

# Australia Western Sahara Association (Victoria)

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **AWSA calls on fertiliser company Incitec Pivot to stop importing Western Sahara phosphate**

A bulk carrier named Pilion docks in Geelong on Tuesday 9 January 2007 carrying phosphate from Western Sahara, the last colony in Africa, in violation of UN regulations.

Farmers using superphosphate made by Incitec Pivot are fertilising their land with ill-gotten goods. This product is made from phosphate rock belonging to the people of Western Sahara, but sold by Morocco without their consent and without any benefit going to them.

Western Sahara figures in the United Nations as a non-self-governing territory, which has the right to self-determination under the UN Charter. The UN also makes clear that the natural resources of a non-self-governing territory cannot be taken without the consent of its local population, in this case, the Saharawi people.

In 1976 Morocco invaded Western Sahara just as the former colonial power, Spain, was pulling out. Since then Morocco, who has been selling huge amounts of Western Sahara's phosphate and other natural resources (such as fish and even sand) not for the benefit of the Saharawis, but for the profit of the Moroccan Government.

The Saharawis fought the Moroccans from 1975 until they agreed to a ceasefire in 1991 so that the UN could run a referendum on self-determination. Since then the Moroccans have refused to allow the referendum to be held, despite the efforts of the UN. The Moroccans have bashed, tortured, imprisoned and even killed the Saharawis in the occupied parts of Western Sahara who have demonstrated in support of the referendum. Many other Saharawis have had to endure up to 30 years of living in exile in refugee camps near Tindouf in south west Algeria.

Not only has the senior legal advisor stated that it is a breach of international law to exploit the natural resources of Western Sahara, but also the UN General Assembly has consistently condemned the exploitation and plundering of natural resources and any economic activities which are detrimental to the interests of the peoples of territories like Western Sahara and deprive them of their legitimate rights over their natural resources.<sup>1</sup>

The Australian government has warned Australian companies about the risks of taking part in this trade. On 27 May 2006 DFAT issued the following statement:

**Morocco - Economic and Trade information** *The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade notes that given the status of Western Sahara as a Non-Self-Governing Territory, there are international law considerations with importing natural resources sourced from the Western Sahara. We recommend that companies seek legal advice before importing such material.* <http://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/morocco/index.html>

Human rights activists facing daily persecution within occupied Western Sahara, have called upon the international community to make Morocco stop the pillage of phosphate and other natural resources of Western Sahara. "We think Australian companies should listen to their plea, and respect international law which bans this trade", said Cate Lewis, secretary of the Victorian branch of AWSA.

The Australia Western Sahara Association is calling upon Australian fertiliser companies to consider their position in relation to international law. "If they wait until the vote of self-determination in Western Sahara has taken place, then they will know with whom they can deal over the purchase of phosphate and other natural resources". This doesn't mean that Australian companies need to give up all trade with Morocco: "We have no objections to legitimate trade with Morocco", insists national president of AWSA, Nick O'Neill

"The best way to resolve this issue is for Australia and other members of the UN to insist that Morocco allow the referendum on self-determination for Western Sahara to take place as soon as possible. This will allow Australian companies to carry out legal trade in the natural resources of Western Sahara to the benefit of the Saharawis, Australian farmers and Australians generally. It will also allow for the development of the proposed greater Maghreb economic union in north-west Africa which will benefit Australia's trading interests as well", Nick O'Neill said.

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Further information

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<sup>i</sup> For example, UNGA Resolution 46/64, of 11 December 1991 states that "the exploitation and plundering of the ... natural resources of colonial and Non-Self-Governing Territories by foreign economic interests, in violation of the relevant resolutions of the United Nations, is a grave threat to the integrity and prosperity of those Territories".