

JÁNOS BESENYŐ

WESTERN SAHARA

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János Besenyő
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RECOMMENDATION

I am fortunate enough to know the author of this book who was on duty in Western Sahara when I was serving as the Chief of Staff of the Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF). Even back then I considered it as a priority not just to send our soldiers to foreign countries but to process and channel their experiences to anyone who might benefit from them.

For peacekeeping and the involvement of the HDF in missions outside Hungarian borders are not just military or governmental interests, but important contributions to uphold peace and stability worldwide. We simply cannot forget that the concepts of security and the world itself have changed gravely and rapidly, therefore, we are no longer an independent island with an outside view on the more and more bloody conflicts of other countries and continents. The Republic of Hungary—due to its NATO and EU commitments—participates in a growing number of armed and unarmed peacekeeping and peace-managing operations. Therefore, I consider it as of great importance that a vast number of studies deals with such operations in order to help us gain a better knowledge of the outside world and to support us with credible information about the activity of our peacekeeping forces.

This volume gives a thorough overview of a still operating UN mission in Western Sahara. Also, this work fills in a niche, since this area—apart from a few minor articles—has not been covered yet. Since the Republic of Hungary has been deploying a small contingent for years—who has been tasked with classic peacekeeping duties—, this fact is rather surprising. Considering that one of the main duties of the Council on Geopolitics is to monitor the different crisis areas of the world, the timeliness of this study is completely verified.

The author includes his own experiences to give a thorough overview on the activities of the MINURSO. The book is based on those experiences and on a wide-range analysis of relevant sources. Also, it soon becomes obvious that the author was not satisfied to be familiar only with the information deriving from his line of duty, but aimed to understand the roots of the conflict. One of the many benefits of this case study is that someone unfamiliar with this topic will also be able to understand the aim, essence and hardships of this mission in Western Sahara.

As of today, the Hungarian foreign policy does not pay enough attention to the African continent, even though there is a lot to do over there. The world's poorest continent has to suffer under an increasingly great number of wars and armed conflicts. The EU's attention towards the region is already raised and the NATO is being involved in strategic logistics tasks aimed to support the African

Union peacekeeping mission in the Sudan. Meanwhile, the experts of security policy can only hope that a time will come when the different international organisations act together to solve the problems of Africa.

I do recommend this book of János Besenyő for anyone who is interested in understanding the hardships of Africa in detail.

Colonel General **Zoltán Szenes**
Former Chief of Staff
Hungarian Defence Forces

EDITOR'S PREFACE

Fortunately, interest in Africa-related issues and topics has been gradually on the rise in the last decades—and this is a global phenomenon. Unfortunately, not many pieces on Africa (books, journals, etc.) are available in Hungary, definitely, not by Hungarian authors. The journal *Afrika Tanulmányok* (Africa Studies in Hungary) and Publikon Publishers have the mission to change this situation and annually come out with more and more articles and volumes about different themes connected with the continent. Luckily, we find committed partners in achieving these aims.

We are delighted to be the publisher of the first English-language book of János Besenyő. He is that type of committed person who has been extensively writing on African topics, trying to channel his ground experiences into the Hungarian readers' circles. One of his decisive works is formulated in this volume, in which he thoroughly explores the historical background and the present-day situation of the conflict in Western Sahara. The area itself is full of interesting stories and tales—János Besenyő relies on these while in a very professional way arrives at certain significant conclusions, for instance, as far as the UN mission in Western Sahara and its potential future are concerned. He does this in a sophisticated and even-tempered manner, which, I think is one of the strengths of the book.

The author is a good photographer at the same time—he does have sharp eyes to notice the very details of life in the Sahara, among the local communities of the territories he visited. We had a difficult task to pick only a couple of his photos; we would have liked to publish another book only of these great moments and descriptions (hopefully, next time we will have the chance to continue this collaboration).

We are proud to present János Besenyő's monography on Western Sahara, as the first such book in the English language in Hungary. We hope that the readers will enjoy it, and wish that many more pieces on many more African countries and themes will follow so that people understand more about real Africa. These will surely allow them/us to look beyond the stereotypical images that are embedded in our everyday minds. Africa is much more to these; Africa deserves much more attention to discover its real values! Such attempts as János Besenyő's can help us open our eyes.

Pécs, 20 April 2009

István Tarrósy, M.Sc., M.A.

editor, executive editor of *Afrika Tanulmányok*
managing director of IDRResearch Ltd./Publikon Publishers

GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES – FLORA AND FAUNA

The area lies in North Africa, on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. It is bordered by Morocco in the north, Algeria in the east (they have 42 kms of common boundary) and Mauritania from the east and south. Its area is 266,000 square kilometres. Just like in most African countries, the borders were marked out by the colonial powers by ratifying different treaties, agreements. The borders of Western Sahara were regulated and marked out by the agreements signed by Spain and France in 1900, 1904 and 1912.¹

Its lowland area is plain, sandy and rocky, with a few hills in the southern and north-eastern parts. These hills are at an altitude of not more than 400 metres². Its lowest point is Sebjet Tah, 55 metres below sea-level, while the highest is a 721 metre high hill, which has no official name.

Western Sahara can be divided into three main regions.



Source: MINURSO

The north-eastern zone is a rocky desert (hamadas) spreading from the chains of the Atlas mountain to the Zemmour mountains. Mountain

chains of volcanic origin of different sizes and unique hanging rocks can be found here. Water is scarce in the area, there are only few scattered wells.

Despite the relative lack of water, many species of plants and animals live in the area. For example, the screwhorn antelope or kudu (*Addax nasomaculatus*), the Dama gazelle (*Gazella dama*), Dorcas gazelles (*Gazelle dorcas*),³ the African sand fox or pale fox (*Vulpes pallida*), sand foxes or Rueppel's fox (*Vulpes rueppeli*), the caracal or African Lynx (*Caracal caracal*), the African wildcat (*Felis silvestris*), the golden jackal (*Canis aureus*), and the desert hedgehog (*Hemiechinus aethiopicus*).

The most typical plant of the area is the acacia with large thorns, which can be considered the only indigenous species in the desert besides some variations of cacti.

Deriving tannin from this acacia, the plant is used for paint production by the locals. Due to its hardness, the wood can be used in a versatile way. The so-called Senegal Acacia (*Acacia senegal*) can also be found in the desert. Rubber arabicum is made from it by tapping.

The animals are quite difficult to observe as they move around mostly at dawn or late at night. The military observers can also see their footprints or gather information from the Moroccan soldiers and the descriptions of the Bedouins. Many of the animals living here are registered in the Red Book and are strictly protected. Nevertheless, both Moroccan soldiers and rich foreign tourists (mainly from Saudi Arabia and Yemen) hunt them without feeling any remorse.⁴

When on patrol in the area of Mehaires and Tifariti we met Saudi Arabian hunters, who were escorted by members of the Polisario on their antelope hunt. Antelopes and addaxes are abundant, though their number decreased during the war. Addax is a type of antelope which has totally adapted to the extreme climatic conditions of the desert. As it obtains its moisture need from the plants it usually eats, it drinks very little water. The average weight of the animal is approximately 135 kgs. According to the locals its meat is very tasty. As both the male and the female have a horn, they are very appealing trophies for foreign hunters. The hunters chase the animals on fast jeeps and eventually shoot the exhausted animal. As the addax is not afraid of humans because of its size the females protecting their calves even attack hunters, so it is easy to capture them.

Due to the intensive hunting, the number of addaxes in the Western Sahara is estimated to be 50.⁵ One of our patrols was lucky enough to see a small group of antelopes. He was notified by one of the Bedouins.

The second zone is called the area of the river by the locals because temporary rivers run through it. It is bordered by the Draa valley from the

north, and the valley of the Jat river from the west. The water gathers in these valleys during the short rainy seasons in the autumn. Due to the very high temperatures, water evaporates very quickly, so it never reaches the Atlantic.⁶

The Saguia el-Hamra (the Red River) can be found in the “river-zone”. The importance of this particular river is revealed in the fact that the region was named after it.⁷

Vegetation suitable for grazing is significant on the banks of the rivers and near Smara. The local inhabitants also grow barley and other crops.

The flora and fauna are a bit more versatile here than in the rocky territory called hamadas. Oases of different size offer some additional colours to the scenery. The size of the oases can vary from a few hundred square metres up to the size of a smaller village. Almost 75% of the people of the Sahara live in oases, where mostly palm trees (date palm and gingerbread tree), vegetables and many different types of crops are grown. The 10-15-metre-tall gingerbread tree (*Hyphaene thebaica*) is indigenous on the territory of Egypt, Sudan, Kenya and Tanzania, but due to the Arabic merchants it has naturalised in most parts of the oases of the Sahara. The fruit of the palm is the size of an apple and is orange in colour, its taste resembles gingerbread. The locals use it as a plant to substitute bread. Buttons are made from the hardcore of the plant, while mattresses and other household items from its fibre.

Date palm tree is well-known and represents the most important industrial plant of the desert as all of its parts can be utilised. The tree symbolises long life in Arabic culture even today. The tree can live even as long as 150 years. Apart from consuming its fruit, syrup, vinegar and alcohol are produced from it.

Furniture, baskets and other articles for personal use are made from its leaves, while the sweet juice tapped from the tree is used as a kind of refreshment.

One typical feature of the region, similarly to other parts of the Sahara, is that it can rain for hours over a small area but there is no sign of the rain even only a few hundred metres away. The desert flourishes after the rain and a lot of different kinds of flowers unknown to us grow from the ground. After a short blossoming period, however, they disappear until it starts raining again. In river valleys the Houbara bustard (*Chlamydotis undulata*) can be seen frequently. They are the size of a pheasant and have brown and white spots. They feed on small mammals and lizards. The area is certainly rich in insects: different species ranging from the rhinoceros beetle (*Oryctes nasicornis*) to the scarab (*Scarabaeus Sacer*) can be found here, which serve as food for other species.

The Jerboa and the Fennec fox (*Vulpes zerda*) are two typical small mammals of the desert there.

Jerboa (*Jaculus*) is a rodent similar to the cross-breeding of a mouse, a rat and a squirrel. It is the most typical representative of the 40 different types of rodent in the desert. To keep its temperature at an adequate level, it digs a tunnel system under the sand, where the temperature is 10-20 degrees cooler than outside. Mostly, the small animals move around and feed during the night. Europeans can see them when the locals try to sell them.

The desert fox (*Fennecus zerda*) is the smallest type of fox on earth; its weight is less than even 1-1.5 kgs. It is even smaller than an ordinary cat. The largest part of its body is its ear (15 cms). It is of cream colour with a blackish tail.

It is a nocturnal animal similarly to the majority of the animals of the desert. It hunts in groups, or with its family. Locals capture them by traps and try to sell them mostly to tourists. They can be seen frequently in the desert but they disappear when humans approach their territory. They are hostile during their mating period and also after their babies are born, and they can even attack humans. It is advisable not to buy these animals (jerboa, desert fox, lizards, etc), as they could spread diseases unknown to us.

Scorpion (*Scorpionida*) and Horned viper (*Cerastes cerastes*) are also widespread all over the desert. It is better to be cautious with them.

There are 30 known species of scorpion living in the Sahara. The military observers mostly meet the Black scorpion (3-8 cms in size) and the almost completely transparent Glassy scorpion (3-5 cms in size). The black is more dangerous and its bite can be lethal, but in most cases it causes paralysis.

