

## A line in the sand: Africa's last colony

Built to keep the Sahrawi from their own land, the berm that bisects Western Sahara is a potent symbol of Morocco's determination to hold on to Africa's last colony in the face of long-standing - but weak - international pressure

Ivan Broadhead  
South China Morning Post  
Sunday Post Magazine  
May 11, 2008



A Moroccan cluster bomblet protrudes from the Sahara sands among the dunes where 10-year-old Saeed Mahmoud and his five-year-old brother, Hassan, are shepherding their goats.

Stopping to sit and rest awhile, the youngsters notice the strange object glint in the fierce sunlight. Unaware of its lethal nature, they casually begin to throw stones at the shiny target.

Saeed scores the first hit. The blast ruptures the heat-laden air and hurls the boys across the dunes like a pair of rag dolls. Hassan lies unconscious, bones and body broken. Blood seeps from Saeed's skull, forming pools that are absorbed by the sand.

"They should have died instantly," says their grandfather, Edhil Mohamed Saleh, with a mixture of sadness and pride. "But they are Sahrawi; born and raised in the desert and made strong by the life we live here in the face of our oppressors."

The boys' survival is in the balance, as is that of their country, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) or Western Sahara as it is slightly better known in the English-speaking world.

Formerly Spanish Sahara, Western Sahara is a vast and sparsely inhabited territory - larger than Britain with a population of around 390,000 - just 30 minutes flying time from Spain's Canary Islands. It remains the last colony on the African continent, having been annexed by Moroccan and Mauritanian troops in 1975, just weeks after Spain ceded administrative control.



More than three decades after fleeing their homeland to escape persecution by the invaders, the majority of the Sahrawi continue to languish in exile, their plight ignored by many. One notable supporter is Spanish movie star Javier Bardem, who is spearheading a campaign to restore peace and freedom to the Sahrawi diaspora.

"The situation in the refugee camps gets worse each year," Oscar-winner Bardem said at the Sahara Film Festival last month. "The peace process is blocked ... 200,000 former Spanish citizens have been

abandoned in the desert for 33 years."

Leading up to their retreat, the Spanish colonial authorities were plagued by guerrilla attacks launched by the Sahrawi independence movement, the Polisario Front. Such was their success that Spain planned to deliver Western Sahara into Polisario hands.

Morocco's King Hassan II had other ideas and, asserting an historical claim on the territory, ordered 350,000 of his countrymen to the border. On November 6, 1975, the unarmed Moroccan protestors invaded Western Sahara and confronted the Spanish army in an event known as the Green March.

The move forced Spain to the negotiating table and, eight days later, in the same week that General Francisco Franco died, the European power rid itself of Western Sahara by signing the Madrid Accords. Instead of giving the Sahrawi the independence they craved, the agreement divided sovereignty between Morocco and Mauritania.

"Our country was not Spain's to give," protests Mohamed Abdelaziz, Polisario secretary general and president-in-exile of the SADR, repeatedly pounding an enormous fist on the arm of his chair.

We are speaking in Rabuni, one of the six refugee camps near Tindouf, in the Algerian Sahara, that have been home to the Sahrawi since Morocco and Mauritania launched full-scale military invasions of Western Sahara shortly after the Accords were signed.

Abdelaziz offers a tiny glass of the sweet, scalding Chinese tea popular among the nomadic Berbers from whom his people are descended. "Imagine, in 1997, if Britain handed Hong Kong to Japan instead of returning her to China," he continues. "Explain this to your readers and they will understand the injustice."



Images: Ivan Broadhead and Mikaela Wallinder, Landmine Action

**President Abdelaziz (left), General Zhao (top right) and a Landmine Action survey team in the liberated territory**

There is something of the Fidel Castro about Abdelaziz, from the beard and regulation army fatigues to the zealous spark in his eyes. Appropriately, his predecessor, El-Ouali Mustapha Sayed, was every bit the Che Guevara. The pair led by example; from the outset of the conflict they joined their comrades at the frontline to fight against the invaders.

El-Ouali was killed in 1976, aged 28, during a Polisario raid on the Mauritanian capital,

Nouakchott. His death was not in vain. The success of the Polisario's guerrilla tactics in those early years hastened the coup against Moktar Ould Daddah, Mauritania's president.

By 1979, the new Mauritanian leadership had signed a peace agreement officially recognising Western Sahara's right to independence. Today, around 50 countries and the African Union offer that same recognition. However, before the Polisario could reclaim the third of its territory occupied by Mauritania, Morocco's army marched in. Brutally subjugated, much of the remaining civilian population took flight across the desert to link up with the Polisario in Algeria. Columns of Sahrawi women and children ran the gauntlet of the Moroccan air force, its cluster bombs and napalm.

Building an entire state-in-exile during those early years was extremely tough. Even today, food remains in short supply in the refugee camps and there are precious few ways for families to generate income - this is a people that very much depends on the goodwill of the international community for its survival.

