



February 2011

UPDATE ON WESTERN SAHARA

Australia Western Sahara Association (AWSA)

AWSA is an incorporated, non-profit Association which was set up to raise awareness and promote the Saharawi cause in Australia as well as campaign for a free and fair referendum on self-determination for the Saharawi people.

Given its similarity with East Timor, the Saharawi cause resonates with the Australian public, and enjoys support from the main political parties, the trade unions and NGOs.

Background

Morocco and the Polisario held four rounds of formal U.N.-sponsored peace talks in 2007 and 2008 before they broke down in acrimony due to Morocco's refusal to discuss the option of independence as one of the alternatives to be put to the people in a referendum of self-determination.

Since then there have been three rounds of informal talks. The last, held in Manhasset, New York, on 8 and 9 November 2010, ended without any movement in the 35-year-old dispute. The next round of informal talks between the parties to the conflict over Western Sahara, Morocco and Polisario, will take place from 21 to 23 January in New York

Attack on the civilian, protest camp

In the early hours of Monday 8th November the Moroccan army and security forces attacked an estimated 20,000 Saharawi civilian protesters from the makeshift protest camp where they had been living for a month.

The Moroccan army was met with anger as the tented city was razed to the ground resulting in dozens of deaths and a large number of injuries and hundreds of detainees. Violent clashes between Saharawis and Moroccan are still taking place across many Saharawi cities particularly in El Aaiun, Western Sahara's capital, Smara and Dakhla.

Western Sahara is now under siege and no free access is given to the media and independent observers.

The camp, known as Gdeim Izik, was set up on 9th October and attracted over 20,000 of women, children and the elderly from surrounding cities demanding improved housing, employment opportunities and respect of their basic rights. Moroccan forces were quick to surround the camp with large numbers of its army and military equipment. A Saharawi a 14 year old boy was shot dead by

Moroccan forces as he was travelling towards the Gdeim Izik in a car. Since then over 30 people are reported dead, hundreds injured and detained by the Moroccan authorities.

The Moroccan army attacked the camp and at dawn on 8th of November, the day the talks between Polisario and Morocco were due to start near New York under UN auspices. The army moved in using life bullets, helicopters, tear gas, and high pressure hoses against the protesters.

Journalists and independent observers were banned from entering the camp. European MPs attempting to visit the camp were refused entry to the country and deported from airports.

The Security Council was convened for an emergency meeting on 16 November.

The Council members “deplored the violence in El Aaiun and Gdaim Izyk camp, and expressed their condolences over the deaths and injuries that resulted.”

All the Council members agreed to send a fact finding mission to investigate what happened at the camp but France was against the idea because it wanted to protect Morocco.

There is an urgent requirement for access to the area to ascertain the facts and assess the needs of the Sahrawi people. The Frente POLISARIO has [demanded](#) a UN investigation as well as the mandating of [MINURSO](#), the UN peacekeeping force in the territory, to monitor and report on the human rights of the population. A 2006 [recommendation](#) from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for the UN to monitor the human rights situation has so far not been implemented. Recent violence shows clearly the need for a mechanism for human rights monitoring.

Human Rights Watch

Human Rights Watch in a [report](#) published on 26 November, under the title “***Human Rights Watch Report (Western Sahara: Beatings, Abuse by Moroccan Security Forces)***” stated that Moroccan security forces repeatedly beat and abused people they detained following disturbances on November 8, 2010, in the Western Sahara capital city of El-Ayoun. Human Rights Watch said also that security forces also directly attacked civilians. The Moroccan authorities should immediately end the abuse of detainees, and carry out an independent investigation into the abuse, Human Rights Watch said.

Human Rights Watch said it interviewed seven Sahrawis detained following the November 8 violence and then released. The witnesses had severe bruising and other recent wounds that suggested they had been beaten. "All alleged that the police or gendarmes abused them in custody, including in some cases beating them until they lost consciousness, throwing urine at them, and threatening them with rape."