Antidote can be found in the camps, which must be injected as quickly as possible after the bite. A couple of days prior to my arrival at the Mehaires camp, a Polisario soldier was bit by a scorpion. As the incident happened close to the camp, he received the antitoxin fairly quickly so there was no further complication and his life was saved.

The bite of the horned viper is even more dangerous. The snake can grow to a length of 1.5 metres. Its bite causes paralysis, heart spasm and eventually death. This is why it is advisable not to reach into any holes, to wear boots all the time, and check the clothes and the inside of the boots after waking up. (One morning the commander of the Smara sector found a horned viper in his room.) Antidote against vipers is available in all the camps.

Although, the areas along river banks provide better conditions (food, shelter, etc.) for the animals, the wall system built by the Moroccans makes the movement of larger animals impossible. Nevertheless, antelopes, jackals,

hyenas and larger mammals have been seen on the territories occupied by Morocco.

The third zone is called the Rio de Oro. This is an extremely plain area, interspersed with sand dunes. Due to its composition, the soil is unable to hold and store water, so the water gathers in the sub-soil, which makes it possible to dig wells in such areas.⁸

The monotony of the area is broken by the Dakhla Peninsula (formerly: Villa Cisneros) and the La Guerra. The desert here includes the coastline of Western Sahara (1,100 kms) and Mauritania (754 kms). Rainfall is very low but due to the humid air arriving from the ocean, conditions are favourable for a lot of plant and animal species and the migratory birds arriving from Europe, which spend the winter here.⁹ Along with other organisations, the Swiss Ornithological Institute, in autumn 2002, organised a scientific expedition to the coast of the Sahara and Mauritania, where research was carried out on migratory birds.

During the project 9,467 birds were captured, 55 of the species were ringed in Europe. According to the Swiss and other organisations involved in the observation of birds, today we have information about 209 bird species in Western Sahara. Most of them are migratory birds and only spend the period of autumn and winter on the coastline. Besides the migratory songbirds, many birds of prey, mostly different species of falcon live in the areas which are difficult to access. Recently, their number has decreased significantly, mainly due to nest-robbing.

The last habitats of Monk seals (*Monachus monachus*), which are on the verge of extinction can also be found in the area. Morocco has provided temporary protection for the known habitats of these seals (Cape Blanc Peninsula and the Dakhla National Park), thus, they are in relative security now. The fishermen of Laayoune said that they had seen seals several times on the coast and around the area of Tarfaya, near the coast. One even got entangled in their fishing net.

The only poisonous animal of the area is the Algerian rattle snake (*Coluber algirus*). It leads a concealed lifestyle so can be seen very seldom.

Golden jackals (*Canis aureus*), Desert foxes (*Fennecus zerda*), Sand cats (*Felis margarita*), Honey badgers (*Mellivora capensis*) and Dotted hyenas (*Hyaene hyaene*) must be mentioned among the animals living here. Antelopes also occur and a cheetah was also seen around Dakhla in 1999. The predator must have wandered over from the territory of Mauritania they have not been seen in the Western Sahara desert since the 1980s.

Around the coastline, apart from a few minor settlements, there are no living habitations. The majority of the people there earn for a living as fishermen or

by raising camels. Their number increases with the approximately 160,000 Moroccan fishermen, who work on the coastline temporarily in the summer and early autumn.¹⁰

Although I have not included it in any of the zones, there is a special desert environment—the area of the salty lakes (Saharan halophytics). This type of area is located around Bir Lahlou and the Mehaires patrol route in Mauritania. Places like this are called *chott* by the Arabs and some of the local nomads gain salt there which is so important for them.

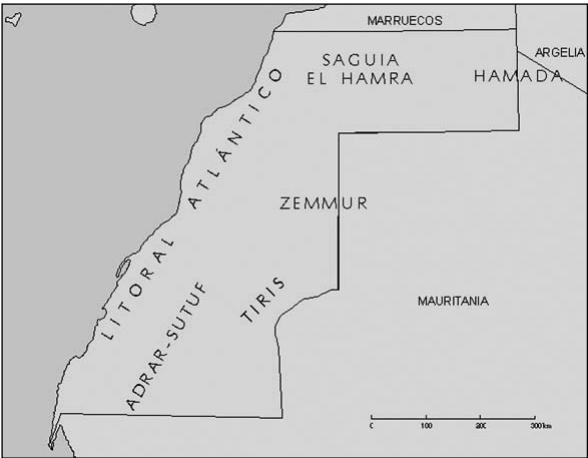
There are permanent and temporary salty lakes, which makes the salinity of the soil higher than in other parts of the desert. The salty lakes have no connection with the ocean, their water arrives from the rainfall and some underground sources.

The plants that grow here have adapted to the local conditions and learnt to tolerate the periodically changing salinity of the water. The salinity decreases after the rain and increases in dry periods. Very few species of algae exist in the water; they serve as food for the birds migrating over the area (flamingos, white headed ducks, etc.). A special sub-species of Jerboa—the four-toed jerboa—can only be found here.¹¹

The climate of the Sahara is continental; the winters are cold and dry, while the summers are extremely hot. The temperature can rise above 50 degrees in the shade. Due to the proximity of the ocean, the humidity is relatively high so the weather is humid and foggy. The average rainfall is merely 45 mms, even in Dakhla, which lies on the ocean shore.¹²

Wind is a major problem all over the territory of the Sahara as it carries the sand particles. It can cause skin irritation or inflammation of the eye. Thus, the locals always cover their head and face with a scarf. The most unpleasant of these winds is the windstorm called 'Irifi', which can cause a sandstorm merely by its strength. The wind arriving from the north-east is called 'Sirocco' by the Europeans. The Sirocco is extremely dry and hot and covers everything with sand. Visibility becomes extremely limited; it is reduced to 1 or 2 metres. The storms occur between October and March, but sometimes in the summer, though, not very frequently.

The following map shows other parts of Western Sahara:

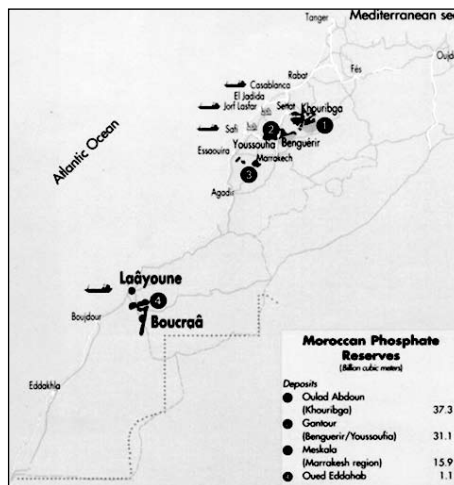


Source: www.arso.org

ECONOMY

In the north-west corner of Africa phosphate deposits were discovered in the 1960s by the Spanish—their exploitation was launched by the Moroccan Government. These reserves provide one of the best quality phosphate of 80% purity, therefore, mean significant revenues to Morocco, which had been among the first phosphate producers and sellers of the world. After the USA it was Morocco where the largest amount of phosphate (22 million metric tons) was produced in 2002.¹

The map below shows Moroccan and Saharan phosphate reserves:



Source: Philip A. Szczesniak:
The Mineral Industries of Morocco and Western Sahara. 2002.

The mines in Western Sahara are important for Morocco also because the conveyor system between the mines and seaports makes transportation extremely cost-effective. Phosphate from the mines in Khourigba, Morocco, is transported to ports by rail making production more costly than that in Western Sahara.²

Mines in Morocco and Western Sahara are supervised by the OCP (Office Chérifien des Phosphates), which is responsible for everything from operating mines to market research and sale. However, 35% of the proprietary rights of mines still belong to Spanish companies.³

Annual phosphate production in the Sahara region is around 2 million metric tons only and the reserves allow continuous and profitable mining for several more decades.

According to the latest research findings, Western Sahara is extremely rich in minerals, particularly in iron ore, uranium, titanium, natural gas and oil.⁴ Some geologists say that vanadium is also abundant in this territory—enough to consider its mining, which then would result in high profit.⁵

The Spanish found oil already in the 1960s, however, they did not attempt to launch offshore drilling due to the underdevelopment of the area in economic terms.⁶

Under the seafloor of coastal waters several American and French companies (Kerr-McGee and Total Fina Elf) conducted oil research and their findings indicate rich reserves off the coasts of Western Sahara.⁷ However, oil production was impossible to launch because of the objections of the Polisario and several other organisations. Companies hope for settling the problems related to the disputed territories and plan to start oil production only afterwards. Nevertheless, as a result of the lobby activities of several Norwegian human rights organisations and because of certain economic factors, the Norwegian company Skagen Vest, which had been financially involved in Kerr-McGee company sold its shares in 2003 since it had no intention even to provide indirect support to Moroccan efforts aimed at oil production in the Sahara. The firm was the biggest Norwegian shareholder of the company through its 100,000 shares. In his press release one of the company CEOs Kristian Falnes explained the decision with the highly risky policy of the American company. That is why his company sold these risky shares with minimum profit. The current value of the shares is over 5 million USD. Naturally, this did not shatter Kerr-McGee Company. Its employees continue working in Western Sahara in spite of the fact that exploitation of natural reserves in territories occupied by another state is prohibited by international law.⁸

One thing is for sure, the Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara (NSCWS) has threatened all companies attempting to conduct oil research or production in Western Sahara with Moroccan license with economic boycott and political measures (including negative press campaigns). This organisation has already inflicted fairly serious moral and economic damage to Norwegian TGS-NOPEC oil research company, which has made several research drills off the Western Sahara coast. Hundreds of newspaper articles were published, radio and TV reports were broadcasted on the company generating a rather negative PR and inflicting economic damage.

To make the situation even more complex the Polisario has also offered oil concessions to another consortium (British-Australian Fusion Oil&Gas), therefore, only after the settlement of the rule over the disputed territory the winner of the competition for the oil production in the region can be announced.⁹

Moreover, the coastal waters comprise one of the richest fish areas in the world and fishing right is also disputed by the opposing parties.¹⁰ Spanish and Moroccan ships were confiscated by Polisario guerrillas several times when those had no license from them. When in December 2002 a tanker sank at the Spanish coast a lot of Spanish fishermen lost their jobs due to water pollution. Both the Moroccan Government and the Polisario proposed the fishermen to use the territorial waters for fishing. Moroccans also have major revenues from fishing and processing sea fish.¹¹

Fishing off the Sahara coast has always been a major industry off the Sahara coast line although fishing has been conducted in coastal waters.¹² Local fishermen using small, home-made fishing boats (dories) usually went for 2-3-day-long trips to catch shrimps, mussels and various kinds of fish (sardine, mackerel, tuna, dolphin, etc.). Algae, kelps and seaweeds were also harvested for catering and other purposes. In fact local people ventured to the ocean only in the spring and summer months while during the stormy winter period they did some other jobs.

Until 1914 the right to conduct large-scale fishing belonged to Spanish, French and Portuguese companies and only after the first fish processing factory was founded by the Spanish was the catch purchased from local fishermen who started exploring areas farther off the coast in order to have a better living. The real development began in 1927 when a shipyard was established by the Spanish, where 16-24-metre-long trawlers were manufactured mostly by local workers. Those ships had not yet storage rooms that would have allowed keeping the fish alive, therefore, those trawlers were unfit for longer fishing trips although the processing of the catch began right on board.

