

Vast gap of science and politics on global warming

A genuine path of carbon reduction is required urgently, **GEOFF LAZARUS** writes

Hundreds of thousands of Australians have called on federal politicians this year not to support the proposed Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme legislation and to develop policies capable of addressing the danger of devastating global warming. They have done so because the speed and severity of global warming is exceeding even the worst predictions of a couple of years ago leading many scientists to suggest that greenhouse gas levels are already too high.

They are particularly concerned that Labor's targets and opt-out clauses for the major polluters means our emissions will continue to increase, and not necessarily at a slower rate. The suggestion in some quarters that it is at least a start is naive. It is worse than nothing because it will lock Australia into a position for some years that fails to achieve even minimal emission reductions.

The Indian subcontinent is experiencing delayed and reduced monsoonal rains accompanied by

higher than normal temperatures – in turn, taking a serious toll of the poor. According to former United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan, climate change is already costing 300,000 lives a year and this toll will grow as global warming displaces millions of people.

The best climate science, shaped by eminent scientists such as NASA's Professor James Hansen is telling us we are in fact in a climate emergency, which demands emergency action. Hansen, whose views have widespread support from numerous prestigious research institutions, asserts we urgently need to reduce current levels of CO₂ from 386 parts per million in the atmosphere to less than 350ppm to avoid a global disaster. But Kevin Rudd's CPRS targets, if applied worldwide, would likely take us to 450 to 550ppm and result in a two- to three-degree warming of the planet. This would not only mean the end of the Great

Barrier Reef and further damage to our agricultural industry, but in the longer term would lead to an uncontrollable increasing of temperatures of between eight and 12 degrees over the next 100 years. Resultant collapsing water and food resources would devastate many parts of the planet.

Hansen is also highly critical of cap and trade mechanisms, the cornerstone of Rudd's plan to reduce carbon levels. This is because they are easily manipulated by energy business interests seeking to avoid genuine reductions, and by financial interests wanting to make millions from speculating on and trading carbon permits.

Not surprisingly, properly functioning carbon markets have failed to materialise in European countries as a consequence of any government cap and trade policies.

Ironically, Rudd said we must learn from the excesses of free-market and

neo-liberal economics, yet chooses to stick with market-based solutions which won't work. This is why a broad coalition of environment organisations, including 120 climate action groups, Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, the Wilderness Society and numerous state and territory-based conservation councils representing more than 400,000 Australians, recently proposed an alternative plan B.

It's a plan for immediate action on climate change in energy efficiency, renewable energy, sustainable transport and forest protection that could be implemented in the next two years regardless of the fate of the CPRS. The plan would set Australia on a path to halving carbon pollution in a decade and create new industries and thousands of new jobs, including in areas reliant on fossil-fuel industries, such as Latrobe Valley and the Hunter Valley.

It shows how a doubling of the

renewable energy target coupled with a national feed-in law that creates a guaranteed price for solar and other renewable energy, and other measures would enable a phasing out of the oldest and the dirtiest coal-based power stations.

It includes proposals that will protect our forests and woodlands so they can be effective carbon stores, and make improved agriculture practices part of the solution.

If broadly applied by the 22 nations responsible for most of the world's carbon emissions it would take us down a genuine path of carbon reduction in line with the views of Hansen and his colleagues.

Disturbingly, many of the carbon reduction policies to be taken to the December Copenhagen conference by the major polluting countries, while better than Rudd's CPRS, are also inadequate. A recently published *Nature* article, "Halfway to Copenhagen, no way to 2 C", shows

their reduction targets are in the range of 420 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020. Based on research from the Potsdam Institute, it illustrates that the so far announced national targets give virtually no chance of containing warming to under two degrees. They will result in emissions 80 per cent higher than 1990 levels in 2050. What we need is a program that will reduce CO₂ levels to about 50 per cent in 2020, and 100 per cent by 2050, and therefore keep temperature rises to the barest minimum.

The gap between science and the politics of climate change in developed nations such as Australia, is vast. When the CPRS legislation is once again debated in the Senate in August, and when these issues are considered in Copenhagen, let's hope that Annan's and Hansen's concerns are properly understood by our politicians and world leaders – because, very clearly they aren't now.