“Human Rights Watch told ministry of interior officials in Rabat on November 18 of its evidence that security forces had opened fire in the city of El-Ayoun, wounding civilians, and of other violent attacks by members of the security forces on Sahrawis, both those at liberty and those in detention.”

HRW Report adds “Following the initial violent confrontations, Moroccan security forces participated with Moroccan civilians in retaliatory attacks on civilians and homes, and blocked wounded Sahrawis from seeking medical treatment.”

European Parliament

In a consensus [resolution](#) on the Western Sahara, adopted on 25 November the European Parliament "strongly condemn" the violent incidents which occurred during the dismantling of the Gdaim Izik protest camp and said that the UN is the most appropriate institution to conduct "an international independent investigation" of the events.

In the resolution the European Parliament expressed its "greatest concern about the significant deterioration of the situation in Western Sahara"

It also deplored the attacks on press freedom, which have affected many European journalists, and called on Morocco to allow free access and free movement in the Western Sahara for the press, independent observers and humanitarian organisations.

The European Parliament stressed the need for a UN human rights monitoring mechanism in Western Sahara.

The Resolution reaffirmed that the EU fully supports the efforts of the Personal Envoy of the UN Secretary General "to find a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution which will allow the self-determination of the people of the Western Sahara".

AWSA

Annexes

<http://www.theage.com.au/national/letters/no-excuse-for-this-abuse-of-trust-20101123-185kb.html>

We must step up on Western Sahara

ON NOVEMBER 8, as talks resumed at the UN between Morocco and Polisario [the Western Saharan independence movement], Moroccan security forces initiated a brutal attack on 20,000 Saharawis at a peaceful protest camp at Gdeim Izik, near El-Aaiun, the capital of occupied Western Sahara.

The catastrophe is similar to the Santa Cruz Cemetery massacre of 1991, when Indonesian soldiers opened fire on East Timorese students in Dili. Estimates put the number of Saharawis killed at more than 30, with hundreds injured and arrested.

Australia has a history of support for human rights and international peace, and should condemn the killing of innocent civilians in Western Sahara.

Several Australian companies import phosphate rock that Morocco illegally extracts from occupied Western Sahara. Australia should stop this trade from the occupied territory.

Our government should also join the international protest against the massacre and oppression of the people of Western Sahara, and call on the UN to send a fact-finding mission to the region. The UN mission should also include human rights monitoring.

Cate Lewis, Australia Western Sahara Association; Dr Helen Hill, Australia-East Timor Association; John Dowd, International Commission of Jurists; Peter Jennings, Union Aid Abroad; Cam Walker, Friends of the Earth.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/nov/26/boiling-tensions-in-western-sahara/print/>

<http://thehill.com/opinion/columnists/david-keene/132259-our-friends-in-the-desert#comments>

Our friends in the desert

By David Keene - 12/06/10

Americans like to imagine that most conflicts are waged by good guys against bad guys and respond to trigger words to decide who falls into which camp. Linking one's opponents to terrorism, Osama bin Laden or Muslim extremism is a sure way to win the sympathy and support of many who remain unwilling or unable to look beyond the complexities of a high-school football game.

Nations and people seeking a sympathetic hearing have always known this about Americans and acted accordingly to make sure that what we know about those they dislike comes with the slant they seek. Thus, the first thing the British did to get an edge on their enemies in the summer of 1914, as war in Europe threatened, was to cut the trans-Atlantic cable between the U.S. and continental Europe, guaranteeing that our news would have to flow through London.

A less-than-accurate narrative is saleable as long as those to whom it is sold don't discover that it is little more than fiction.

Controlling the narrative becomes even more important when few Americans are familiar with the facts. This has certainly been true of a struggle that's been going on in the North African desert since the mid-'70s.

Until then the colonial Western Sahara was a part of what was known as the Spanish Sahara; the Spanish abandoned the territory, which was immediately invaded, occupied and annexed by Morocco.