Not until the occupation of Western Sahara did local people develop fishing industry as they were happy with opportunities provided by the Spanish. Naturally, in the early 1960s more and more foreign fishing boats (Norwegian, Italian, Danish, French, etc.) started to arrive into the region although they were kept away from their privileged areas by the Spanish for a while.

Changes took place when Morocco occupied the territories and it was realised that one of the richest fisheries is off the Sahara coasts. At first Moroccan fishermen used only small boats (korb) without engine, in the shallow coastal waters.

On a boat usually 12 fishermen worked using mostly dragnets and hook-traps. By the late 1970s the majority of boats had been equipped with 25HP engines, which made work much easier.

It is fairly difficult to provide exact figures on the number of boats. The ones below are from Moroccan registers:

1981-1982	3,600	boats
1983	4,130	boats
1984	4,930	boats
1985	5,370	boats
1988	5,380	boats
1992	8,000	boats

Nearly 75% of these boats were concentrated in the Atlantic coast and the remaining 25% in the Mediterranean. In fact, the number of boats grew significantly in the 1980s when in several regions profitable octopus fishing (*Octopus vulgaris*) could be conducted. Plastic containers tied to concrete blocs are placed on the seafloor and these traps are checked every 2-3 days on the average. Such traps are planted in 100 metres from the coast line but some of them can be as far as 30 kilometres—from a few metres' depth to as much as 20 metres. Some ships regularly check nearly 3,000 octopus traps a week and make good profit although this is a seasonal job only. The same fishermen use lobster traps and several kilometre-long hook traps planted along the routes of migratory fish schools. Collecting sponge and algae is also part of their normal business, which then are sold either on local market places or to food companies (alga Agar-Agar).

Moroccan State fishing fleet has four types of vessels:¹³ small fishing boats (doires, korb, etc.) catching mainly schools of sardine, sardella, or mackerel near the surface. The boats have 15-25-strong crews using 250-400-metre long and 40-50-metre deep nets. The boats start work in the afternoons or evenings and finish the next morning.

In 1927 there were only 27 such boats under Moroccan flag operating between Tangier and El Jadida. After World War 2, however, rich fisheries were discovered in the region of Safi, Essaouira and Agadir making the number of fishing boats increase to 180 in a short period of time.

Local waters rapidly got exhausted, thus, after the occupation of Western Sahara Moroccan fishermen relocated their centre of activities to the ports of Tan-Tan and Layoune (El-Aaiun). There was a steady increase in the number of trawlers, and in 1975 the fleet counted 269 boats. In 1997,

however, there were merely 323 boats of such types since the Government intended to reduce their number and supported the commissioning of modern boats.

The ageing small-boat fleet is some 40 years old and since shipyards manufacturing such vessels were closed down there was only repair and maintenance work done on these boats.

The second type contains more up-to-date motor vessels which use trawler nets along the coastline. On the boats with 10-15 strong crews work starting from around 2 in the morning and returning to port late afternoon. Some of these boats are capable of cruising even for a week and are equipped with freezers to store the catch. However, such boats can only operate over sandy seafloor and lower their nets twice a day (each takes 3-5 hours).

Currently, there are 331 such boats in the Moroccan fishing fleet, 80% of which operate off the Sahara coasts.

There is a group of small (8-10-metre-long) motor boats capable of spending about 3 days in the open sea. These boats were first built in the 1930s and they were designed for catching fish farther off the coast line. Due to specific requirements the boats with 13-14-strong crews are equipped with freezers allowing the fishermen to keep their catch fresh. Currently, the Moroccan fishing fleet has 920 boats, 96% of which operate along the Atlantic coast line (primarily off the Sahara coast).

In the fourth (mixed) category all those boats are considered that use both types of net. Currently, the Moroccan fishing fleet has 56 such boats.

Officially, the state-run fishing fleet was established as late as 1972 and 4 big fishing ships were stationed in the port of Las Palmas. After former Spanish Sahara with its fish-rich coastal waters taken by Morocco the Government submitted its first project on exploiting fisheries. In the framework of the programme fishermen were provided long-term subsidised loans to assist them with buying boats, together with the ban on foreign ships from a 120-kilometre-wide zone off the coast.¹⁴

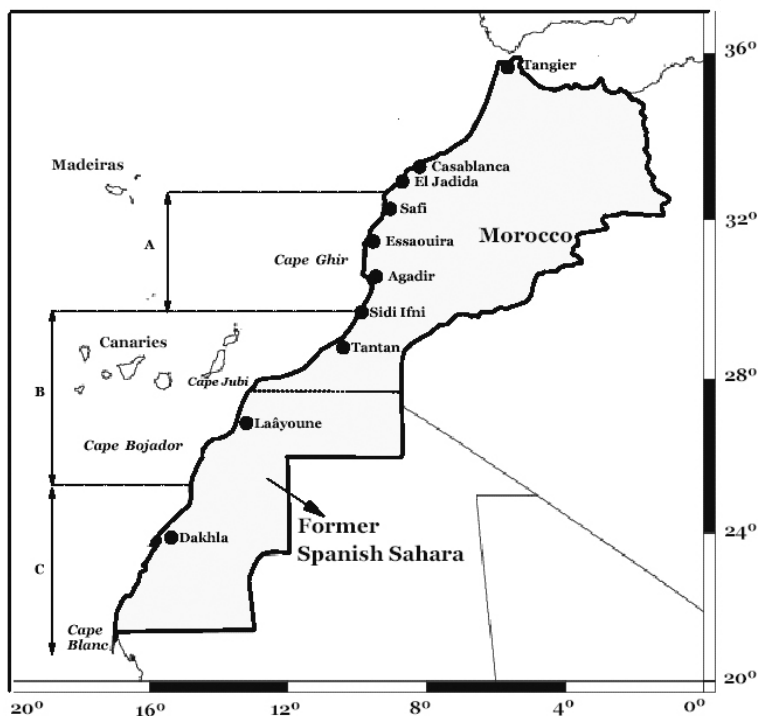
In 1981 fishing was one of the top industries of Moroccan economy, therefore, the Ministry of Fishing Industry was established and plans for building new seaports and food factories for processing fish in the Sahara region was approved.¹⁵

The Moroccan fishing fleet stationed mostly in foreign ports (Las Palmas, Abidjan and Dakar) between 1972 and 1986, then, in reconstructed seaports of Agadir, Tan-tan, and Layoun.

Most of the catch of the fleet (87%) comes from the Sahara region during the 4-6-week-long fishing season.

Most of these ships are modern, equipped with radar, sonar, freezers and other technologies, allowing continuous fishing and processing of catch simultaneously.

The following figure shows fisheries off the Moroccan coast lines and seaports:



Source: Mohammed Baddy-Sylvie Guenette: *The Fisheries off the Atlantic coast of Morocco 1950-1997*

Most of the catch consists of small, so-called mass fish (sardine, sardella, mackerel, etc.). In 1950 the annual Moroccan catch was only 110,800 tons and later it increased to 485,500 tons a year. 85% of small fish is sardine (*Sardinia pilchardus*), and mackerel is the second most frequent type. 90% of the mackerel catch is made up by common mackerel (*Scomber japonicus*) while the amount of Atlantic mackerel (*Scomber scombrus*) is insignificant since its habitats are located more to the south.

The amount of catch significantly increased: while in the 1960s it was merely 4,100 tons a year this amount grew to 14,000 tons per annum

in the 1990s. The amount of various kinds of octopus was some 24,000 tons a year.¹⁶

Also 12,000 tons of different sorts of lobster, shrimp and mussel (black mussel, oyster, etc.) were caught and sold annually.

Naturally, it is not only Moroccan fishermen who do fishing in these waters as both the European Union and other countries lobby in Morocco for licences of fishing in the region.¹⁷ Exercising fishing rights is a delicate issue and triggered several conflicts between Moroccan authorities and ships under foreign flags. Thanks to their more advanced technology foreign ships return home with more catch than locals. This becomes clear when analysing data: e.g. in 1990, when Moroccan ships caught 402,200 tons, foreign fishermen caught 998,400 tons. These are only the official statistics, which do not include illegal fishing, which is very frequent in the region.¹⁸ Spanish fishing fleets caught 255,000 tons of fish making up 65% of the Moroccan catch. This may be the cause why fishing in territorial waters was limited or banned for Spanish ships several times by the Moroccan Government. Fishing boats violating the regulation were forced to local ports where they were confiscated.¹⁹

Besides fishing industry sea transportation, including seaports (Layoune, Dakhla), was also top priority in the development policy, partly in the framework of agreements with Senegal. The heads of the two governments—Mohamed VI and President of Senegal Abdoulaye Wade—concluded an agreement at the French-Africa Summit in Paris in February 2002 on the establishment of a new transportation company.

Since there are grave ethnic conflicts between Senegal and Mauritania, which was regarded as supporter of the Polisario in the region, triggering several armed clashes Moroccans provide a comprehensive economic and political support to Senegal.²⁰ A clear sign of economic relations is the fact that after Senegalese air company Air Afrique had gone bankrupt, new national air company Air Senegal was established with Moroccan support. Royal Air Maroc is the majority owner of the company (51%). Common projects include the building of a Dakar–Morocco highway across the occupied Sahara region. By now Senegal has become the most loyal ally of the Moroccan Government in Africa, which is very important for Morocco as the majority of Western African countries recognised SADR, the Government of Western Sahara, created by the Polisario.²¹

Windy and barren desert may seem valueless, nevertheless, the Moroccan Government and the University of Kassel, Germany, elaborated a joint project on the utilisation of wind energy. Scientists have discovered that Southern

Morocco—including occupied Western Sahara regions—is the windiest area of the world.

Since the majority of the relatively small population is city dweller the population density is extremely low and there cannot be any obstacles to constructing wind farms as opposed to Europe, where higher population density causes various problems (opposition of local population, etc.).

The project was named “Desert Wind”. According to Mr Gregor Czisch, University of Kassel, wind is a potential source of energy for the next generation and in the Sahara energy can be produced at a much lower price than the energy purchase price in Germany. At Sahara wind farms energy can be extracted at mere 4.5 Eurocents per kilowatt while the cheapest option in Germany is at 6.5 Eurocents a kilowatt.

Moroccan scientist Khalid Benhamou, involved in the project states that along the roughly 2,000-km-long coastline some 2-4 Megawatts of energy can be produced on a square kilometre. Accordingly, the annual production on average can be more than 1,000 Terrawatts which is half of the EU energy consumption. The implementation of the project would begin in Tarfaya but in Western Sahara wind farms could be constructed only after the final settlement of disputed Sahara territories is signed. The programme can offer extremely tempting economic opportunities for the participants.²²

Another seemingly bizarre but very profitable economic activity can be connected with the area of sand dunes in some 250 kilometres from Tarfaya. However strange it may seem, the Spanish Government pays good money for the fine sand delivered from this area to the beaches of the Canary Islands. Several ships leave the port of Layoune and sell their loads, which are valueless for the local people, to companies in tourist industry.²³

Agriculture in the area is minimal: arable lands and oases, where fruit (dates) and some vegetable production is dominant, makes up a mere 5% of total production. Another 19% of the region is suitable for pasturage of camels, sheep and goats, done mainly by nomads.²⁴

Yet another significant part of the population is involved in handcraft and home industry. Using semi-precious stones and remains of stones of animals beautiful jewellery is made which is sold mainly to tourists. Silverworks and leather-craft are also traditional trades. Although living standards in the occupied territories are well below the Moroccan average, still, it is higher than of people in Polisario-controlled territories. Nowadays, tourism began to develop, however, due to the unsettled status quo organised tourism industry could emerge only in the territories occupied by Morocco. Nevertheless, some “adventurers” take the risk to venture into the so called “free territories”.²⁵

The majority of foreign investors come from France and Spain because both historic and economic relations between firms from these European countries and Western Sahara remained.

