proposal for “Saharan autonomy”¹²⁹ presented to the UN Security Council on 11 April 2007 is the result of a consultation process with Moroccan political parties and takes account of proposals formulated by CORCAS. However, according to a Moroccan journalist, “it should be emphasised that

Tindouf sequestered populations, representatives of socio-economic operators and bodies and personalities known for their lucidity and honesty”. From the CORCAS website at, www.corcas.com/RoyalDecree/tabid/495/Default.aspx.

¹²⁵ Crisis Group interview, Khallihena Ould Errachid, Rabat, 16 February 2007.

¹²⁶ Crisis Group interview, Ali Omar Yara, Paris, 4 February 2005.

¹²⁷ See “Une mascarade nommée Corcas”, *Le Journal Hebdomadaire*, 14 December 2006.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, El Kanti Balla, Paris, 19 February 2007.

¹²⁹ The key points of the Sahara autonomy plan presented by Morocco to the Security Council of the United Nations on 11 April 2007 are as follows:

“4. Through this initiative, the Kingdom of Morocco guarantees to all Sahrawis, inside as well as outside the territory, that they will hold a privileged position and play a leading role in the bodies and institutions of the region, without discrimination or exclusion.

5. Thus, the Sahara populations will themselves run their affairs democratically, through legislative, executive and judicial bodies enjoying exclusive powers. They will have the financial resources needed for the region’s development in all fields, and will take an active part in the nation’s economic, social and cultural life.

6. The State will keep its powers in the royal domains, especially with respect to defence, external relations and the constitutional and religious prerogatives of His Majesty the King.

8. As the outcome of negotiations, the autonomy statute shall be submitted to the populations concerned for a referendum, in keeping with the principle of self-determination and with the provisions of the UN Charter”.

Full text available at <http://autonomyplan.org/>.

CORCAS was totally excluded; it wasn’t really associated with the autonomy plan. Some of its members heard of its plans from press reports. The final document was concocted in the palace by a small team, which was to present it in various Western capitals”.¹³⁰ Abdesselam Ouazzani, director general of the Istiqlal party headquarters, told Crisis Group that his party had offered its text alongside that of the Union socialiste des forces populaires (USFP, Socialist Union of Popular Forces) during the consultation process. The text emphasised three essential principles – “national sovereignty, attention to local circumstances and substantial autonomy” – but they never “found anyone with whom to really negotiate”.¹³¹

C. THE MOROCCANS

For the Moroccan government, the costs of the impasse are essentially diplomatic. On the one hand, non-recognition of its annexation of the Western Sahara has had a greatly damaging effect at the international level, with Morocco opting to resign from the Organisation of African Unity on 12 November 1984 in protest against the SADR’s admission. In so doing, Morocco excluded itself from the continent’s principal organisation and initiated a long-lasting state of isolation from the African continent, in addition to halting relations with states that recognised the SADR. Its image on the continent was tarnished, with many countries viewing Morocco as an occupying power. The number of countries that recognise the SADR has decreased since the 1991 ceasefire; still South Africa broke ranks in 2004 as a result of Morocco’s rejection of the Baker plan. This was a significant blow to Rabat, coming in the wake of its relatively successful efforts since the early 1990s to nurture relations with African countries.

More importantly, Morocco has to live with the consequences of its difficult relations with Algeria, particularly opportunity costs in the economic, commercial and even security sectors.¹³² The perpetuation of the conflict has also stymied regional cooperation – namely, the Arab Maghreb Union – and therefore prevented Morocco from addressing security, economic and diplomatic issues together with its Maghreb partners.

There also are costs to Moroccan citizens. For reasons linked to the conflict, the authorities have devoted considerable investment to the “Southern provinces”, often at the expense of the rest of Morocco. This has

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interview, Karim Boukhari, editor-in-chief of independent Moroccan newspaper *Tel Quel*, 13 February 2007.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, Abdesselam Ouazzani, Rabat, 11 February 2007.

¹³² See section V. B below.

led to a development gap of which one outgrowth is the presence of slums, which have become hotbeds of salafism. Fouad Abdelmoumni also emphasises that the conflict has helped shape political life:

We have witnessed over recent years the impoverishment of Moroccan political life; the opposition has lost its backbone; nobody denounces major human rights violations in the south. These regions have become rights-free zones, where fiscal law is not applicable, where subsidies are distributed to a Sahrawi elite and to administrative and military notables. They are offered farms, fishing licences and other advantages. In addition, this region has become a notorious area of contraband trade.¹³³

The impasse is, from Morocco's point of view, clearly preferable to a solution that would contradict its long-held principles. But a realistic appraisal of the cost the kingdom continues to pay is needed, and might steer it towards a more flexible and imaginative approach to resolving the conflict.

