

AUSTRALIAN DELEGATION TO SAHARAWI REFUGEE CAMPS

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- Meredith Burgmann, MLC, President of the Legislative Council, NSW Parliament (Australian Labor Party)
- Yvette Andrews, film maker, Chief-of-Staff to Meredith Burgmann
- Annette O'Neill, social worker and member NSW Administrative Decisions Tribunal
- Nick O'Neill, human rights' lawyer, president NSW Guardianship Tribunal
- Deborah Hope, journalist, 'The Australian' newspaper
- Geoffrey Stapleton, engineer, Global Sustainable Energy Systems
- Cate Lewis, activist in the Australian Western Sahara Association
- Georgia Vlassopoulos, ceramic artist, teacher at RMIT University
- Ron Guy, artist and representative of Australian Workers' Union
- Andrew MacLeod, international organisation, Geneva
- Susan Humphries, social researcher and gardener, Melbourne

Background

In April 2004, a delegation of Australians visited the Saharawi refugee camps near Tindouf, in south western Algeria. The Saharawi are the people of the former Spanish Sahara, now known as Western Sahara, who were forced out of their homeland when the Spanish left the country and it became occupied by neighbouring Morocco.

More than 165,000 people are living in the camps and rather fewer are under Moroccan control in the occupied zone of Western Sahara.

The refugees are in desperate need of international help, both for their material survival and for political pressure to deliver the UN-promised referendum of self-determination.

In events and timelines strikingly similar to those in East Timor, the country of Western Sahara has been struggling for independence and self-determination since the 1960s. In East Timor, the Indonesians moved in when the Portuguese abandoned the colony, and the liberation movement, Fretilin declared independence in 1975. In Western Sahara an armed struggle against the Spanish began in 1973 with the foundation of the Polisario Front independence movement. In 1975 the International Court of Justice ruled that the people of Western Sahara had the right to self-determination. Morocco laid claim to the territory sending some 350,000 Moroccans to the territory, in what is known as the 'Green March'. The Spanish handed administrative rights to Mauritania and Morocco before withdrawing in 1976 when the Saharawi Democratic Republic was declared by the Polisario and war against the Moroccans began in earnest.

At this time, refugees fled to neighbouring Algeria, which assisted in the establishment of camps, and where these people are still exiled today.

In 1981 the Moroccans commenced building a fortified wall to defend the territory they had taken. This wall was eventually to run the length of the country, dividing it into what the Saharawis refer to as the Occupied Zone, the western half running along the coast and containing the main towns of the country, and the Liberated Zone, the desert country to the east of the Wall, which is controlled by the Polisario Front. Apparently about 110,000 Moroccan soldiers are deployed on the Wall.

In 1991 a UN monitored cease-fire began, but peace plans, dating from 1988, have failed to be implemented. As recently as 2004 April, Morocco rejected a UN peace plan and the UN has reluctantly extended the monitoring role of its MINURSO (Mission des Nations Unies pour un Référendum au Sahara Occidental) troops until 30 October 2004. Underscoring ongoing UN weariness with the impasse, special envoy for Western Sahara James Baker, former US Secretary of State, resigned from his post as the personal envoy of the UN Secretary General in June this year. Baker resigned because of Morocco's rejection of his peace plan and the endless delays of the peace process. Alvaro de Soto has taken on the job of negotiating the peace plan leading to a referendum of self-determination for the Saharawi people.

The Saharawi have conscientiously confined their struggle to the UN process, at the same time seeking international support through lobbying and solidarity groups. An

important part of their strategy has been to place Polisario representatives in other countries, including Australia.

The Australian Delegation

In 2003 Fatima Mafoud, a Saharawi woman from the camps in Algeria, currently based in Italy, toured Australia with fellow Polisario representative, Kamal Fadel who is posted in Sydney. In Melbourne, a series of lectures, films and dinners was supported by Senator Lyn Allison, who had visited the camps. Lyn's enthusiasm was shared by another camp visitor, Cate Lewis, a long-time activist from the UK and now convenor of the Australia-Western Sahara Association, Melbourne. A plan for a visit evolved from a suggestion of Dr Meredith Burgmann, during Fatima's welcome to Sydney in the NSW Parliament. The availability of Polisario representative, Kamal, to travel with the delegation and to make arrangements with the camps ensured that the interests of the group could be prepared for, and that a range of appropriate meetings and visits were organised.

Most of the delegates are members of the Australia-Western Sahara Association, and have histories of involvement with international causes, in particular with refugees. The delegation travelled with a mission of offering solidarity, material support and encouragement to the Saharawis. Above all, the group sought to learn, and to establish what could be done to help in Australia.