In accordance with the provisions of the current ceasefire agreement, and decision of the United Nations, Morocco is not allowed to build roads or exploit the natural resources of the country until the final settlement of the status quo.²⁶

This provision of the agreement is, however, frequently ignored—for example in the Guerguerat region near the Mauritanian border a road was built with the involvement of the armed forces and the construction of fishing villages is also in progress along the Western Sahara coastline.²⁷

To date 6 such villages had been built, and in the 2002 regional budget resources for another 6 settlements were earmarked.

The reason is that in the seas rich in fish some 140,000 Moroccan fishermen work temporarily who stay on the Western Sahara coast during the fishing season as they are unable to make a living in Morocco.²⁸ In spite of their merely USD 7-a-day wage they support their families in Morocco. Besides the existing fish processing factories (Layoune and Dakhla) operating at full capacity further factories are planned to be built.²⁹

As the above data clearly indicate, Morocco gained significant economic opportunities through the occupation of Western Sahara. For this and some other reasons (nationalism, Berber separatist movements, etc.), it does not intend to return the area to the SADR.³⁰ Therefore, local inhabitants can expect only partial autonomy within Morocco as the Moroccan armed forces will never withdraw from Western Sahara voluntarily.

SOCIETY

The Saharawian social structure is similar to that of the other nomadic or partially-settled tribes living in the Sahara. The most fundamental agency of society is the family. Families in blood relation constitute a tribe (Fakhd or gabila), the leader of which has special rights in organising and directing the life of his tribe.¹ The leading position (sheikh) is mostly hereditary, passing from father to son, while members of the family or the tribe belong to different classes on the basis of their birth or occupation. It is possible to pass from one class to another based on individual talent but it happens very rarely. However, marriage between a man and a woman coming from different classes is practically impossible.²

Saharawian men consider their pipe as a status symbol. They are made of several different metals, but all men strive to have one of silver.

Locals constitute more than **twenty major tribes**, which can be divided into three main groups: **Ouled Delim**, **Reguibat** and **Tekna**. Beside these there were minor tribes in occasional alliance or at occasional wars with each other. Though maintaining a rather loose relationship with each other these tribes had substantial autonomy on their own territories. For this reason a Spanish chronicler once mentioned them as having a lifestyle of complete anarchy. Alexander Scott was the first foreigner to write about the nomads living in this territory, about their social life, and he was the one who mentioned them by their names such as: Reguibat, Taoubalt, Mejjat, Izarguien, Ouled Delim, Arousien, Ouled Tidirarin, Skarna, etc.³

As the colonists focused their attention on the free territories to be colonised more and more people arrived to map the region and to make favourable trade deals there. Colonels Leopold Panet and Faidherbe, who arrived at the region in 1850, were commissioned by the French Government to assess the strength of the local tribes and to maintain friendly relationship with the most important tribal leaders for the interests of France.⁴

A couple of years later Joachim Gatelle toured the region inhabited by the Tekna tribes and prepared a very detailed description, which the French later made good use of. The Spanish strived for maintaining friendly relationship with coastal tribes (Ouled Delim, Ouled Bou Sba, Ait Moussa and Imraguen) and they even entered into official agreements and contracts with some of them. At the end of the 1800s French Camille Douls visited the majority of the west Saharan region meeting other tribes such as Tadjakant, Mechdouf and Ouled Sidi Mohamed. The writer as a member

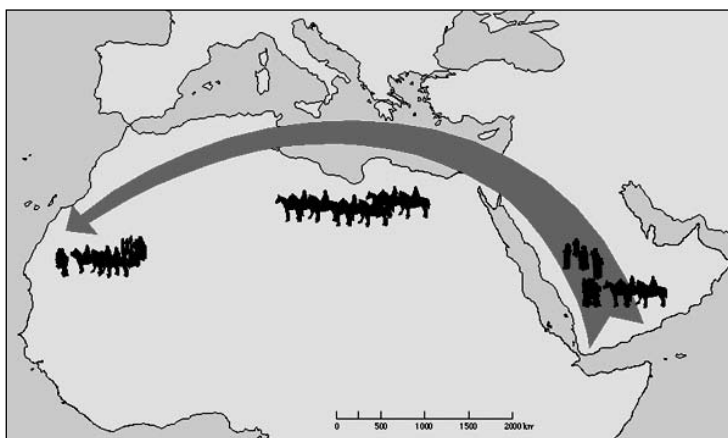
of a Tidrarin caravan experienced an attack of the Ouled Delim tribe (1887), who besides shepherding also dealt with slave trade and looting caravans.⁵

The Saharawian tribes are not all of Arabic origin as the Arabic tribes occupying the region mixed with local Berber tribes.⁶

Nevertheless, there remained some relatively clean blooded Berber tribes like the majority of the Reguibat tribal union, originating from the **Sanhaja Berbers**, who occupied the region before the Arab conquest. Later they accepted groups of Arabic descent, but Berber traditions are exceptionally strong both in their language and in their culture.⁷

The descendants of the **Makuil** tribe (Beni Hassan tribe) and tribes like Ouled Delim, Ouled Arousien and Ouled Bou Sba arriving from the area of present-day Yemen in the 13th century are among the clean-blooded Arab tribes.

The following map shows the migration route of the Arabic tribes arriving in the Sahara:



Source: Besenyő János: *A nyugat-szaharai kérdés és az ENSZ által vezetett békefenntartó misszió (MINURSO) tevékenysége* (Geopolitikai Tanács Közhasznú Alapítvány, Budapest, 2007. p. 18.)

Tribes of Arab origin are very proud of their roots and clean blood. For example, the members of the Ouled Delim tribe can trace back their origin as far as Delim, the son of the supposed founder of the Beni Hassan tribe.⁸ They are the most populous tribe in Western Sahara and they consider themselves the cleanest blooded Arabs in the Sahel region.

The tribes and the different unions were organised on a regional basis, therefore most tribes of the Sahara still live and migrate with their animals within the same area to the present day. The territories of the clean-blooded Arab tribes were referred to as the land of the whites i.e. “*Trab el Beidan*” although this area was further divided into smaller regions.⁹ The most famous of these was the “*Sahel*” which was later completely occupied by the Spanish, who called the natives Ahel el-Sahel i.e. “the people of the Sahel” after the name of the region.¹⁰

Having examined the regional aspects of the Saharawians it is also interesting to look at the typical occupations they pursued.

Some tribes were mainly soldiers and in return for their armed assistance smaller tribes paid a kind of tax (*debiha*). These tribes provided armed escort for the caravans, though in case a rival tribe was commissioned to do the task they would attack and attempt to rob the traders not employing them. These tribes were known as “the people of arms”.¹¹

Tribes of this category were the following:

- Reguibat Sarg
- Reguibat Sahel
- Izarguien
- Ait Lahsen
- Arosien
- Oulad Delim
- Yagout
- Ait Musa Oulad Ali
- Azouafit
- Ait Usa
- Oulad Bou Sbaa

Tribes that were conquered or forced to pay tax had the common name (*znaga* or sometimes *lahma*) and although they were not slaves they had a very similar status to the Helotes in the military state of Sparta. Stronger tribes would often attack and rob the znaga tribes with the pretext of a military exercise in order to practise their fighting skills and weapons handling. The word znaga comes from the Sanhaja Berbers and it denoted the Berber ruling class before the Arabs. The meaning of the word was slightly modified in the 15th and 16th centuries and the Spanish used it for the non-Arabic, but Berber origin nomads who did not adopt the **Hassania** dialect, but preserved their mother tongue. Later the word lost its ethnic

meaning and was only used in connection with tribes that had the status of slaves or that were tax payers.¹²

People of znaga status were neither allowed to carry weapons officially in the presence of members of superior tribes, nor to sit in the middle among their guests in their own tents. This was a very serious offence among the people of the Sahara. Subordinate tribes would often pay for the protection with animals or forced labour (*horma*).¹³

Mostly the smaller tribes living along the coastline belonged to the znaga, like:

- Foicat
- Imeraguen
- Le Menasir
- Meyat
- Lamiar
- Oulad Bou Aita
- Oulad Abdeluahed
- Ouled Tidirarin

Some tribes whose members studied the Qur'an all their lives and worked as teachers of the religion were referred to as "*zuaia*s". Members of these tribes were called "people of the book" (*as ahel ktub*). These tribes had high esteem and possessed deep respect. Nevertheless, stronger tribes made attempts to suppress them from time to time. That happened to the Ouled Tidirarin tribe, which after several years of desperate fight became tax payer of the Ouled Delim tribe in the 18th century, thereby losing their position among the religious tribes became znaga.¹⁴ Ahel Berical¹⁵ and Tendega belong to the "zuaia"s but there are some tribes along the coast which are also members of this group, like Kenta and Terquez.¹⁶

In order to avoid the taxpaying status some tribes tried to prove their Arabic descent, therefore, they would manipulate their family trees to get the honourable "*chorfa*" status (descendant of the Prophet). This, of course, led to a boom in the industry of pedigree forging, which used to be fashionable in Hungary, too (i.e. proving non-existing nobility or sheepskin).

The following belong to the Chorfa tribes:

- Reguibat Sarg
- Reguibat Sahel
- Arosien
- Oulad Bou Sbaa

- Ahel Sheikh Ma El Ajnin
- Filala
- Toubalt

The tribes of Arabic origin (descendants of the Beni Hassan tribe) had the status of free fighters which meant the highest level in the traditionally weapon-using Saharawian society. Although they also mixed with Berber tribes during their history, they are still regarded as clean-blooded Arab tribes.

They are the following:

- Oulad Delim
- Tekna
- Escarna
- Oulad Gailan
- Oulad Lab
- Chenagla

Members of the Tekna tribe live mainly in South Morocco, in an area spreading from the Anti-Atlas Mountain to Saguia el Hamra. They consider themselves descendants of the **Lemtula** (Berber) tribe and the Makuils. Because of the latter they are also listed among the clean-blooded Arabs. The Lemtula tribe had already lived in the Oued Noun region, which later became the centre of the Tekna tribal union, by the time of the arrival of the first Makuil groups (1218). The tribe following a nearly two-century fight finally assimilated into a group of the Beni Hassan thereby forming a new tribal union named Tekna.¹⁷

During the centuries the tribal union was divided into two opposing groups:¹⁸

1. Ait Yemel “El Gazzi”

2. Ait Atzman (Ait Bella)

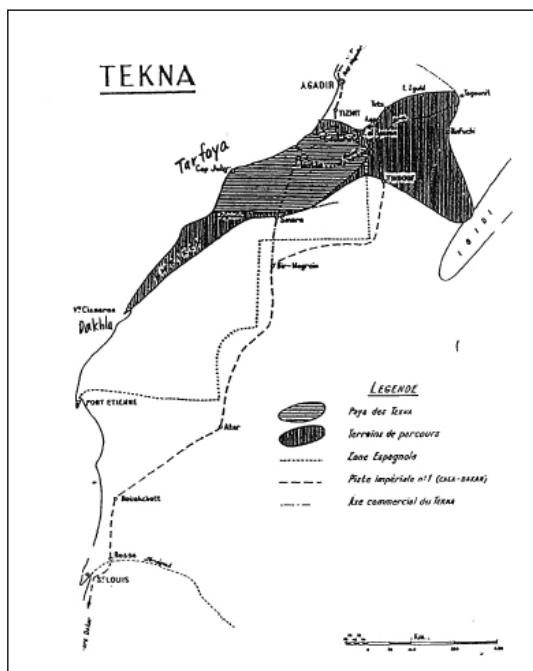
1. Ait Yemel:

- Ait Lahsen
- Izarguien
- Ait Musa Ould Ali
- Yagout

2. Ait Bella:

- Azouafit
- Ait Usa
- Ait Iasin
- Ait Ibrahim
- Ait Ahmed

The map illustrates the area occupied by the tribe and its taxpayers:



Source: Gaudio: Les populations du Sahara occidental, p. 103.