V. THE COST FOR THE REGION AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

A. ALGERIA AND MAURITANIA

1. Algeria

Although Algeria has always maintained that the Sahara question is a matter of principle, the cost of which cannot be calculated, it clearly has paid a significant price in terms of its own security. The conflict fuels a major source of tension on its western border, requiring the presence of several tens of thousands of soldiers in the Tindouf region.¹³⁴ Since the Sand War¹³⁵ and the Western Saharan conflict, Algerian security analysis, as well as the military strategies taught through the ranks, remains focused on the threat of an attack from the west.¹³⁶

The closing of its border with its most important neighbour also has increased the costs borne by Algeria. These include the support it grants to the Polisario and the SADR in terms of weapons, food aid, and budgetary and financial support; particularly in light of the reduction in international assistance of the past few years. Another significant economic cost stems from Algeria's inability to take advantage of the Gara Djebilet iron reserves so long as the Western Sahara conflict, and, more generally, tensions with its neighbour Morocco remain unresolved. The need to build a second gas pipeline to Spain (Medgaz)¹³⁷ which, unlike the first, will not pass through Moroccan soil but will link Béni-Saf in Algeria to Almeria in Spain, will also represent a heavy financial burden.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ The most frequently cited figure by specialists with whom Crisis Group met.

¹³⁵ Name generally given to the short-lived hostilities between Algeria and Morocco in October 1963, in the wake of Algeria's independence.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group interview, Peter Cross, analyst with Middle East Tactical Studies (METS), Paris, 27 April 2007. However, for Ramtane Lamamra, secretary general of the Algerian Ministry for Foreign Affairs, "the significant purchases of Russian arms by Algeria should not be interpreted as an aggressive measure aimed at Morocco. We are emerging from nearly fifteen years of an internal struggle against an Islamist movement. Now that it is much weakened, we must bring our army up to standard, because since the beginning of the 1990s, we have equipped ourselves with arms for the fight against a guerrilla force". Crisis Group interview, Algiers, 3 March 2007.

¹³⁷ This gas pipeline is in construction and due to make its first delivery in 2009. See "L'Algérie, troisième fournisseur de gaz de l'Europe", www.algerie-dz.com/article7584.html.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, Moulay Abdelmalek Alaoui, Rabat, 8 February 2007. However the Saharan issue does not represent a substantial budgetary burden for Algeria, which enjoys bountiful gas and oil exports.

¹³³ Crisis Group interview, Fouad Abdelmoumni, 13 February 2007.

The significant diplomatic investment made by Algeria also must be taken into account, insofar as Algiers has had to expend resources to support the SADR internationally and ward off Morocco's contrary efforts. This is all the more true today given that Washington, Paris and Madrid have joined in the belief that Western Sahara's independence could destabilise Morocco and, therefore, in their opposition to Algeria's stance.

2. Mauritania

The situation looks different from the perspective of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania. Initially allied to Morocco, then militarily humiliated by the Polisario, Nouakchott already has paid a heavy price for this conflict, which was one of the principal causes of the 1978 military putsch that drove out President Moktar Ould Daddah.¹³⁹ Since then, this neighbouring conflict zone has forced the country into two delicate balancing acts: above all in its foreign policy, as Mauritania has slowly moved to "positive neutrality", in which it proclaims no official preference for one side or the other and allows the Polisario to move freely through the north of its territory; and a domestic balancing act because Mauritanian society includes partisans of both sides in the Sahara conflict and a move towards one (Moktar Ould Daddah, who was pro-Moroccan) or the other (Mohamed Khouna Ould Haïdallah, who was pro-Sahrawi) tends to set off significant political problems.¹⁴⁰ Today, despite the significance of this issue to the country, therefore, it is carefully concealed behind a consensual façade.

Mauritania also has had to face the risks posed by anti-personnel and anti-tank mines. The head of the country's demining effort, Ahmed Salem Ould Ahmed Salem, has said that three *wilayas* (governorates) are directly affected: Adrar, Dakhlet Nouadhibou and Tiris Zemmour.¹⁴¹ Should the status quo last for a long time or should the conflict be settled to the Polisario's detriment, a large number of Sahrawis might be tempted to relocate to Mauritania, as they have begun to do over the past few years. This would pose a real humanitarian problem and reignite internal political tensions, notably tribal, as some Mauritians

already resent the Rguibat's growing role, especially in the economic arena.¹⁴²

B. THE REGION

It is, of course, difficult to measure precisely the influence of the Western Sahara conflict on inter-Maghreb disputes. The conflict certainly hinders regional development, leading some to speak of a "non-Maghreb", which economists and development experts deplore. The loss of earnings due to the Arab Maghreb Union's failure is on the order of 2 per cent of average annual GDP for each country – Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania.¹⁴³ Trade with other Maghreb countries represents on average only 2 per cent of foreign trade for each of these countries. Although the five countries possess genuine economic complementarity,¹⁴⁴ they engage in virtually no trade. For Tunisia, for example, this might well result in the failure to create some 20,000 jobs a year.¹⁴⁵ The lack of integration also puts the brakes on foreign direct investment in a region of 100 million consumers. This is another significant loss, on the order of \$3 billion for the region as a whole.¹⁴⁶ The region also suffers from a real deficit in terms of telecommunications infrastructure, which further frustrates economic advances.