Geoff Lazarus, a spokesman for Climate Action Canberra, is a member of the National Climate Action Network.

Bring human rights home

RODNEY CROOME

Should Australia have a charter of human rights? This question is being asked across the nation by the human rights panel appointed by the Rudd Government last year. But it's a question that has never made sense to me because Australia already has a de facto charter of rights.

Since December 1991 individual Australians have been able to complain about human rights violations to the United Nations Human Rights Committee. The committee judges if the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights has been breached, and if it has, issues a non-binding directive to the Australian Government.

The first such complaint from Australia was about Tasmania's former laws criminalising male-to-male relationships with a maximum penalty of 21 years in jail. In 1994, the Human Rights Committee found those laws breached the right to privacy and the right not to suffer discrimination, giving the Federal Government a mandate to act. The Government subsequently entrenched the right to sexual privacy in federal law, rendering the Tasmanian laws inoperative, with the overwhelming support of the Australian Parliament and people. Activists then launched a High Court case to have them invalidated altogether, but by then the Tasmanian Government knew the game was up and the laws were finally repealed.

This example of a human rights charter at work undercuts some of the main arguments against such charters. It shows that sometimes our parliaments are not, in themselves, able to resolve intractable human rights problems without input from independent human rights tribunals.

It shows that charters of rights can play a positive role in creating a more just nation, a role that enhances our existing democratic system rather than undermining it.

It shoots down the idea that yet another parliamentary committee would be sufficient to protect

Charters of rights can... create a more just nation

human rights. The existing Senate committee that oversees human rights played no effective role at all in tackling the former Tasmanian law.

But UN intervention in the Tasmanian gay law debate also poses what, for me, is the real question about a charter of rights – is the one we currently have good enough?

One of the problems with the UN Human Rights Committee is that it is a far-away body, made up of foreign experts possibly unfamiliar with Australian social conditions and unable to take verbal evidence.

It would be in everyone's interests – litigants, government and the community – for Australia to effectively repatriate the International Covenant so that human rights abuses could be judged and remedied by Australian courts and parliaments under a human rights charter to which Australians have explicitly assented.

Put simply, we need to bring human rights home.

The other problem with oversight by the UN Human Rights Committee is that while a UN decision gives the Federal Government the power to act under the external affairs power in the constitution, the Government is not properly held to account if it fails to act.

The result is that human rights are politicised.

A government can act on causes that are well known and popular but ignore others even if they are just as important.

In truth, the Tasmanian law was tackled by Canberra because it was a hot-button issue in marginal inner-city electorates, while many other worthy UNHRC decisions have been ignored by successive federal governments because no one much knows or cares about them.

It's not just victims of human rights abuses who suffer in these circumstances, it is the principle that human rights are universal, inalienable and above politics.

The solution is to have a charter of rights that ensures government has to answer for all verified human rights violations, not just those it can win votes by addressing.

This is what the ACT and Victoria have begun to do with their local charters. It is the fundamental deficiency in our current, de facto national charter. And it should be the key issue for the national human rights panel.

Rodney Croome was made a Member of the Order of Australia in 2003 for his gay human rights advocacy. The national human rights consultation panel is holding public hearings in the Great Hall at Parliament House this week.

Reality bites in drug debate

A United Nations report on the drugs trade ignores the reality that prohibition does more harm than good, **GEORGE MONBIOT** says

It looked like the first drop of rain in the desert of drugs policy. Last week, the executive director of the United Nations office on drugs and crime, Antonio Maria Costa, said what millions of liberal-minded people have been waiting to hear. "Law enforcement should shift its focus from drug users to drug traffickers... people who take drugs need medical help, not criminal retribution."

Drug production should remain illegal, possession and use should be decriminalised. Many will have toasted him with bumpers of peppermint tea, and, perhaps, a celebratory spliff. I didn't.

I believe that informed adults should be allowed to inflict whatever suffering they wish – on themselves – but we are not entitled to harm other people. I know people who drink fair-trade tea and coffee, shop locally and take cocaine at parties. They are revolting hypocrites.