The **Izarguien** was the third biggest tribe in the region of Western Sahara and the biggest within the Tekna tribal union. Today, they are still nomads dealing mainly with shepherding (keeping camels) and trade. Their territory extends from Tislatin (south of El Aiun) to the northern part of River Draa, though by now they have moved into several towns of the Sahara (El Aaiun, Smara, etc.).¹⁹

The **Ait Lahsen** tribe is the second biggest member within the tribal union. They live mainly in South Morocco (Tan-Tan), in the northern part of Western Sahara and in Algeria.²⁰ The Spanish highly esteemed their belligerence and employed great numbers of them in their army.²¹

They are members of the Tekna tribal union. Though they mainly dealt with shepherding, horse-breeding, and doing military (Ait Oussa) service, they had tribes which became known as traders. Members of the **Azouafit** tribe were famous all over the Sahara as traders and caravan leaders. Their

caravan leaders travelled in Essaouira (El-Kouz), Timbouktou, Walata, Taoudenni, Chenguitti and most of the countries of Black Africa (Senegal, Ivory Coast, Gabon, etc.).

After thorough education the merchants sent their children to foreign countries and cities as their representatives, where they, after getting acquainted with the local situation, took part in organising local economic life. They traded mainly with horses, tobacco and wool, but they conducted trafficking in gold and slave for the Tichit and Oualata (Sudanese) tribes. Some members of this group also carried out courier services for the Sultan of Morocco and other higher or lower ranking local leaders.

Since as traders they could get into Algeria and other parts of the Turkish Empire without any difficulty the consignments they were commissioned with were usually delivered to the addressees. The service they provided is chronicled in contemporary Arabic historical sources such as the *Tarik el Fettach* the *Tarikh be Sudan*.²²

Evidently, they were not the only traders in the desert, because their relatives, the **Ait Lahsen** tribe was a serious rival posing a threat to their interests. This tribe sold animals both of their own breeding and bought from other tribes to the Spanish and the French.²³

The **Ouled Bou Sba** was also a trading tribe transporting tea, gunpowder and fire arms from Morocco and trading them in for dates in the area of Mauritania²⁴

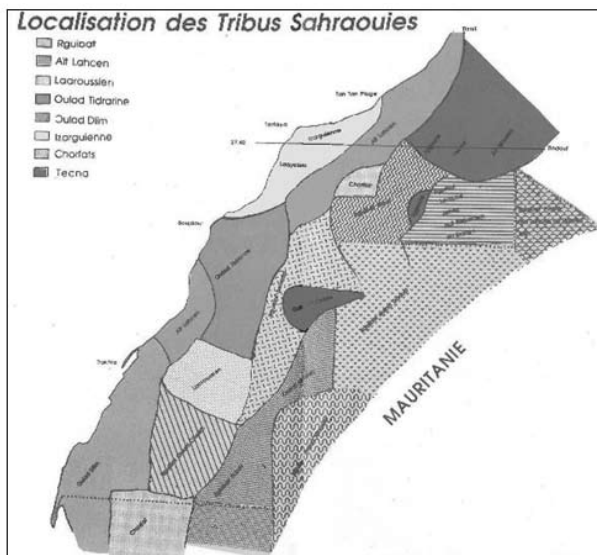
Members of the **Kounta** tribe besides shepherding also monopolised the salt trade on the greater part of the Sahara. The French recruited their Arabic *gendarmier* (**Goumier**) of frightful fame, also used as military support, from among them.²⁵

Members of the **Tagant** tribe were mostly farmers, who traded in their produce of barley and millet in Atar or Saint-Louis (French forts in Mauritania) for salt, dates and camels.

In Saharawian society the members of the **Imraguen** tribe pursued the most peaceful occupation, making a living exclusively from fishing for centuries.²⁶ They live in the D'Arguin National Park (Mauritania) where they fish on coastal waters. About two hundred families constitute the tribe which lives in four fishing villages. The national park is on the list of UNESCO World Heritage and there have been considerations to move the fishermen from the place. Since they live in a very closed community and they have no other skills apart from fishing the WWF and the FIBA (Foundation for the Banc D'Arguin), in close co-operation with the Mauritanian Government, worked out a programme to preserve the traditional fishing and tribal life.

The tribes introduced above present only a relatively narrow cross-section of the Saharawian tribes. There are approximately 120 minor and major tribes in the region of the Western Sahara, which are related to each other live separately though.

The map below shows the major tribal areas:



Source: Royaume du Maroc, Ministère de l'Intérieur et de l'Information: Référendum au Sahara, Recueil de textes et de cartes. pp. 176-177.

Beside the tribal leaders who represented the executive power there was an advisory council called Djemma which was made up of the delegates of various tribes. This council was dissolved without a trace with the creation of the Polisario.

At war time a **war council** was established in order to fend off external threat. When the community was divided by internal conflicts like the more than thirty-year-long war between the tribes of Reguibat and Tadjakent,²⁷ or the disputes about the use of wells, the **Council of Fourty (Ait Arbajn)** was established.²⁸ This organisation, which none of the neighbouring countries ever employed or even was aware of, always had a job to do because the tribes were very likely to solve their disputes with the use of weapons, and also stronger tribes liked looting smaller and weaker ones.²⁹

English explorer Alexander Scott was visiting the region when the Mejjat and the Izerguine tribes unsuccessfully tried to protect their areas from the Ouled Delim warriors (1810).³⁰

Leopold Panet recorded about the Reguibat tribe that constant fighting was their natural element. So, it happened that two tribes while at war with each other joined forces to rob the Ouled Bou Sbaa living in their vicinity.³¹

Another specific office that the Saharawians had was one which we today would call an ambassador (**kafir**). It was a person delegated and authorised by the tribes to officially represent them at the neighbouring tribes.

It is interesting to know that the women of Western Sahara as opposed to the tradition of the neighbouring countries take part in the work in several ways. For example, in Mauritania it would be impossible for a woman to milk the animals while among the Saharawian people it is a woman's job. Nowadays, women have a very important role in society because the number of men living in the refugee camps is very small. As a result, they have to do jobs which were considered to be men's responsibility earlier.³²

To this day camels have a very high value for the locals. The possession of a camel is a kind of status symbol in society. Even though the number of nomads have decreased considerably there are still Saharawians possessing herds of several hundred animals. The price of a camel is nearly 10-12,000 dirham (USD 1,000-1,200), and it still happens that on signing the marriage contract the negotiated "price" of the bride is paid in camels.³³

The Saharawians are proud of their origin and although they still keep in evidence where they come from, the tribal ties are much looser today especially among town dwellers and also because of the different ways of living they lead.

This is due to the fact that the Moroccans forced the majority of the Saharawians who had led a nomadic life for centuries to settle down in cities. There may be a slight similarity to the gipsy minority in Hungary who do not live by their old living standards and laws any more, but the norms and laws accepted by the majority of society still do not have enough influence on them. That is they do not apply their old laws any more, but they have not "mastered" the new ones yet.

Although the majority of the Saharawians have settled down in the towns with the lack of stable job opportunities they just increase the number of those who live on social aids. When the locals made a living from herding and trade the number of able-bodied men receiving social aid was minimal, while today the majority of men living in towns are unemployed. Extensive unemployment soon results in a state where unemployment is accepted and

work and the old way of life devalue. As a result, people living on social aid become more vulnerable (financially and politically) since they are unable to keep themselves up without social support.

Saharawians speak the **Hassaniya dialect** of Arabic, but since the occupation of the region they have mostly used the Moroccan Arab dialect.³⁴ A lot of them also use Spanish, the language of the former colonists, and thanks to state education the number of French speakers has considerably increased recently.³⁵

The majority of the population is Sunni but there are some Shiites and some Christians (mostly Catholic) among them. Saharawians are characterised by a high degree of religious tolerance both within and outside their communities.

The estimated population of the Saharawians living under Moroccan rule is 90,000, but there are about 120,000 refugees in Algerian camps (Tindouf) and an additional 30-40,000 abroad in different countries. However, Polisario leaders think, if they gain their independence and all Saharawians return home, at least there could be 750,000 inhabitants.³⁶

THE HISTORY OF THE REGION BEFORE THE ARRIVAL OF THE EUROPEANS

In prehistoric times the climate of the region provided fairly good living conditions for the Negroid and Berber tribes living there and mainly dealing with animal grazing (period between 5000 BC and 2500 BC). Only rock paintings and a couple of beautifully carved rocks remain after them (Smara, Bir Lahlou, etc.). These depict elephants, giraffes, buffalos, rhinoceroses and Negroid people.¹

The desertification of the area was already in an advanced state by the 3rd millennium BC, which saw the beginning of the southward migration of the Negroid tribes lasting as long as the first century AD. That time the Negroid **Bafur** and **Sarakolle** tribes were replaced by the **Sanhaja tribal alliance** (the **Lentuna**, the **Gudula** and the **Massufa** Berber tribes), and according to contemporary Egyptian sources they were of “Ibero-Mauritanian” type that is light complexioned with fair hair.²

Around 1000 BC Phoenician settlers colonised the Atlantic coasts of present Morocco where they controlled the trade and the shipment of gold from Senegal.³ By the 3rd century BC the traders got as far as Cap Juby, and not much later as far as the Gulf of Guinea.

Carthaginian traders transported various goods, especially salt to countries of Western Sudan as far as the River Niger, from where they brought along slaves, gold, precious stones and date with them. Trade in general terms, however, was mediated by people of nomadic tribes. The Carthaginians had accumulated different types of knowledge and information about the territories but due to special trade interests, the mediators kept them under wraps. Despite all this, today there is evidence that the Carthaginians were familiar with the geography of Western Sahara.⁴

In 603 BC Egyptian Pharaoh Necho II sent an expedition of Phoenician sailors from the Gulf of Suez with the task to cross the Red Sea and along the coasts of Africa to circumnavigate the continent, then, through the “Pillars of Hercules” (Strait of Gibraltar) to return to Egypt sailing the Mediterranean Sea. This voyage lasted for three years and the Phoenicians succeeded. Although there is no written report of the journey, Herodotus—quite doubtfully—mentioned it in his works.