The itinerary included joining an international protest march to the 'Wall of Shame', the fortified wall built by the Moroccans. Unfortunately, the dates of the march were changed, but nonetheless an Australian banner was taken and a protest made at the wall, in full view of Moroccan soldiers.

The camps

There are four main camps near Tindouf, a military outpost in south west Algeria, about 2 hours flying time from Algiers. The camps are named after the main cities in the homeland, Smara, El Ayoun, Dakhla and Ausserd, with around 40,000 people in each. Another much smaller camp has grown up around the women's school, the 27 February School, named after the date of the declaration of independence. Rabouni is the administrative centre, and comprises a series of buildings including a hospital.

The location of camps is based on access to water bores, with the settlements being dispersed throughout an area of some 100 square kilometres in case of attack. Harsh desert conditions are exacerbated by extremes of temperature, and dust. Wind carries fine dust into every corner and the Saharawi combat it with their dress and assiduous housekeeping. Walled compounds afford some protection from wind and blowing dust, but most of the settlements consist of exposed tents and mud brick dwellings.

There is a permanence about the camps, which creates a dilemma for the Saharawis. In their struggle to return to their homelands, they do not want to put down too many 'roots' in the camps.

The highly effective organization of the camps has enabled the provision of services in sanitation and energy, health, and education, and cultural activities. Government structures, from local camp level to national level, are democratic and women are well represented.

Meetings and visits

Prior to flying to Algeria, the delegation gathered in Rome, where Fatima Mafoud provided generous hospitality and an opportunity to meet Italian solidarity activists and parliamentarians, a filmmaker and a writer. A limited edition book produced by filmmaker Patrizio Esposito, of photographs from the pockets of Moroccan prisoners and war dead, was presented to human rights lawyer Nick O'Neill. The book powerfully evokes the human effects of war, for both sides.

Flying to Tindouf via Algiers, the group was met by Kamal Fadel and Bachir Mehdi Bhaya, both experienced international Polisario representatives who were to guide and interpret for the delegation. Bachir is also well known as Michael Palin's guide in the making of the film of his travels in the Sahara.

The delegation stayed at the Hussein Tamek Centre, the presidential guesthouse for official parties. From here daily visits were made to people and places of interest and guests joined the group for discussions at most mealtimes.

Tifariti and the Liberated Zones

The first visit involved a three-day trip to the outpost of Tifariti in the liberated zone, the eastern region of Western Sahara itself. Three 4-wheel drive vehicles were provided for the 500 km desert journey, navigated by the expert Saharawi drivers with geographic markers only, in a complete absence of roads, tracks or signposts.

Tifariti is located in hilly, red-brown gibber desert country. A former military base, its physical desolation is underlined by evidence of the fierce warfare of the 1970s, by trenches, by rusting tanks, bomb casings, and plane wreckage. An oasis garden, however, shaded by eucalyptus trees, grows some fruit and vegetables for the few inhabitants of the village, and provides a measure of visual relief. A considerable settlement had been built here to cater for an expected influx of Saharawis in the lead up to the referendum of self-determination of a series of aborted peace plans. Some bombed buildings have not been rebuilt and lie in ruins, while a large school and hospital in good condition wait for occupants. Some examples of Saharawi and nomadic art and craft are on display in a small museum here, along with relics from warfare.

In an excursion from Tifariti to an escarpment at Erquiez, the delegation saw ancient rock painting and carving, estimated to be some 4,000 to 10,000 years old, depicting bison, gazelle and giraffes and evidencing a former lush environment. Pre-Islamic burial sites were visited at the base of the escarpment.

Lunch provided by a group of nomads was a highlight of the desert travel. In the largest of a cluster of tents, about a dozen nomadic men, women and children offered a traditional welcome of warm cultured milk, while lunch consisted of a goat stew with flat bread and Saharawi mint tea. The day was the hottest the group experienced and after eating and discussions, the invitation to sleep was readily accepted. Amongst the nomads, the delegation met visitors from the occupied territory, bringing firsthand reports of perilous, clandestine visits and of Moroccan oppression in Western Sahara.

Before leaving the liberated zone, the delegation visited a military base, again isolated in an extremely bleak environment. Camped in a small cluster of mud buildings, the soldiers are vigilant for any breach of the cease-fire, and a line up of tanks wait under covers. On the drive from this camp to the Moroccan wall, the desert route littered with visible detritus of warfare, including unexploded mines.

The delegation's 'demonstration' against the Moroccan occupation at the Wall took place at a distance of some 1-2 km, with Moroccan soldiers clearly visible. The Wall, apparently about two metres high and built of sand and stone, appeared as a line on the horizon. Here the group filmed its banner 'Australians against the Wall', and chanted protest slogans. The delegation spent about an hour at the Wall and experienced an ominous sense of threat.