At least a quarter of the entire Sahrawi population resides in the Tindouf camps. Despite the challenges, there is an idealism that pervades the refugees' spirit. At an artisan's co-operative in February 27 Camp - named to commemorate the day the SADR was officially established - an elderly weaver named Fatima Muda tells how the Polisario prioritises health, education, gender equality and other issues not readily associated with Arab separatist movements.

"Women played a vital role in the struggle," she says, "and one of the legacies today is a parliament-in-exile in which 35 per cent of seats are held by female members" - a figure that puts the Hong Kong Legislative Council's 15 per cent to shame.

Muda and her friends, all grandmothers, are keen to show they are still engaged in the struggle. Gathering swathes of red, green, black and white cloth, they stitch together a Polisario flag on their Chinese sewing machine. "Take this with you when you go to the occupied territory and bury



it in the sand of our birthplace," they request. "And when you are safely away from the Moroccan oppressors, the east wind will blow away the sand and our flag will be free."

As the conflict dragged into the 1980s, Moroccan troops became increasingly demoralised at the Polisario's military successes and the government faced a growing financial strain to sustain the war effort. "We, on the other hand, went to war as the weak and the aggressed. Our strength came from the legitimacy of our cause and has not faltered," asserts Abdelaziz.

In a strategy that harks back to the Aurelian Walls of ancient Rome, Morocco concluded that the only way to restrict the Polisario's hit-and-run tactics was to confine the enemy guerrillas behind an artificial barrier. Bulldozers were brought deep into the desert and construction of a berm began. Completed in 1987, this sand wall bisects Western Sahara from the northeast corner to the southwest. It is a formidable military installation extending 2,700km, nearly half the length of the Great Wall of China. It is the single longest minefield in the world and is manned by 120,000 soldiers.

The berm's construction brought about a stalemate in the military conflict, shifting the spotlight to the diplomatic arena. And it is into this figurative minefield that a Chinese army officer, Major General Zhao Jingmin, has recently stepped.

Zhao is the military commander of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (Minurso), established by the Security Council in 1991. Appointed by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon last year, he is the first Chinese to lead a UN military force – a sign, he says, of the growing international respect for China.

Our first meeting, which takes place in the Sahara, is somewhat incongruous. It is St Patrick's Day and, at the UN compound in Laayoune, Zhao is participating in a flag-raising ceremony organised by his Irish Defence Force colleagues. The senior Irish officer, the genial Colonel Fergus Hannon, has gone to great lengths to make the event one to remember by requisitioning a bagpiper, Quarter Sergeant Usher, from headquarters in Dublin.

Zhao looks on in the sweltering heat, perhaps unsure what to make of Sergeant Usher's kilt, which ripples in the light breeze as he gives a rousing rendition of *Wearing of the Green* on the outlandish instrument tucked under his arm. One supposes the general has seen nothing of the like in his native Shanxi province.

More than 200 army officers from 27 countries report to Zhao, including a contingent of 13 Chinese. They are responsible for policing 266,000 sq km of desert and preserving the integrity of the ceasefire that has existed since 1991. "It's as much a diplomatic challenge as military," confirms Zhao in fluent French, which he learned during postgraduate studies in Senegal. "We're here to help the parties try and achieve a solution."

Zhao knows the lie of the land well. This is his second posting to Minurso and he has honed his military and political skills in other hotspots, including the UN's Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission.

"The referendum issue is integral to the political impasse between the Polisario and Morocco," he says, before explaining the events that led to the creation of Minurso.

A year before the Madrid Accords were signed, Spain finally agreed to abide by General Assembly Resolution 2229 (1966) in the face of Mauritania and Morocco's claims on Western Sahara. The resolution required that Western Sahara, defined by the UN as a non-self-governing territory, be allowed to decide its political destiny by means of a referendum.

That the Polisario would win the vote was beyond doubt; a UN fact-finding mission conducted in May 1975 found overwhelming Sahrawi support for independence. The Polisario position was strengthened in October 1975, when the International Court of Justice, responding to King Hassan's claim that Western Sahara was part of Moroccan territory, ruled that neither Morocco nor Mauritania had any legitimate right to assert sovereignty.

Since the judgment, the Moroccan government has poured money into the occupied territory and encouraged mass immigration of its nationals with the brazen use of job offers and tax incentives; votes are being bought for any eventual referendum.

Despite Polisario flexibility on whether these immigrants should be allowed on the electoral register, Morocco remains recalcitrant on agreeing the formula and date for a plebiscite. The referendum issue remains the biggest stumbling block between the sides.

With rioting taking place in Lhasa the morning we meet, it seems appropriate to ask Zhao whether he envisages any role for the UN in Tibet: "It is not necessary for the UN to do anything,"

he says. "Tibet is a region of China so this is a domestic issue.

"China has made lots of efforts to improve the situation," he adds. "The violent actions of these wrongdoers would not be tolerated in any civil society. China cannot tolerate persons who want to split our country."