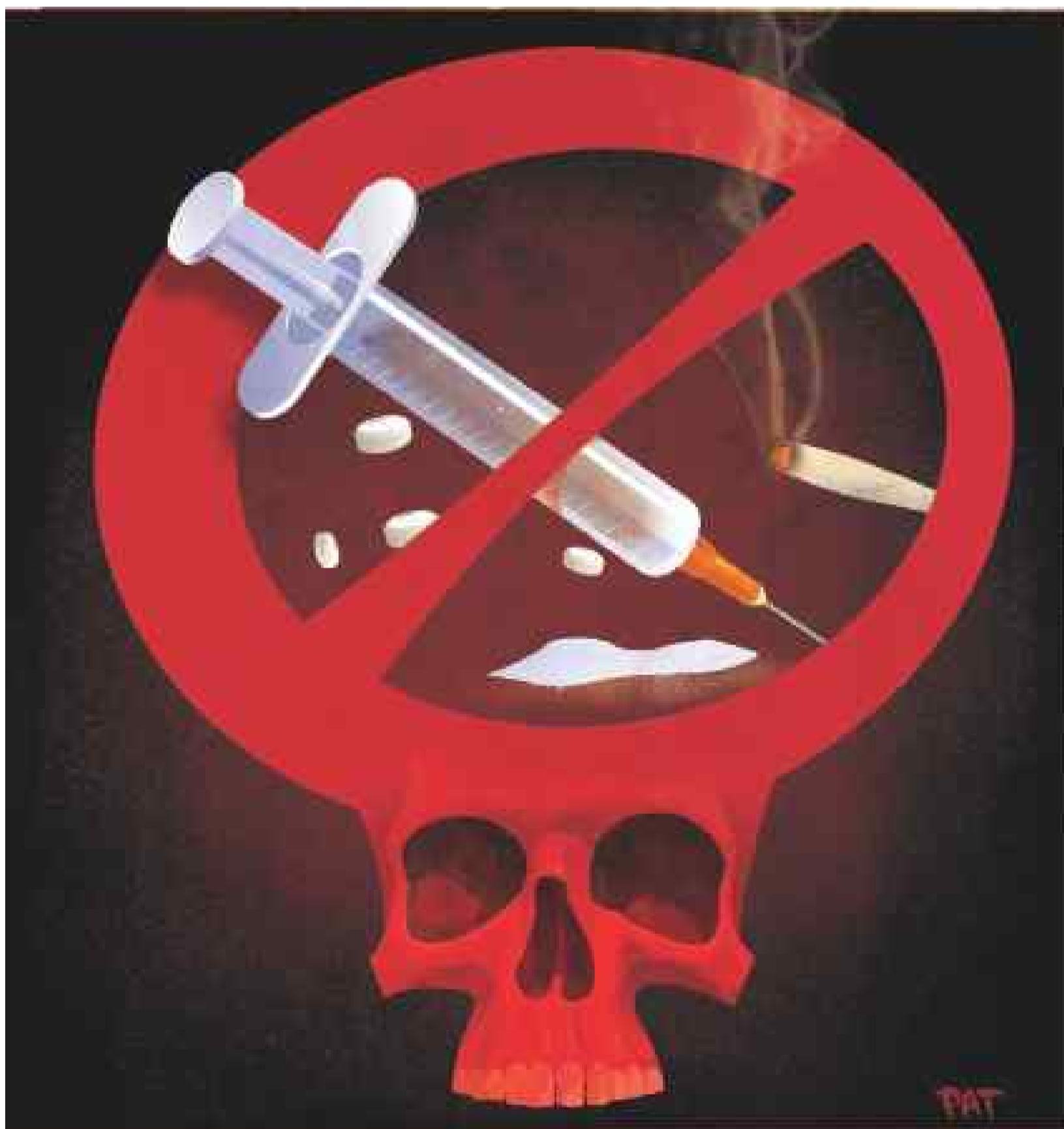
Every year cocaine causes about 20,000 deaths in Colombia and displaces several hundred thousand people from their homes. Children are blown up by landmines, indigenous people are enslaved, villagers are tortured and killed, and rainforests are razed. You'd cause less human suffering if instead of discreetly retiring to the toilet at a party, you went into the street and mugged someone.