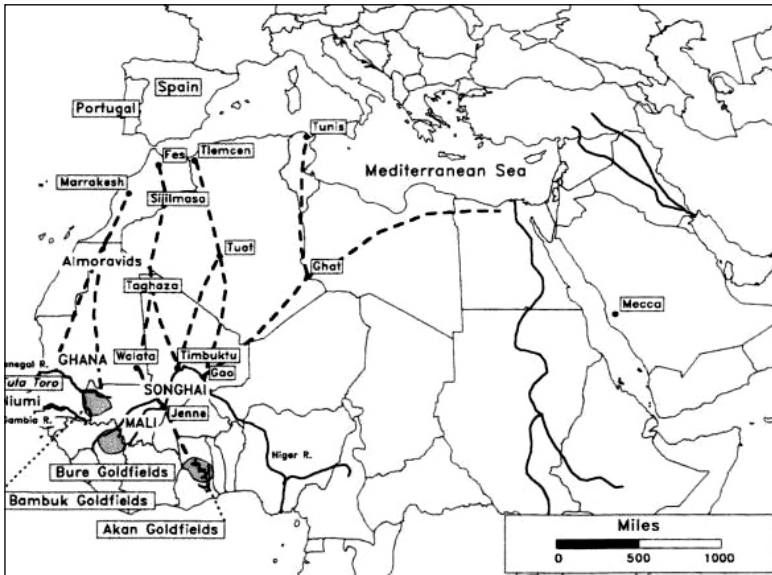
The second naval expedition was sent by the Carthaginians, led by Hanno the Great, son of Hamilcar, just the opposite direction: from Carthage via Gibraltar to the Western coasts of Africa, either in the 6th century BC or at the beginning of the 5th century BC. The exact date of

the expedition is not known. Some researchers suggest that it was in 570 BC, others state it happened either in 520 BC or in 470 BC. It is proven, however, that during the journey Carthaginians founded several trading posts along the coasts of Northern Africa. One of them was the town of Kerne on the territory of Western Sahara.⁵ The story of the expedition was written by Hanno himself in Punic language, but the document is available only in Greek transcripts.⁶

This is known as the time of Roman expansion and most probably of the domestication of camel, too. The life of local tribes was not specifically influenced by the Roman Empire although those centuries saw an increase in commerce.⁷ Romans also sent numerous expeditions to the Saharan territories, but whether these succeeded or not, we have limited information—what we know is that they were launched.⁸ In the second half of the 2nd century BC Greek military historian Polybius—while serving the Romans—explored and took down present-day Mauritania and the Northern coastline of Africa. Although the Romans themselves drew a fairly punctual map of the Western-Saharan territories, Pliny, in his geographical work mixed up the River Niger with the River Draa (the later can be found south of Morocco, functioning as border river between Moroccan and Western-Saharan nomadic territories).⁹

The life of the region was significantly changed by the emergence of the Arabic tribes (**Sidi Okba tribes**) led by a military leader called **Okba ben Nafi**, coming from the Omajad dynasty of Damascus. These tribes reached the Maghreb region as early as 647 and the Atlantic Ocean by the 680s. Okba, as leader of the Ifrriqia (Tunisia) Province of the Omajad Empire led several military expeditions to the area mostly for capturing slaves, and by 681 he reached the valley of River Draa. His successor **Moussa ben Nusair**, who was appointed governor in 705, defeated a Berber army in 711 thereby providing relatively free movement for his traders.

On the next map you can see the main commercial roads:



Source: Donald R. Wright: *The World and a Very Small Place in Africa*. pp. 31.

However, it was not until the governorship of **Abderrahman ben Habib** (in 745) that the first commercial station was established and wells were dug along the caravan route leading to the town of Aoudaghost on the order of the governor. In the same year a caravan escorted by a strong military unit started off and successfully reached the town situated on the territory of present-day Mauritania.

As the Arab leaders saw the strong opposition of the Berbers they strived to build commercial and cultural relationship with inhabitants of the region. What they could not achieve by fighting accomplished this way, and in a relatively short period of time a significant part of the Berber tribes was converted to Islam.¹⁰ This is how **Miknassa**, the largest group of the **Zenata** Berber tribal alliance, joined the Kharijite branch of Islam (in 755).

That was the tribe that founded the town of Sijilmasa, which functioned as a commercial and Muslim cultural centre for more than two centuries.¹¹

The Berbers in the region, however, had to fight not only against Arab invaders but also the **Soninke Empire** in Ghana.¹² That was the power that kept both the commercial routes from the south and the trade in gold from

Western Africa under control. Since Sanhajas posed a threat to his commercial interests the Soninke king took the town of Aoudaghost in 990. Between the two peoples the struggle went on for almost 100 years and resulted in the fall of the Soninke Empire later on.¹³

That was the time when **Gudula**, one of the Sanhaja tribes, invited a famous religious teacher, **Abdallah ben Yasin** to teach them about Islam. The leader of the tribe Yahja ben Ibrahim el-Gadali together with the teacher of the new religion went on a pilgrimage to Mecca, where he ascertained that his entire tribe must take Islam as their religion (in 1036).¹⁴

After the conversion of the tribe Yasin visited the area of the Lemtuna tribe, where in a short time he gathered a large number of followers, whom the locals referred to as "*al-murabitun*", which is Almoravidas.¹⁵

In a short time the teacher became the leader of the alliance and he appointed Yahja ben Omar the Lemtuna a leader of outstanding military abilities his deputy.¹⁶

In 1039 Abdallah ben Yasin, the leader of the Almoravidas, declared a holy war against the Zenata tribal alliance. After heavy fighting they occupied the towns of Aoudaghost and Sijilmasa. This meant that the whole of Western Sahara and the African region came under the rule of the new alliance. However, after the victory the old antagonisms came to surface and the Gudulas set a trap for and killed the Lemtuna military leader (in 1056). **Abubakr ben Omar** the brother of Yahja assumed leadership and after suppressing the revolt the military operations resumed.

As a result, as early as 1059, they reached the Atlantic coast, and later the Atlas Mountains. In the same year in an attack the soldiers of the Berghwata tribe killed Yasin, so Abubakr took over the control over the emerging empire, too.

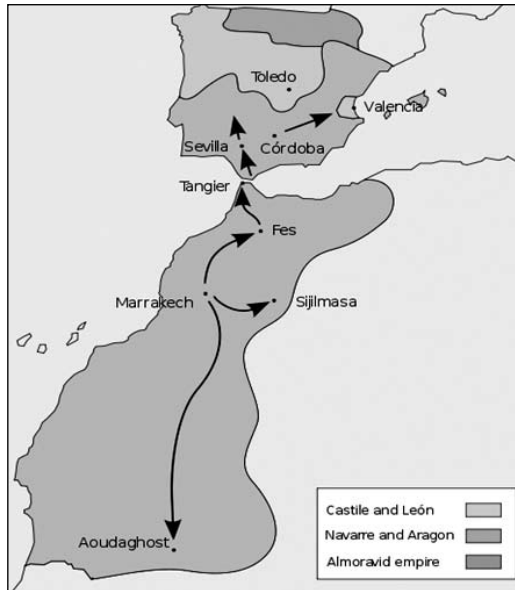
Under the leadership of Abubakr Ibn Omar Berber tribes, especially the Sanhaja living in the region of the Southern Sahara were at war with the Kingdom of Ghana between 1062 and 1076.

As the first step they provided financial support to the revolt of the little Muslim states in alliance that is in vassal subordination with the king. When the rebels engaged a substantial part of the Ghanaian army, the Berber tribes also launched an attack and soon won the war.¹⁷

It was then that the town of present-day Marakesh was founded and it became the capital of the new empire.

In 1082 the Almoravidas occupied Algeria, and later a great part of what is Spain today (in 1094). Despite the victorious battles the Almoravidas lost power and in 1125 when the uprising led by the Almohads broke out, the Empire fell in a short time.¹⁸

The following map illustrates the development of the Almoravid Empire:



Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Almoravid-empire-en.svg>

This way the Sanhajas became independent from the Arabs for a while, and together with the Zenata tribes, their former enemies, they fought for a long time to keep their independence. Because of their resistance it was as late as around 1270 that the first fights took place between the Arabs representing Islam (**Banu Hilal and Soleim tribes**) and the Western Saharan tribes.¹⁹ The two Arab tribes—because of the problems they had caused—were driven from the Delta of the Nile by the Khalif of Egypt, and eventually they settled in Libya and Tunisia. Although their presence in Western Sahara was not too long they had several clashes with tribes living there and also their caravans crossed the area. This is what the famous Arab writer ben Khaldun said about them: *“They are like a huge group of locusts, they destroy everything that gets in their way.”*²⁰

That was the time when the Sultan of Morocco drove the Makuil tribe coming from Yemen out of the territories under his rule (in 1218). The tribe fled to the area south of the Draa River where they mixed with the local Berber tribes during the centuries to follow, thereby creating a new ethnic group (the Saharawians) who later reached the northern borders of Mauritania.²¹



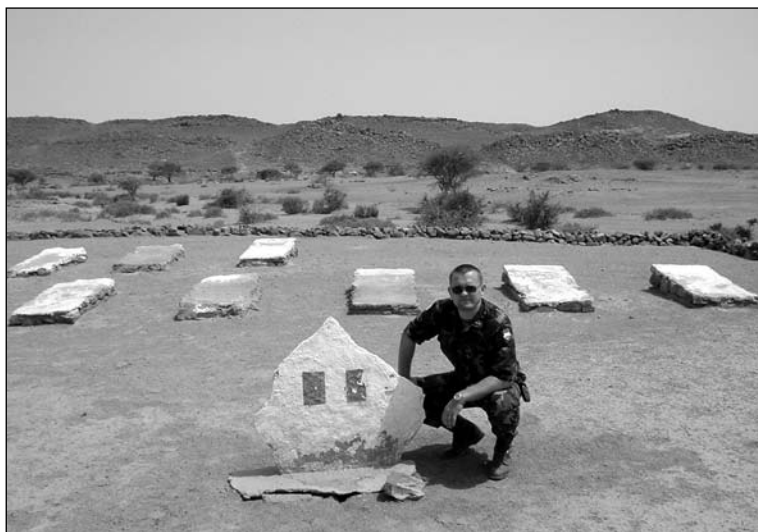
Airbomb



Destroyed APCs in the desert



Landmines



French cemetery in the desert near to Mehaires

COLONISATION OF THE AREA

Europeans arrived to the Canary Islands first (1309), which they could only occupy by 1401, due to the resistance of the Guanche population. **Jaime Ferrer** sailed along Boujdour not much later, in 1346, however, he never returned home from his voyage of discovery.¹

As the Spaniards almost exterminated the native population of the Canary Islands there was no sufficient labour force available for cultivating the land, therefore, slave-hunting expeditions were launched to the coasts of the Sahara. The first raids were somewhere at coastlines of Boujdour in 1405, where a complete caravan was looted, the captured Saharawians were sold as slaves at a good price.² The Spaniards having become enthusiastic over the success of the first escapade repeated the slave-hunting journeys called "*entradas*" or "*cabagadas*" for almost two centuries. Certainly, it could not be officially declared that only the slaves were required, therefore, they hid their real intentions behind the likeness of Christian mission work.³

The very first colony created by Europeans was established by the Portuguese in Ceuta (1415), then, mapping the neighbouring areas began, till in 1433-1434 an expedition led by **Gil Eanes** and **Alfonso Goncalves Baldaya** reached Cap Bojador, the coastal region of present-day Western Sahara.⁴

During the following expedition, which was led by **Goncalves** and **Nuno Tristao**, the Portuguese captured 12 nomads, among whom only a few could speak Arabic as they were of Berber origin. During the expedition in the year of 1440, as many as 235 nomads were captured who were partially sold to the Spanish.⁵ By that time a sort of competition evolved between the Spaniards and Portuguese in slave-hunting.