To get a better perspective on what a split country looks like, I sign a death liability waiver and climb aboard a UN Mi-8 helicopter on a flight to join a desert patrol on the liberated side of the berm. Reassuringly, the Ukrainian pilots are still sporting the lucky shamrock buttonholes distributed by Colonel Hannon's men.



Image: Ivan Broadhead

**The berm, referred to by activists as Morocco's "Wall of Shame", extends over 2,000 km**

Skimming the desert at a few hundred feet with the helicopter windows open is an exhilarating experience. It is easy to understand how Antoine de Saint-Exupery gained his inspiration to write *The Little Prince* when he flew in these same skies. But it is the sheer size of the berm that takes the breath away.

It has severed Western Sahara like a knife cut. For more than 30 years the berm has divided families. The barbed wire and machine guns suggest just how oppressive life on the occupied side is. On my return to Laayoune, the largest city in Western Sahara and claimed by the SADR as its capital de jure, I determine to make contact with Sahrawi activists to hear first-hand their stories of life under occupation.

London-based sources provide an introduction to the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations (ASVDH). Representatives are cautious but they are willing to meet.

This is easier said than done. Moroccan security forces are everywhere. In one 24-hour period I am detained on four occasions by uniformed policemen and twice by undercover officers. The questions are the same; "Why are you here?"; "Where are you going?"; "Who are you meeting?" The routine soon becomes familiar. As a foreign journalist, the worst that can happen is to be incarcerated then deported. Not so for the Sahrawi.

Elghalia Djimi, ASVDH vice-president and a Sahrawi independence activist, was imprisoned in November 1987, held and tortured by the Moroccans for more than three years. "We make the comparison with Abu Ghraib," she says. "I was blindfolded, bitten by dogs, sexually abused and deprived of sleep."

Why can't Morocco's allies, particularly France, Spain and the United States, put pressure on Rabat to move the referendum issue forward and end the human rights abuses? Olaia Sagredo, a Spanish spokeswoman for The Association for the Families of Sahrawi Prisoners and the Disappeared, sees several reasons: "Whenever France and Spain become too vocal, Morocco simply threatens to open the floodgates and let North African immigrants stream into Europe. This terrifies them and they do everything they can to placate Rabat," she explains. "As for the US, they see Morocco as one of their few allies in the Arab world, particularly in the fight against terrorism, and they won't risk damaging the relationship."

A last reason finds its roots in economic expediency. Western Sahara is one of the world's leading phosphate producers and, in negotiations during the Madrid Accords, Spain ensured it would retain a large stake in the industry. To alienate Morocco and be denied access to the phosphate mines would be an enormous blow to Spanish interests.

The issue of the exploitation of Western Sahara's natural resources is contentious. According to Stephen Zunes, professor of politics and renowned Middle East expert at the University of San Francisco, "The UN did serve notice to the Moroccan government back in 2002, raising legal concerns regarding contracts being offered for oil exploration [and] questioning the legality of awarding such contracts as long as Western Sahara is recognised as a non-self-governing territory."

However, Morocco continues to try and engage with multinationals. Total Fina Elf is among those that have been shamed by NGOs and shareholder activists into beating a retreat from Western Sahara. Island Oil, listed on London's AIM index, remains one of the few companies with the temerity to continue operating under Morocco's auspices in the occupied territory.

Even Hong Kong has been dragged into the debate. A cargo vessel belonging to Jinhui Shipping, a subsidiary of Hong Kong-listed Jinhui Holdings, was recently observed in Laayoune harbour by the Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara. The crew was preparing to load a cargo of phosphate bound for New Zealand.

Raymond Ching, Jinhui vice president, explains that the ship, the Jin Cheng, was bought from another shipping line last year with a contract arranged by the previous owner that Jinhui had an obligation to fulfil.

"Being headquartered in Asia, we confess we knew nothing about Western Sahara. We've only had this one charter ... but now that we understand the issue we will not directly contract any more business out of there," Ching promises.

Back in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, where food and water are strictly rationed and children are inadequately nourished, it seems unconscionable that the likes of Island Oil put profit before the moral probity of their business dealings. At his home-in-exile of the last 30 years, Saleh finishes recounting the tale of his grandsons, the young shepherds Saeed and Hassan.

After being found and driven by car to the hospital in Rabuni - an eight-hour journey across the desert - Saeed died of his head injuries. Hassan, now six years old, is recovering well despite being considerably traumatised by the loss of his brother.

"One day Hassan will see our homeland liberated," says Saleh confidently. Shaking hands with the nearly-blind septuagenarian, I take leave from his tent and begin my journey back to the occupied territory. There I vow to fulfil my promise to the Sahrawi grandmothers and bury their flag in the Western Sahara sands. Who knows where the east wind will carry it when freed.



Image: Ivan Broadhead

**Mohamed Saleh (75) and Haria (8), grandfather and cousin of young shepherds Saeed and Hassan**