

Australia Western Sahara Association (Victoria)

For immediate release – 26 February 2009

Press Release

on the occasion of raising the flag of Western Sahara on 27 February 2009, which marks the 33rd anniversary of the Saharawi Republic

Today we raise the flag of Western Sahara for the first time in Australia as a gesture of solidarity and friendship with the people of Western Sahara.

At locations across Australia (Sydney, Newcastle, Perth, Darwin, Hobart, Geelong) and in Melbourne at the Australian Workers' Union at 10am, the Saharawi flag will fly.

33 years ago the people of Western Sahara declared a republic in Western Sahara to fill the vacuum left by the withdrawal of Spain the then colonial power.

In 33 years the people of Western Sahara have achieved a great deal. Their state is a member of the African Union, is recognised by over 80 countries worldwide. In the refugee camps, they have established democratic institutions and have improved the rights of women and literacy rates in their nation are now about 90%, one of the highest in Africa. Jose Ramos Horta president of East Timor said that, "Western Sahara could be a beacon of democracy in the Middle East and the Maghreb, and as a moderate secular state of an Islamic people, would be a bridge between the Islamic states and the rest of Africa."

Two thirds of the territory of the Saharawi Republic (Western Sahara) is occupied by the Kingdom of Morocco which invaded the area in 1975. The invasion forced 165,000 Saharawi to flee their homeland and seek refuge in neighbouring Algeria where they have been living in dire condition ever since. Those left behind face brutal human rights abuses including forced disappearance, murder and torture.

At the same time Morocco, in connivance with foreign powers, exploits the natural resources of Western Sahara without any benefits to the indigenous Saharawis.

Over 100 UN resolutions have called for the organisation of a referendum of self-determination to allow the Saharawis to exercise

their inalienable right to self-determination but Morocco has been able to obstruct the process and defy international legality.

Through the gesture of raising Western Sahara flag we are also raising our voices against the dreadful injustice caused to the innocent Saharawi people.

We raise our voices to extend strong support and solidarity with the people of Western Sahara who have suffered immensely during the past three decades.

We raise our voices to urge our government to put pressure on Morocco to allow the organisation of a free and fair referendum of self-determination in Western Sahara as soon as possible.

We raise our voices to urge Australian companies Wesfarmers, Incitec Pivot and Impact Fertilisers to put an end to their illegal exploitation of Western Sahara phosphate, which is enriching the Moroccan autocratic regime and causing pain and suffering to the people of Western Sahara.

For background, see below.

For further information please phone Ron Guy, 0428 173 970 or Georgia Vlassopoulos 0425 702 975

Australia Western Sahara Association (Victoria)

inc no: A0047692T

post: P O Box 164, Clifton Hill 3068

email: awsamel@alphalink.com.au

web: <http://www.awsa.org.au/>

BACKGROUND

The Saharawi Republic (SADR) was proclaimed by the indigenous people of the territory of Western Sahara on 27th of February 1976. The SADR is a full member of the African Union and is recognised internationally by over 80 countries.

Western Sahara is regarded by the United Nations (UN) to be a non-self governing territory. Since 1976 Morocco has illegally occupied Western Sahara and has frustrated the rights of the Saharawi people to self-determination.

The key factors behind the current dispute can be summarised as follows:

1. The Saharawi people and their ancestors have lived and ruled Western Sahara since at least the first century BC.
2. The Saharawi people have their own distinct ethnic, cultural and linguistic characteristics.
3. Western Sahara has never been a part of the Kingdom of Morocco nor have the Saharawi people ever acknowledged Moroccan sovereignty.
4. The end of Spanish colonisation (1884 to 1975) was marked by the illegal partition of the territory between Morocco and Mauritania. This partition was in contravention to previous Spanish commitments to comply with UN Decolonisation procedures (to include a referendum on self-determination by the indigenous population).
5. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) examined Moroccan and Mauritanian claims concerning sovereignty over the Territory in 1975 and concluded 'that the materials and information presented to it do not establish any tie of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco or the Mauritanian entity'. The court did not find legal ties of such a nature as might affect the decolonisation of Western Sahara and, in particular, of the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the Territory. The ICJ decision was a clear rejection of the Moroccan and Mauritanian claims of sovereignty over Western Sahara.
6. Morocco and Mauritania occupied the territory by military force in 1976. This action was immediately deplored by the UN.

7. The Saharawi population, through the Polisario Liberation movement, organised an effective military resistance to this illegal annexation. Mauritania withdrew all claims to the territory in 1979 and recognised the SADR as the legitimate governing authority of the Territory.
8. Following a prolonged military conflict, the UN brokered a Settlement Plan to resolve the conflict in 1991. The conflict over sovereignty was agreed by both parties to be resolved through a UN organised referendum of the indigenous population.
9. Repeated Moroccan interference and objections to the work of the UN in establishing an electoral roll, has effectively delayed this referendum. Several UN diplomats resigned during this process citing unacceptable Moroccan interference in all aspects of the UN work. The UN issued a provisional of eligible voters (86,000) in February 2000. Morocco subsequently filed 131,000 appeals to delay the peace process.
10. An alternative Moroccan initiative was proposed in 2003. This alternative provides for pseudo-autonomy for the Territory as part of the Kingdom of Morocco. This alternative does not provide for self-determination and is thus totally unacceptable to the Saharawi people and wasn't supported by the Security Council.
11. 30 April 2007 UN Security Council asks the two parties to enter into negotiations to overcome the impasse.
12. Four rounds of direct talks under UN auspices: June/August 2007 and January/March 2008

The political situation is as stark as the situation the Saharawi refugees have faced for the last 33 years. A referendum on self-determination is the moral right of the indigenous population, and one that is enshrined in the charter of the UN.

The willingness of the Security Council to support self-determination for the people of East Timor and to ignore it in the case of Western Sahara is inconsistent. It is morally unacceptable for the rights of the Saharawi people to be sacrificed through a lack of UN will.