Because they are divided, the countries of the Maghreb cannot speak in a common voice in international negotiations, including as part of the Euro-Mediterranean Dialogue, and cannot defend their shared interests. The lack of close cooperation on security issues is also notable. Although there is no evidence of structural links between the region's different radical Islamist movements, particularly between Moroccan and Algerian salafi jihadists, some connections have become evident (such as the presence of members of the Salafist Group for

¹³⁹ The coup brought to power a military regime which lasted until 2005, when President (ex-Colonel) Maaouya was removed. A transitional government ruled until the the April 2007 election of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi as president. See Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°41, *Islamism in North Africa IV: The Islamist Challenge in Mauritania: Threat or Scapagoat?*, 11 May 2005; and Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°53, *Political Transition in Mauritania: Results and Prospects*, 24 April 2006.

¹⁴⁰ First the 1978 putsch; later the two attempts to overthrow Haïdallah, unsuccessful in 1981 and successful in 1984.

¹⁴¹ See Agence de Presse Africaine (APA), 4 April 2007.

¹⁴² See "Une dimension mal connue du conflit du Sahara Occidental : la position de la Mauritanie", *Afrique contemporaine* n° 201, January-March 2002, pp. 83-88.

¹⁴³ See "Les enjeux de l'intégration maghrébine", working document n°90, July 2003, Moroccan ministry of finance and privatisation.

¹⁴⁴ "There are obvious complementarities between the different economies in the region. Morocco has real expertise in the sectors of agriculture, ecotourism, social housing, and finance that Algeria does not have. On the other hand, Algeria is a producer of petrol and gas, while Morocco must buy them both from other countries", Crisis Group interview, Moulay Abdelmalek Alaoui, Rabat, 8 February 2007.

¹⁴⁵ See Ridha Lahmar, "8ème session du conseil des ministres maghrébins du commerce: quelle zone de libre-échange pour le Maghreb ?", at www.realites.com.tn.

¹⁴⁶ See "Les enjeux de l'intégration maghrébine", op. cit. See also Jawhar Chatty, "La nécessaire intégration économique maghrébine", *La Presse*, <http://www.lapresse.tn>.

Preaching and Combat (GSPC)¹⁴⁷ in Mauritania at the time of the June 2005 attack on the Lemgheyt fort).¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, the parties use and manipulate the issue of terrorism against one another: Morocco accuses the Polisario of having links with al-Qaeda,¹⁴⁹ Algeria suggests Rabat finances its own armed Islamist movement.¹⁵⁰ The issue of illegal migrants – some of whom cross the Sahara – is another painful reminder of the lack of cooperation.¹⁵¹

Finally, one must mention the significant expansion of illegal trafficking in the Western Saharan territories, south east Algeria and northern Mauritania. The Mauritanian section of *Défense des Enfants Internationale* recently sounded the alarm over the large amount of imported cigarettes in Mauritania: “The quantities of imported cigarettes in Mauritania exceed the amount imported into Morocco, despite having nearly ten times fewer people”.¹⁵² Mauritania has become an international hub in illegal cigarette trafficking; much of it headed towards Algeria. This traffic could not be as significant without the complicity of people close to power centres in Nouakchott, to the Polisario or to the Algerian army.

Recent press articles also have described the implication of Moroccan officers in international drug trafficking through Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara.¹⁵³ All told, the region has become a transit area for a range of goods (cigarettes, drugs, arms and fuel), implicating political and military officials on all sides. This trafficking and the corruption it entails will continue to flourish at least as long as the Western Sahara conflict continues.

C. THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The principal cost borne by the international community has been its support since 1991 for the United Nations

Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), roughly \$45 million per year. This does not take into account the cost of the workings of the Security Council, the different special envoys of the UN Secretary-General, and international aid for the Tindouf camp refugees, including that disbursed through the World Food Programme (expected to be \$11 million in 2007) and the High Commissioner for Refugees (at an average of \$3.5 million per year since 1991).