The several hundred thousand inhabitants waged a guerrilla war against the Moroccan king's vastly superior army, which had the backing of most of the Arab world and the former colonial powers. The independence-minded Sahrawi, as they were known, were bombed, napalmed and eventually driven across the border into neighboring Algeria, where several hundred thousand still live in U.N.-administered refugee camps.

Led by Mohamed Abdelaziz, the Sahrawi realized they couldn't win a shooting war with the Moroccans and instead sought help from the United Nations and the World Court.

The World Court found that their claim to the lands seized by Morocco were legitimate, and the U.N. sided with the Sahrawi's demand for a referendum on whether they the people living on the land preferred independence or Moroccan rule. The Moroccan king essentially told the U.N., the World Court and the Sahrawi to pound sand.

Still, Abdelaziz believed that right would eventually prevail and began preparing his people for self-government. As a result, the refugees living in the camps — which I have visited and in which my daughter served as a volunteer a few years ago — are well-educated and live under a written constitution almost unique among Muslim nations in that it guarantees residents the vote and provides equal rights for women. The inhabitants also tend to be strongly pro-American.

Abdelaziz and his followers have won the support of many U.S. Christian churches that supplement the dwindling supplies from the U.N. with food and other staples. Their plight has been generally ignored in the U.S., but they do enjoy bipartisan support in Congress, with Oklahoma Sen. James Inhofe as perhaps their principal Republican champion.

At first the Moroccans simply ignored world opinion but eventually agreed to a referendum as long as the Moroccans who had moved or been moved into the area since the '70s could participate.

Former U.S. Secretary of State James A. Baker accepted a U.N. appointment as a special negotiator to come up with a plan for the referendum. The Baker Plan was rejected out of hand in 2003 by the king, who began spending millions to convince the world that the Western Saharans are little more than al Qaeda wannabes and arguing that most Sahrawi want to live under Morocco's enlightened rule.

That myth died along with a number of protesters and Moroccan security officials last month when Moroccan forces broke up a peaceful encampment of Western Saharans inside Moroccan-occupied territory, arrested hundreds and moved to cut off communications and press access to the area.

<http://thehill.com/opinion/columnists/david-keene/132259-our-friends-in-the-desert#comments>

As the protest began, the Sahrawi feared just such a reaction and asked the U.N. for protection. On Oct. 18, a spokesman for the Moroccan government told Reuters that there was no need for such protection

because “Morocco tolerates protests ... and [there] will not be police intervention against those protesters.”

Three weeks later, with guns blazing, the intervention became a reality and the narrative collapsed.

Keene is chairman of the American Conservative Union and a managing associate with the Carmen Group, a Washington-based governmental consulting firm.

Interesting links:

- <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2010/nov/26/boiling-tensions-in-western-sahara/print/> : **SIMANOWITZ: Boiling tensions in Western Sahara Clashes in Morocco defy U.N. peacekeeping**
- http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephen-zunes/upsurge-in-repression-cha_b_784639.html
- <http://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2010/12/13/jeremy-harding/so-much-for-human-rights/> : So much for human rights, by Jeremy Harding.
- <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900SID/VVOS-8BBMLZ?OpenDocument&RSS20=02-P>
- http://www.democracynow.org/2010/11/15/moroccan_forces_raid_protest_camp_in (VIDEO)
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=64orjKWE5mw>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aG0ga00eI2o&feature=related> (tear gas being used against the protesters including women and babies).
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1EQ5L2dgs8&feature=related>
- <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/en/pressroom/content/20101125IPR00558/> : **Western Sahara: MEPs for a UN independent investigation**
- <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2010-0443+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN> : **Text of European Parliament Resolution**
- <http://www.africa-union.org/root/ar/index/COMMUNIQUE%20on%20situation%20in%20Laayoune%20ENG%201.pdf> (African Union Communiqué).
- <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/11/26/western-sahara-beatings-abuse-moroccan-security-forces> : **Human Rights Watch Report (Western Sahara: Beatings, Abuse by Moroccan Security Forces)**.

For more information: www.awsa.org.au and <http://www.spsrasd.info/en/main3e.php>