A short while later the Portuguese, systematically mapping the coastline, established their first trade-station on Isle of D'Arguin (1445), slightly south of Cap Blanc.⁶

Portuguese historian Gomes Eannes de Azurara wrote about the expedition of **Joao Fernandes** in one of his books. The Portuguese explorer set foot on the shores somewhere near to Dakhla in 1445 and prepared a detailed report for the Royal Court. In his report he mentioned that the nomads living there had hardly resembled those living in the territory of Morocco, even the language they spoke was different, and it was the religion alone that was identical as they also recognised Mohammad as their Prophet.⁷ In the meantime the Portuguese realised that it was more

simple to purchase cheap slaves from tribes of the Sahara than organising risky surprise raids, therefore, they established trade relations with several coastal tribes who sold black slaves and gold to them.⁸ Black slaves were transported from the town of Ouadana to the Isle of D'Arguin, which meant a merely six-day long journey. Slave-trafficking had been organised from there for about two hundred years by the Portuguese and annually thousands of slaves had been transported from the island.⁹

Later the islands had been occupied by the British (1666), then, by the French (1667), finally, by the Dutch (1685-1721).

Holland bought up the acacia gum (*Acacia verec*) originated from Mauritania, which was used in their textile plants set up in Portendick in Africa. Today, nomads tap this type of acacia tree, too, and use it for textile dying, or make jewels out of its hardened version. Although the Dutch captured the Isle of D'Arguin in 1638, later they had to give it up to the French, in this way they completely disappeared from this area (**Hague Convention, 1727**).¹⁰

By the end of the 15th century, the right to control the area from Cap Bojador up to Agadir, including the Canary Islands (**Toledo Convention, 1480**), was awarded to Spain in accordance with the resolution of Pope Sixtus VI.¹¹

At the end of the century **Diego Garcia de Herrera**, the governor of Canary Islands erected a fortress (Santa Cruz de Mar Pequena, 1476) and permanent colonies (Ifni) nowhere else but only in the coastal zones as Spain had not taken the risk of permanent settling. By that time, however, they had already led several expeditions to the inner areas of the Sahara. In fact, Herrera had built the new fortress in order to store captured slaves, since the Spanish exterminated the entire population of the islands of Fuerteventura and Lanzarote. Their raids were launched from this fortress and the captured slaves were transported to the Canary Islands from here. The success of the slave-hunters is marked by the fact that local tribes led a siege against the fortress within two years after its building and the garrison had only been saved from massacre by the relief troops of 700 men urgently sent by the governor. As slave-hunting was extremely lucrative and the Court acquired one fifth of its total revenue from this source the raids continued. A slave-hunter, Juan Camacho participated in forty-six actions in 1491 alone, which, in his narration, were all successful. Nevertheless, when Governor Herrera died (1485), the fortress was abandoned and the local tribes demolished it at once.¹²

However, the Spanish sovereigns henceforward needed the revenue derived from slave-trafficking, therefore, the fortress was rebuilt and operated as a trading centre onward. In October 1550 the Spanish King appointed

Captain **Alonso Fernandes de Lugo** from Andalusia Captain of Africa, and ordered him to establish new fortresses. The Captain had constructed three new fortresses: the fortresses of Taghaost, San Miguel de Saca and Cape Bojador. The fortress of San Miguel de Saca was attacked one night prior to its completion by the local nomads, who butchered more than 300 Spanish soldiers, even the life of Lugo was saved by his interpreter, originated from the tribe of Ait Bou Tata.¹³

The increasing number of slave-hunting sorties infuriated the local tribes to such an extent that finally they declared a holy war, jihad. The attacking Bedouins seized and demolished the fortress of Santa Cruz in 1517, massacred the resisting forces and the survivors were sold in style as slaves. The Arabs attacked the slave-ships sailing under Spanish and other flags, later they attacked the settlements in the Canary Islands.

They also sent the captured people to slave-markets. As a repercussion of this, the Spanish officially banned the actions, expecting the Saharawians to end their pirate raids, too. Yet, the unpermitted slave-hunting expeditions deluding superabundant return went on till 1593.¹⁴

However, the lost revenue was supposed to be replaced somehow, therefore, the discovery of the fish exuberant off-shore waters came in time. The Spanish concluded several fishing agreements with coastal tribes who granted free fishing or had not attacked the fish-drying plants established on the shores.¹⁵ However, the Spaniards had no intention to share the territories with other Europeans, thence when the Scottish George Glas established a trading station opposite the Island of Fuerteventura (1764), he was imprisoned by the Spanish, and the station christened Hilsborough was set ablaze. The Scottish businessman was arrested when he went to Lanzarote Island to purchase a ship and recruit a new crew. Although he got restored to liberty from his year-long imprisonment by the intervention of the English Government, the building of the trading station that had remained unhurt so far were destroyed by the nomads.¹⁶

In 1727 the Spaniards and the Sultan of Morocco, Sidi Mohamed ben Abdallah signed the **Treaty of Marrakech**. However, neither the Kingdom of Spain, nor the Kingdom of Morocco could handle the piratical tribes, which is proven by their **agreement on common fishing, concluded on 28 May 1767**. The agreement provides exclusive fishing rights to Spain in the coastal waters from Santa Cruz (Ifni) to the Northern borders.

Nevertheless, Article 18 of the agreement well indicates the existing problems of the two states in this region:

*“His Imperial Majesty warns the inhabitants of the Canaries against any fishing expedition to the coasts of Oued Noun and beyond. He disclaims any responsibility for the way they may be treated by the Arabs of the country, to whom it is difficult to apply decisions, since they have no fixed residence, travel as they wish and pitch their tents where they choose. The inhabitants of the Canaries are certain to be maltreated by those Arabs...”*¹⁷

This agreement was amended several times in the forthcoming years, but the article quoted had steadily been remained in it.

It is to be known that Morocco had never been a nation state till the 20th Century but it consisted of a Principality of several areas independent from each other. Many a time the Monarch had no power over the tribes living in that area, thus, they could live according to their laws. The territory under the control of Moroccan leadership (makhzen) at that time was called “*bilad el-makhzen*”. The majority of the cities and oases where the Moroccans established their authority, and over which the representatives of the Sultan (*kaid*) exercised their control, also belonged here. However, there were areas which were only known as “*bilad es-siba*” at that time; this meant the land of refugees, i.e. absconders.¹⁸

The mentioned territory covered the Rif Mountains populated by Kabyles, the Berber settlements of the Atlas Mountains, and the northern part of Western Sahara. Although the Sultans of Morocco officially expressed their supremacy over these areas their power and military strength was enough only to control the most important trading stations and cities. There were periods when the Sultans were not able to oversee a given area as long as for a number of decades, or even for a century. Still, there were some tribes, which attached importance to maintain relations with the Sovereign of Morocco, therefore, they entered into an alliance (*bayaa*) with him, and the Sultan appointed the chief of the tribe by a decree (*dahir*) as his representative.

A few tribes of the Sahara also agreed upon alliance with the Sultan but there were some tribes—such as the tribes of Arosien, Ait Lahsen, or Ouled Bou Sbaa—, which fled from his reign to the Sahara. Nevertheless, the Reguibat tribes, which constitute almost 60 per cent of the Saharawian population, had never signed any document, which would have provided legal title to the Sultan to hold dominion over them.¹⁹ The fact that the Sultan of

Morocco had no influence over the Saharawian tribes caused several problems not only to the Spanish but to the French diplomacy, too, as the mediation of the Emir of Mauritania was needed to ransom French seamen shipwrecked at the coasts of Western Sahara. Since the Emir maintained good connections with the 'Council of Forty', he could have successfully negotiated between the parties.²⁰

Alexander Scott was among the mariners who suffered shipwreck between Cape Noun and Tarfaja in 1810. The captors of the sailor sold him as a slave to a warrior from the Toubalt tribe, who had been his master for five years. When Scott was travelling in the Atlas Mountains with his owner he escaped and was assisted home by an English major in official mission in that locality.²¹ That was the time when leaders of Spain decided to occupy the coastal lines of Western Sahara, partly to eliminate the pirate actions, together with defending the Canary Islands. Therefore, the leaders of the country announced to establish a protectorate on the area from Cap-Blanc to Cap Bojador in December 1884. This idea was later approved and then legitimated by the participants of the Berlin Conference on 26 February 1885.²² The Spaniards created the *Compania Comercial Hispano-Africana* on 30 March 1884 on the model of the well-functioning North-African Company (Mackenzie Company-Cape Juby) with English-Scottish interest.²³

Several people participated in the company who took positions in the top political or economic leadership of the kingdom restored in 1874. According to their concept, the Kingdom of Spain, having lost her power and vegetating like her own imperial shadow ought to have established new colonies, particularly on the territories of Africa not occupied by other European countries. The concept was promoted by King Alphonso XII himself and he donated 3,000 Pesetas to the company, which collected 37,000 Pesetas within a short time, covering the expenses of two expeditions.

The first expedition led by Manuel Iradier, Amando Ossorio and Bernabe Jimenes headed to the area of Equatorial Guinea, while the other group led by Emilio Bonelli Hernando went to Western Sahara. The concept of founding colonies had been approved by royalist, conservative Prime Minister Canovas del Castillo, however, the Government resigned in the meantime, thus only the minister of foreign affairs of the new Government could order the army to conquer the unoccupied coasts of the Sahara. The Spanish unit led by **Captain Emilio Bonelli Hernando** conquered Dakhla (Villa Cisneros), where they erected a fortress and established the mail-service. Only 25 soldiers served in the fortress at that time, and they were rotated in three-month periods when the ship carrying supply from the Canary Islands arrived. Bonelli became the

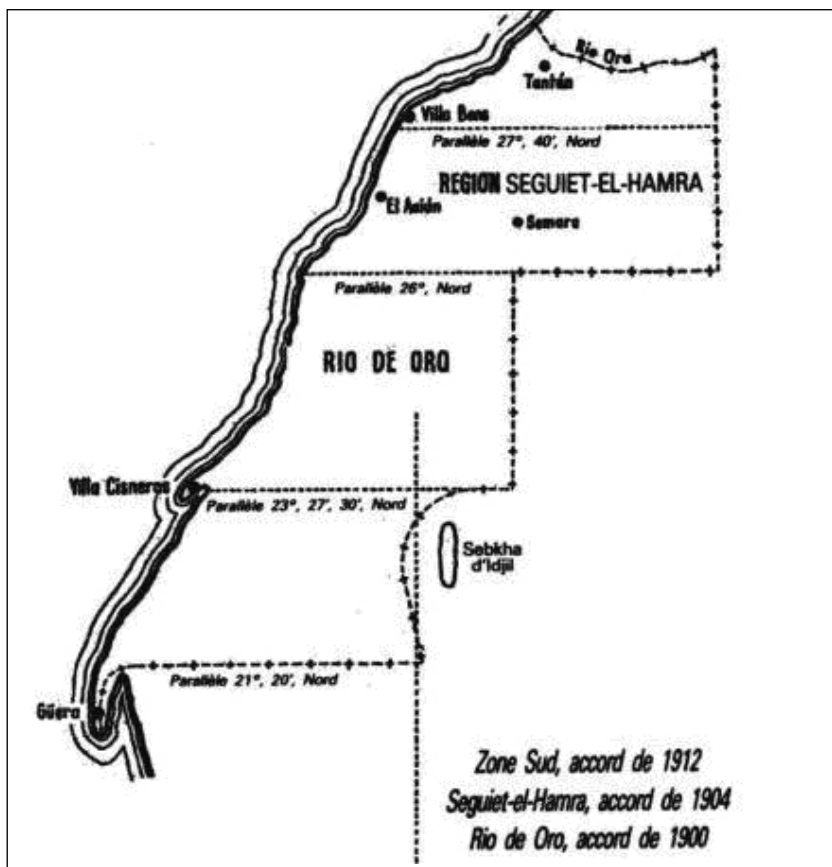
first military commander who had been living in Morocco for more than six years, therefore, he was fluent in Arabic and could develop good connections with the representatives of the local tribes. The captain made a proposal to the government to establish further stations along the coastline (Angra de Cintra, Cape Blanc and Rio de Oro).²⁴

To provide protection to the coasts of the Sahara and the newly-established settlements the Government sent a considerable fleet reinforcement to the Canary Islands with the order to pacify the shores of Western Africa. By April 1886 the Spanish penetrated inside the continent and appointed the first Governor, who represented the Government in the area.