Meetings and visits in the camps

Brahim Mokhtar, Head of Protocol in the Saharawi government, who the delegation was to meet toward the end of the stay, arranged the visit with Kamal Fadel. The delegation met politicians, administrators, service providers, military officers, and media workers, and visited hospitals, schools, arts and crafts centres, war and cultural museums and gardens. They were welcomed into Saharawi homes.

The Minister for Cooperation, Baba Salek, oversees the setting of priorities and distribution of aid. The refugees are totally dependent on international aid, which is quite often promised and not delivered. Aid is provided in cash, in goods and through the provision of services such as education. Nearly all upper secondary and tertiary education is undertaken overseas, in countries such as Algeria, Cuba or Spain. Food is a current urgent priority, related to recent shortages, and an appeal was made for assistance with the provision of milk powder.

Saleh Abd Mohamed is one of five Saharawi MPs in the new African Union Parliament, and he joined the delegation with Bouhoubeini Yahya, Head of Saharawi Red Crescent, the international Red Cross affiliate which deals with the distribution of international aid to the refugees and three African Union representatives, from Ethiopia, Tanzania and Nigeria at a cultural evening. The African Union is a federation of all African countries with the exception of Morocco. These leaders all expressed frustration with Morocco and the Union's interest in achieving a referendum for Africa's last colony.

President Mohamed Abdelaziz and senior government members hosted a lunch for the delegation. The President was profoundly appreciative of the effort in coming such a distance, and expressed gratitude for their interest in the plight of his people. The President asked the delegation to promote the justice of the Saharawi cause, the parallels with East Timor and the democratic principles and practice of the government-in-exile. As an indicator of the bond between the leadership of the two liberation movements, Jose Ramos Horta has written the preface to the soon-to-be published book of Toby Shelley on the Western Sahara. The President also pointed to concerns that his people could become impatient with the careful, non-violent leadership, and that young men especially, could become subject to extremist influences. A return to war was not out of the question.

Health services

Some insights into Saharawi health were provided through visits to three relatively large hospitals, at Tifariti, at Smara camp and at Rabouni. The lack of inpatients was ascribed to a lack of resources and equipment, with a system of community clinics dealing with everyday health issues, and the capacity to send complex cases to appropriate facilities in Algeria. A Cuban trained pharmacist had a queue of people for his limited supply of drugs, and told of his interest in exploring traditional medicine using indigenous plants. Again, he is limited by a lack of resources to process the plants and to run the necessary efficacy trials.

Babies are mostly delivered by midwives in the community, with at-risk cases going to Algerian hospitals. At camp hospitals trained medical and nursing assistance is available, but overseas-donated equipment is out-moded and drugs are in short supply.

Visiting medical teams offer specialist medical services and surgery at the national hospital at Rabouni. The medical director, Mohamed Fadel Ehniya showed the delegation the operating theatre, but again there are no patients. Nearby a dental clinic, however, was fully operational.

The main health problems described are strongly environmentally related and include malnutrition, anaemia, thyroid conditions, diarrhoea and respiratory problems such as asthma.

Schools

The delegation visited a junior secondary boarding school, a women's school and a special needs' school.

The 9 June Boarding School is named after a significant event in Saharawi history, the day that El Ouali, founder of Polisario Front, died, which became day of the martyrs. The school caters to around a thousand girls and boys aged 11-13 years. The delegation saw classrooms, with children at work, dormitories and children vigorously pursuing recreational activities in the courtyards between the mud brick buildings, and on a dusty soccer 'field'. Classes and buildings seemed to be traditionally organised and very basically equipped, the children happy, enthusiastic and friendly. Discussions with the teachers through interpreters were limited to inquiries about the curriculum and the progress of the children.

On a much smaller scale, the special needs school caters to about 60 disabled young people, aged from about 4 years to early adulthood. Its director, Dr Buyema Fateh, runs a very progressive program, aiming for each student's attaining as much functioning independence, social integration and livelihood autonomy as possible. While obviously short of resources, the school offers a rich and encouraging environment, which was very evident in the busy 'classrooms' and displays of work.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and an Algerian women's organisation run a women's centre, providing classes in a range of areas such as sewing, English and information technology. The delegation saw small

groups engaged in these activities, and talked to teachers who are also able to provide counselling services as needed. Again, the emphasis is on empowering women.

Culture

Saharawi culture is possibly at its most vibrant in its music and dance, which the delegation was offered in an evening under canvas, with a dinner of camel meat and couscous, all shared with the visiting African Union representatives from Ethiopia, Tanzania and Nigeria. The delegation was delighted to learn that the Tanzanian ambassador had studied law in Melbourne!