Arguably more significant than the economic costs are the symbolic ones. The UN continues to fund MINURSO, initially set up to prepare a referendum, a project that is today all but dead. MINURSO has instead turned away from its initial mission and become a ceasefire monitoring force. The complete impasse since 1991 over one of the oldest conflicts dealt with by the organisation has heavily damaged the UN’s credibility.¹⁵⁴

Europe too should be concerned about this unresolved conflict which has helped give rise to a significant and dangerous zone of illegal trafficking (notably in terms of immigration and terrorism). Furthermore, the dispute between Algeria and Morocco continues to complicate the policies of Western countries (particularly France, Spain and the U.S.) who are committed to the kingdom’s stability yet do not wish to alienate Algeria. The balance between the two aims appears to have eroded over time, and the current tilt towards Morocco is directly linked to increased tension with Algeria.

¹⁴⁷ Principal Algerian armed terrorist group. GSPC changed its name to the Al-Qaeda Organisation in the Islamic Maghreb on 25 January 2007.

¹⁴⁸ See Crisis Group Report, *Political Transition in Mauritania*, op. cit. pp. 5-6.

¹⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, Hassan Alaoui, Rabat, 8 February 2007. See “Collusion entre le Polisario et Al Qaïda”, available at www.infosdumaroc.com/modules/news/articles-1502-collusion-entre-le-polisario-et-al-qaïda.html.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, Smaïl Hamdani, Algiers, 25 February 2007.

¹⁵¹ During the events of September-October 2005 in Ceuta and Melilla, illegal migrants who tried to force their way into the Spanish enclaves had entered Morocco from sub-Saharan Africa by crossing the Sahara and in particular Algerian territory. *Le Monde*, 16 October 2005. Morocco pushed a number of the migrants back to the Algerian border.

¹⁵² See www.mauritanie-web.org of 4 April 2007.

¹⁵³ See Djilali Benyouf, “Des généraux de l’armée royale impliqués. Le Maroc, nouvelle filière du trafic de cocaïne”, *Liberté Algérie*, 11 February 2007.

¹⁵⁴ See Crisis Group Middle East/North Africa Report N°66, *Western Sahara: Out of the Impasse*, 11 June 2007.

VI. CONCLUSION

For over 30 years, the Western Sahara conflict has continued, a result of cold and often erroneous calculations by the parties. These calculations seldom account for the true costs of the current situation. The region's security and the development of neighbouring countries have both been gravely affected by this frozen conflict.

The challenge today is, therefore, two-fold. The launching of a debate between Morocco and Moroccans, Polisario and the Sahrawis, Algeria and Algerians, as well as among other regional and international parties, should help change their respective assessments and generate new support for the resolution of the continent's oldest conflict. A second goal is to better understand the political reasons behind the impasse and, above all, try to change its underlying dynamics; this requires rethinking the way in which the crisis has been handled by the actors and, in particular, by the UN. This is the aim of Crisis Group's companion report, *Western Sahara: Out of the Impasse*.¹⁵⁵

Cairo/Brussels, 11 June 2007

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF WESTERN SAHARA



APPENDIX B

GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AMDH	Moroccan Association of Human Rights (Association marocaine des droits de l'homme)
AMU	Arab Maghreb Union
ARSO	Association for a Free and Fair Referendum in the Western Sahara (l'Association de soutien à un référendum libre et régulier au Sahara Occidental)
CORCAS	Royal Consultative Council on Moroccan Affairs (Conseil royal consultatif des affaires marocaines)
CRS	Sahrawi Red Crescent (Croissant rouge Sahraoui)
CMI	Compagnies Mobiles d'Intervention [Mobile Intervention Units]*
DST	Direction de Sécurité du Territoire [Directorate of Territorial Security]
ECHO	European Community Humanitarian aid Office
FA	Forces Auxiliaires [Auxiliary Forces]
FAR	Royal Armed Forces
FLN	National Liberation Front
GIR	Groupes d'Intervention Rapide [Rapid Intervention Groups]
GPRA	Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (Gouvernement provisoire de la République algérienne)
GSPC	Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat
GUS	Groups Urbains de Sécurité [Urban Security Groups]
ICJ	International Court of Justice
MINURSO	UN Mission for the Organisation of a Referendum in Western Sahara
Polisario Front	Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguía el Hamra and Río de Oro (Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro)
RG	Renseignements Généraux [Intelligence Service]
SADR	Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic
UNHCHR	UN High Commissioner for Human Rights
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNMAS	UN Mine Action Service
USFP	Socialist Union of Popular Forces (Union socialiste des forces populaires)
UXO	Unexploded ordnance
WFP	World Food Programme

* Translations listed in square brackets are unofficial.

APPENDIX C

TERMS OR EXPRESSIONS IN ARABIC

Amîr al-mou'minîn	Commander of believers
Bay'a	Allegiance
Chérif (sing.) / Chorfa (plu.)	Descendant of the prophet Mohammed
Dahir	Decree of the Sultan of Morocco
Makhzen	a Moroccan political institution that is the most traditional, even feudal, element of the Moroccan political system

APPENDIX D

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