

**Briefing:**  
**Western Sahara Briefing:**  
**Current Developments and Challenges to Self-Determination**  
**Opening Statement**  
**Chairman Donald M. Payne**  
**May 09, 2007, 10:30am, RHOB 2255**

Good morning, and thank you all for joining us. The purpose of this briefing is to examine the current developments on Western Sahara and challenges to self-determination as presented by Morocco's recent "autonomy" proposal.

Those of us who follow Africa closely are well aware of the long struggle of the Saharawi people to resolve the 30 years of conflict over Western Sahara. The last remaining colony in Africa, Western Sahara remains one of the longest-running conflicts. The only just way to solve this conflict is to hold a referendum to allow the Sahrawi people to determine their own future.

This issue is one that I have been following for some years and have worked closely on with my colleague Mr. Pitts of Pennsylvania. We are sharing a deep concern over the continued lack of settlement of the conflict over Western Sahara.

Mr. Pitts, myself and 45 members of Congress, including most of the Congressional Black Caucus, sent a letter to President Bush 2 weeks ago calling on his administration to embrace a solution for Western Sahara based on the respect of freedom and human rights which are the basic values of the foundation of our own country.

The people of Moroccan-administered Western Sahara have been denied their right to self-determination and their basic human rights for more than 30 years since the end of Spanish colonial rule in 1975.

On April 10th, Morocco presented an "autonomy" plan for Western Sahara in a letter to U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon. The proposal would impose Moroccan sovereignty on the territory. The autonomy proposal would be an imposition against the will of the Sahrawi people and would deny them their right to a referendum to vote on their own destiny.

Here in the U.S. Congress, there is a long history of support for a referendum – the opposite of what Morocco has proposed -- particularly reflected in the unanimously passed legislation (H.Res. 245) of the 105<sup>th</sup> Congress which expressed support for a free, fair, and transparent referendum in which genuine Sahrawi people vote.

The United Nations Security Council has continued to uphold the right of self-determination. Sadly, the continued delay of this referendum has brought disunity among countries in North Africa and could cause instability in this region. In addition, the delay has caused terrible suffering for the Sahrawi refugees who have lived in refugee camps since 1975, continuing to hope for the actualization of the 1991 promise of a referendum for self-determination held by the United Nations.

In light of the recent autonomy plan offered by the Government of Morocco, we are concerned about the continued violation of international law which goes against the ruling by the International Court of Justice to grant self-determination to the Sahrawi people. The right to self-determination is a founding principle on which our own country was built, and it is vital that we uphold this principle both in theory and in practice.

On April 30, 2007, the U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 1754, welcoming Morocco's efforts. The resolution called upon the parties to enter into negotiations without preconditions to achieve a political solution which will provide for the self-determination of the people of the Western Sahara. It further requested the Secretary-General to set up these negotiations and to report on their status in two months, thereby seeking expeditious action.

Although Morocco and the Polisario are reported to have agreed to hold direct talks on the basis of the Security Council resolution, which extended the mandate of the U.N. Mission for the Referendum in the Western Sahara (MINURSO) for six months, it however has to be considered that after more than a decade and over at least \$500 million spent, there is still no resolution to this conflict. Only a democratic process would provide a just and lasting solution that will lead to peace and stability in North Africa. Such a democratic process would also send a signal to the broader Maghreb [MAH-GREB]

region and the Middle East that there are successful alternatives to violence in the pursuit of national aspirations.

There needs to be more responsibility on the side of the United States to pressure our close ally, Morocco, to agree to allow a referendum to be held. If the Sahrawi people want their country to be integrated into Morocco, then that is what they will choose. But we must provide the leadership as the U.S. to respect and uphold the right to self-determination or we are hypocrites. We cannot say we want to promote democracy elsewhere and allow the people to be free of tyranny and oppression there but not allow the people of Western Sahara that same right.

I have also serious concerns about the repression and violence being carried out against Sahrawis by Moroccan officials in the occupied territory of El Ayun [EL- A- YOON]. The crack down on human rights defenders has been going on for years in Western Sahara. It's simply unacceptable and we must be clear that – whether the country in question is a U.S. ally or not – this repression and abuse will not be tolerated.

Morocco holds up its long-standing history with the U.S. since the 1700's, being the first country to recognize the U.S. as an independent country. But this relationship also has a checkered past.

The U.S. used Morocco to prop up the brutal dictator Mobutu in Congo, which then became Zaire. Then Morocco gave refuge to Mobutu in 1997 as he fled Zaire due to the popular revolt taking place.

Morocco is also known for propping up dictators in Gabon and Equatorial Guinea as well. So we have to set the proper example to our allies and encourage the right behavior, not what is currently taking place or what took place in the past.

I hope during the course of our briefing today each of our speakers will give their assessment of the situation with its challenges and developments.

We are honored to have Ambassador Frank Ruddy with us. He previously served as Deputy Chairman of the U.N. Peacekeeping Referendum for Western Sahara (MINURSO). Thank you, Ambassador Ruddy for being with us.

Our first speaker is Mr. Jacques Roussellier. He is adjunct scholar from the Public Policy Center at the Middle East Institute.

Our third witness and moderator is Suzanne Scholte , president of the Defense Forum and Chairman of the U.S.-Western Sahara Foundation.

Welcome to each of our panelists.

**IF PITTS HAS ARRIVED...**

With that I turn to the distinguished Member of Congress, Mr. Pitts for his opening statement. Thank you.