The music provided was a synthesis of modern popular music and traditional Saharawi, and was often accompanied by ululation from the women and children. Women and girls in traditional white mehlfas performed the dance, again traditional, and with great beauty and drama.

Throughout the visit, the delegation saw examples of arts and crafts, both in a special centre and in museums. Arrangements were made for an exhibition of paintings to be brought to Australia.

Trade Unions

Reflecting attention to the detail of democracy, there is a trade union movement in the camps with three main unions for general workers, women and youth. The delegation's representative of the Australian Worker's Union met with Saharawi union representatives in Rabouni.

Horticulture

Each camp has a communal vegetable garden, where individuals and groups grow fruits, vegetables and herbs. The gardens tended to be on a large scale and away from the camps, thereby requiring more sophisticated organisation and equipment. Apparently individual domestic plots close to dwellings have been tried and proved too difficult because of wandering domestic goats. Also, training is probably required for a people struggling with a harsh environment and no tradition of gardening.

The extent to which the camps are supplied with fresh produce was difficult to ascertain, but the established crops looked very healthy. Where crops were not flourishing, this was related to equipment failure, for example with water pumps. The main crops grown include dates, mint, onions, tomatoes, and capsicum.

Media

News from the camps is relayed to the world by the Saharawi Press Service (SPS). The delegation met informally with Melainin Lakhel at Rabouni who described his work with the SPS in publicity and Internet maintenance. This was a particularly fruitful meeting as Melainin speaks fluent English, is very articulate, and has lived under Moroccan occupation before escaping to the camps. The Australian-Western Sahara Association (AWSA) now receives articles from Melainin by email.

In conclusion

Defying current media stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims, the Saharawis are moderate, liberal, peaceful and democratic. Their society is intelligent, well organised and matriarchal, and strongly based on democratic principles and the rule of law. Their struggle is highly principled and the Saharawis place great emphasis on the role of education and knowledge in securing their future. Outsiders are always impressed with the high levels of literacy and educational attainment. A range of effective, efficient and democratic structures are in place to govern the camps and to distribute the material aid from the UN and international community on which the Saharawis depend.

The delegation saw this exemplary Arab democracy and moderate Islamic society as a model of good government and stability in a very unstable part of the world.

Polisario leader and president of the Saharawi Republic, President Mohamed Abdelaziz emphasises the justice of the Saharawi cause, supported by the International Court of Justice and the UN.

The current leadership has for many years agreed to concessions in UN peace plans, but these are continually thwarted by Morocco. The leadership fears a growing impatience from a younger generation of Saharawis deprived of a livelihood, and hence open to exploitation by extremists.

A media worker with the Saharawi Press Service reminded us that emphasising the humanitarian and human rights aspects of the Saharawi cause is a good approach with new audiences we might reach in Australia.

Further activities to raise awareness in Australia and provide assistance are being planned. Journalist delegate Deborah Hope has excellently summarised the Saharawi plight, based on the delegation visit and her own research, in the long feature article in Weekend Australian, 15/16 May 2004. The group is particularly pleased to have the opportunity for further exploration of the issue, drawing on the East Timor experience, in a joint seminar with the Australia East Timor Association and the Australia Western Sahara Association hosted by the Institute of Post Colonial Studies, in Melbourne on 19 August 2004.

An exhibition of artwork and crafts from the camps is being organised, and also photographs from the delegation. Australians will also have an opportunity to see more of the rugged beauty of the Sahara through the production of a documentary film made on the trip. The first screening will be in Sydney on 14 September in the NSW parliament. Finally, a solar energy project is being investigated and an urgent request for immediate humanitarian aid in the form of milk powder is being followed up.

Further resources:

Newspaper article:

Hope, Deborah. *On the road from Morocco*. May 15/16 2004. Weekend Australian.

Books (with bibliographies):

Hodges, Tony. (1983) *Roots of a desert war*. (Out-of-print, but usually available on internet sites, ebay or Amazon)

Shelley, Toby. (2004) *Endgame in Western Sahara – What future for Africa’s last colony?. With preface by Jose Ramos Horta* (Zed Books): watch AWSA website for publication date, and launch.

Websites: also use Google

www.awsa-westernsahara.org - Australian Western Sahara Association

www.arso.org - Swiss Association for a referendum in Western Sahara which has become the main international website for Western Sahara

www.wsahara.net – an English language site managed by a Saharawi living in the US

www.news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa

For further information, to join AWSA or make donations, contact the Australian-Western Sahara Association in Melbourne, awsamel@alphalink.com.au or at AWSA, PO Box 164 Clifton Hill VIC 3068

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