But the counter-cultural association appears to insulate people from ethical questions. If commissioning murder, torture, slavery, civil war, corruption and deforestation is not a crime, what is? I am talking about elective drug use, not addiction. In the United States, casual users of cocaine outnumber addicts by about 12 to one. I agree that addicts should be helped, not prosecuted. I would like to see a revival of the British program that was killed by a tabloid witch-hunt in 1971: until then all heroin addicts were entitled to clean, legal supplies administered by doctors. Cocaine addicts should be offered residential detox.

But, at the risk of alienating many, I maintain that while cocaine remains illegal, casual users should remain subject to criminal law. Decriminalisation of the products of crime expands the market for this criminal trade. We have a choice of two consistent policies. The first is to sustain global prohibition, while helping addicts and prosecuting casual users. This means that the drugs trade will remain the preserve of criminal gangs. It will keep spreading crime and instability around the world, and ensure that narcotics are still cut with contaminants.

As journalist Nick Davies argued during an investigation of drugs policy, major seizures raise the price of drugs. Demand among addicts is inelastic, so higher prices mean they must find more money to buy them. The more drugs the police capture and destroy, the more robberies and muggings addicts will commit.

The other possible policy is to



legalise and regulate the global trade. This would undercut the criminal networks and guarantee unadulterated supplies to consumers. There might even be a market for certified fair-trade cocaine.

Costa's new report begins by rejecting this option. If it did otherwise, he would no longer be executive director of the UN office on

drugs and crime. The report argues that "any reduction in the cost of drug control... will be offset by much higher expenditure on public health (due to the surge of drug consumption)". It admits that tobacco and alcohol kill more people than illegal drugs, but claims that this is only because fewer illegal drugs are consumed.

Strangely, however, it fails to

supply any evidence to support the claim that narcotics are dangerous. Nor does it distinguish between the effects of drugs themselves and the effects of the adulteration and disease caused by their prohibition.

Why not? Perhaps because the evidence would torpedo the rest of the report. A couple of weeks ago, Ben Goldacre drew attention to the largest study on cocaine ever

undertaken, conducted by the World Health Organisation in 1995. I've just read it, and this is what it says. "Health problems from the use of legal substances, particularly alcohol and tobacco, are greater than health problems from cocaine use. Few experts describe cocaine as invariably harmful to health. Cocaine-related problems are widely perceived to be more common and

more severe for intensive, high-dosage users and very rare and much less severe for occasional, low-dosage users... occasional cocaine use does not typically lead to severe or even minor physical or social problems."

This study was suppressed by the WHO after threats of an economic embargo by the Clinton government. Drugs policy in most nations is a matter of religion, not science.

The same goes for heroin. The biggest study of opiate use ever conducted (at Philadelphia General Hospital) found that addicts suffered no physical harm, even though some of them had been taking heroin for 20 years. The devastating health effects of heroin use are caused by adulterants and the lifestyles of people forced to live outside the law. Like cocaine, heroin is addictive, but unlike cocaine, the only consequence of its addiction appears to be... addiction.

Costa's half-measure, in other words, gives us the worst of both worlds: more murder, more destruction, more muggings, more adulteration. Another way of putting it is this: you will, if Costa's proposal is adopted, be permitted without fear of prosecution to inject yourself with heroin cut with drain cleaner and brick dust, sold illegally and soaked in blood; but not with clean and legal supplies.

However, his report does raise one good argument. At present the trade in class A drugs is concentrated in rich nations. If it was legalised, we could cope. The use of drugs is likely to rise, but governments could use the extra taxes to help people tackle addiction. But because the wholesale price would collapse with legalisation, these drugs would for the first time become widely available in poorer nations, which are easier to exploit (as tobacco and alcohol firms have found) and which are less able to regulate, raise taxes or pick up the pieces.

The widespread use of cocaine or heroin in the poor world could cause serious social problems: I've seen, for example, how a weaker drug – khat – seems to dominate life in Somali-speaking regions of Africa. "The universal ban on illicit drugs," the UN argues, "provides a great deal of protection to developing countries."

So Costa's office has produced a study comparing the global costs of prohibition with the global costs of legalisation, allowing us to see whether the current policy (murder, corruption, war, adulteration) causes less misery than the alternative (widespread addiction in poorer nations). The hell it has.

Even to raise the possibility of such research would be to invite moves by the Congress to shut off the UN's funding. Drug charity Transform has addressed this question, but only for Britain, and the results are clear-cut: prohibition is the worse option.

As far as I can discover, no one has attempted a global study. Until that happens, Costa's opinions on this issue are worth as much as mine or anyone else's: nothing at all.

Guardian

Damage on many fronts in false focus on slavery

A documentary on Western Sahara refugees marks a low point, **KAMAL FADEL** writes

Last month in Sydney, the notion of democracy took a pounding. The launch of the documentary *Stolen* at the Sydney Film Festival marked a low point in local film culture, and signified the tenuous grip on truth we now have in contemporary society. That such a film should be financed with about \$350,000 of public money – through Screen Australia – and accepted by the prestigious festival raises questions about the nature of reality and on how it is depicted in mainstream media, such as through the medium of the film documentary.

The film purports, in a sensationalistic way, to reveal widespread evidence of racially based slavery in the Saharawi refugee camps on the Western Sahara-Algeria border. Central to the apparent scoop is an interview with

Fetim Sallem, a 36-year old mother of four. She was in Australia to explain her story, which is significantly at odds with the film's take on it (so much so that Fetim requested unsuccessfully to have her interviews removed from the film.)

Rather than verifying shaky claims of slavery and then seeking out the source of this possible ill (say in the repressive environment the Saharawi people have endured since the illegal invasion by Moroccan forces in 1975, an event that sent many into the camps that still exist today), the film-makers of *Stolen* chose to conflate a few ill-gotten and misunderstood accusations into a tabloid expose. The approach of the film-makers challenges the very basis of the

documentary genre and undermines its value as a means of serious scrutiny. In an age when reality TV is nothing of the sort and when celebrity gossip is considered hard news, this is perhaps not surprising. But it is disappointing and very distressing for those who, like Fetim, are vilified in the process.

There are fundamental flaws in the film-makers' storyboard. Fetim is not a slave and widespread slavery simply does not exist in the Saharawi refugee camps. This fact has been confirmed by numerous visits by independent journalists and human rights reporters over the years.

A member of a delegation sent by Human Rights Watch to investigate the film-makers' claims said the

delegation "did not find evidence of forced labour, certainly not of slavery of the kind" in 19th century America.

The Saharawi live under great strain and considerable duress, brought about by decades of foreign occupation. A generation has grown up in a refugee environment. Our society is not perfect, our situation not Utopian. None is.

But, slavery is something Polisario abhors and is on the record as opposing. The practice is an unacceptable cultural anachronism and we have outlawed it completely since the inception of our independence movement in 1973.

Polisario has worked hard to address whatever human rights issues we find in our midst and we

continue to undermine all forms of abuse and restrictions on liberty. This year, Polisario openly lobbied hard for the United Nations mandate to include a human rights monitoring process in its mission in Western Sahara. This was quashed by France, an erstwhile supporter of the Moroccan occupiers in Western Sahara, using its veto power in the Security Council.

The biggest threat to human rights in Western Sahara is the illegal Moroccan occupation and the failure of the international system – epitomised by France's blocking actions. These weaknesses ensure the Saharawi remain trapped in a nightmare of Realpolitik, driven to some extent by Morocco's vast

propaganda machine. The simple desire, backed by UN resolutions, to allow the Saharawi the right to decide their fate (independence or an autonomy under Moroccan administration) in a free and fair referendum remains, inexplicably, unrealised.

Reality is clearly a fungible commodity in the eyes of the makers of this film, for its backers and for the festival organisers. They are reflective of a wider crisis in the ability to discern truth from fiction. They are not alone. There has been a negative impact on the life of Fetim Sallem by the actions of the film-makers and also on the cause of independence in Western Sahara. That's a reality no one can challenge.

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