With the aid of a Spaniard speaking Arabic perfectly the Spanish managed to find several local representatives of the tribes, who were ready to sign an agreement recognising the Spanish control (**Iyill Convention**).²⁵ In spite of the fact that their representatives had signed the Agreement the tribes represented by them took up arms against the Spanish troops marching in. The Saharawian tribes organised several insurrections against the Spanish power of occupation, and they assaulted the fortress of Villa Cisneros in 1887, then, they attacked the fort in 1892 again, while in 1894 they set the ships “Tres de Mayo” and “Las Marias” anchored in the bay on fire.²⁶ All that the Spanish managed to achieve was a single agreement signed on behalf of the Saharawian tribes by Ould Laroussi, the chief of one of the Ouled Delim tribes. Namely, the tribal leader recognised that it was easier to trade with the Spanish than to fight against them.²⁷ Naturally, complying with the agreement was not meant by other tribes, so the skirmish went on.

The Saharawian tribes still independent from Spain fought a battle at **Daora in 1899** against the troops of the Sultan of Morocco, where they stopped the Moroccans to gain grounds in the Sahara area.²⁸ In the meantime the Spanish wanted to ensure their rights already won against the French and other European states, therefore, they came to an agreement with France occupying Moroccan and Mauritanian territories on disputed border issues. As a result of the negotiations the first French and Spanish border agreement was ratified on 27th June 1900, which was amended by secret agreements, signed on 3rd October 1904 and later, on 27th November 1912.²⁹

The following map shows the borders established by the agreements:



Source: Gaudio: *Les populations du Sahara occidental*. p. 48.

These agreements established the borders which were also approved by the contemporary states, with the sole exception of present-day Morocco. The borders were also established within the framework of a new agreement in 1954. Despite the successful Spanish and French diplomatic co-operation the Spanish were able to effectively act only in the coastal areas while the French managed to gain grounds in the Sahara areas faster and more spectacularly. That is why **Sheikh of Smara Ma El-Ajnin**, a religious leader of Mauritian descent asked the help of the Moroccan ruler to fight against the French (1905).

The popular religious and military leader known by the nickname 'Ma El-Ajnin' (Water of the Eyes) did not belong to any Saharawian tribe.

The latter holy man of the Saharawian tribes was born in Hodh, near the banks of the River Niger around 1830-31, under the name Mohammed Mustafa Ould Sheikh Mohammed Fadel.³⁰

His family came from Tafilalet (South-East Morocco) and moved to Hodh in the 17th century. His father, Mohammed Fadel Ould Mamin, was one of the most honourable religious leaders (*marabu*) of the city, who founded the Kadirija denomination of Sufism (Muslim religious school). As a tradesman, Ma El-Ajnin moved to the North-Western part of the Sahara in 1859, close to Tindouf city founded by the Tadjakent tribe a few years earlier. When he arrived to this area he had already performed his pilgrimage to Mecca, thus, he received great prestige among the inhabitants who had never reached the Holy Place.³¹ Because he maintained good connections with the members of the Alavita dynasty it was not surprising either that in 1887 the then Monarch of Morocco appointed him his official representative to the nomads of the Sahara, who already worshipped him as a saint. When the construction of the city of Smara founded by him had begun, Sultan Moulay Abdelaziz sent masons and building material (timber beams and other material not available in that region) to expedite the construction.³²

However, the Sheikh worried about the headway of the French, who approved a plan in 1899, the developer of which proposed the creation of a French protectorate from Senegal to the River Draa. In the spirit of the plan the French had occupied the entire territory of both Algeria and Tunis by 1903. The fortified city of Brakna, the last refuge of the resisting Arab warriors, was conquered by **Xavier Coppolani** of Corsican origin in French service by the end of 1903.³³ Thus, there was no more considerable power in the North, which could offer resistance against the colonisation intentions of the French, although the French commander and a few soldiers were slaughtered by the nomadic troops led by Sidi Seghir Ould Moulay Zein in the village of Tagant later on, when he stood overnight in the local caravansary in transit with a few soldiers (12 May 1904).³⁴

According to the French assumption, the raid was ordered by Ma El-Ajnin. Of course, the assassination could only temporarily delay the French who soon appointed a new commander to lead their troops.

The French troops started to occupy the still independent little desert state, Adrar, at that time (9 January 1909). The French defeated the resisting tribes (Ouled Delim, Reguibat, and Aroussiyine tribes) in several battles, which surrendered after losing their leaders and most of their warriors.³⁵

This is the reason why Sheikh Ma El-Ajnin tried to counterbalance the French headway by founding a new town, present-day Smara, in the territory still under Spanish control (1898). The town was located between Tindouf and Adrar, near a busy caravan route and the good lands, and well-suitable for grazing further increased its value. The construction of the main buildings of the town was completed by 1902 and Ma El-Ajnin dislocated his headquarters here for good.

It is interesting that the Sheikh did not regard the Spaniard so dangerous, who really had control over the three major cities strengthened by them, namely Villa Cisneros (Dakhla), La Guerra and the port of Cabo Juby (Tarfaya), and Sidi Ifni later. Therefore, the patrolling warriors of the Sheikh left the Spanish patrols in peace, moreover, they even exchanged commodities with the smaller Spanish military posts, where they could pay for tea, sugar, flour and other commodities with their products (furs, stock, dates, etc.). As the Spaniards had not presented a considerable threat, the chiefs of the local tribes rather focused on the attacks against the French forces.³⁶

As early as 1902 the French launched an expedition to the Sahara, which surveyed the area of present-day Western Sahara and Mauritania, and also collected information for the French troops (**Blanchet expedition**) springing to attack soon afterwards. One of the members of the expedition, lieutenant Jouinot-Gambetta in his report warned the French military leadership about the dangerousness of the Sheikh:

“Ma El-Ajnin, alias Mohamet Fadel, who lives among the locals is a truly fanatic Muslim, and according to his vision their faith will triumph and by that they will overcome the infidels occupying their land.”³⁷

The new town, Smara, soon became the spiritual centre of the nomads of the Sahara, from where they started to organise the armed uprising against the French. According to the concept of the Sheikh, they could have joined the factious tribes with the support of Morocco, then, they could have announced a holy war (jihad) against the infidels. The Monarch of Morocco first promised his support for the revolt, but he compromised with the French later, and then the betrayed Sheikh attacked Morocco. His troops comprising of Saharawian and Mauritanian tribes occupied Marrakesh, but suffered defeat at Fez on 23rd June 1910 from the better equipped and trained French troops led by General Moinier.³⁸

The Sheikh died within a few months, and his sons **El-Hiba** and **Mohammed Laghdaf** continued the struggle, however, they were far from being as talented strategists and spiritual leaders as their father. The reputation

of the Sheikh is also shown by the fact that his descendants, as an independent tribe, became integral part of those living in Western Sahara and had seats in the 'Council of Forty', later even in the Djemma.

The tribes of Western Sahara continuing their struggle used the area of Saguia El Hamra under Spanish rule as the hinterland of the fight against the French.³⁹

As Spain was greatly disturbed by the French intention to develop a bordering colonial empire on the territory of Western Sahara, there was no particular Spanish intervention against the Saharawians. Moreover, there is evidence of paying monthly salary for Laghdaf even in 1919, so that he would not attack Spanish military check-points and other interests.

It is also surprising that the movement with considerable religious background and declaring all-out war against Christians had procured the majority of their weapons from the companies Woerman of Hamburg and Torres of Barcelona.⁴⁰

That was also well-known by the French military high command, therefore, army units penetrated the territory of Saguia El Hamra under the cover of chasing rebellious tribes several times. During one of these attacks the units of **Mouret** comprising of the Senegal Rifle and Kounta, Oulad and Ghalian tribesmen Gendarme following a more than 800-kilometre-long forced march captured and later demolished Smara together with its library founded by Sheikh Ma El-Ajnin.⁴¹ More than 5,000 valuable, ancient manuscripts were stored in that library, a significant part of which perished. This march is mentioned by the French even today as a daring military action as the lieutenant colonel departed with his unit from Atar Garrison on February 9 and arrived in Smara on 1st March.

Laghdaf tried to force a battle with the French troops leaving the town, therefore, he lured them to the environs of Leburat. He passed false information to the French that he had barely 250 armed men so that they could surely expect a victory, but in reality, he had 1,200 warriors, mostly from the coalition of Reguibat Sarg and Sahel tribes. The Saharawians attacked the rearguard of the French camping in the Valley of Tagliat (Oued Tagliat), and also the units sent to their rescue, finally completely surrounded the troops of Mouret (10 March).

The raid was just partial success since the total loss of the 400-strong French unit after the battle were two officers (Lieutenant Morello and Captain Verhardt) and 28 enlisted, while more than 200 soldiers of Mouret were wounded. Finally, the French retreated toward Mauritania, but the Saharawians were unable to exploit their dubious victory, as they suffered the loss of nearly 100 men and the discouraged desert warriors refused to chase the French any further.⁴²

After the lost battle Mouret (according to his memoirs, at least) could have defeated the Bedouins led by Laghdaf, however, he ordered retreat to the French Garrison in Atar city (28 March 1913), where his units were originally stationing.

Otherwise the French deny the fact of setting the library ablaze. According to their story the soldiers of Mouret only placed mines under the most important buildings, in order to demonstrate their determination to the local population, but they did not detonate anything. Although, due to an unfortunate accident (lightning) a part of the library really took fire, but they rescued the books, a part of which later went into Moroccan possession somehow.

Two French travellers in 1930 visited Smara and still saw the books, and the airplanes of the French colonial army took photos on the city to prove to the world that their predecessors did not destroy the city.⁴³ The photos were published in a Moroccan daily; even so, the descendents of the Sheikh have possessed no reliable information about the library to this day.

There was no significant fighting on the territory during World War I, apart from a smaller marine conflict, in which two German cruisers encountered with one of the battleships of the British Fleet near to Dakhla. Naturally, the German high command tried to engage French troops in the Sahara, as well; therefore, they delivered weapons and other equipment to El-Hiba. The UC20 submarine sent by the Germans reached the coastlines of the Sahara on 15th October 1916, where Edgar Probst, the consul stationing in Fez earlier handed over 600 modern weapons and the letter of the Ottoman Sultan to the Saharawians. On his way back the Spanish captured the German envoy near Tarfaya and deported him to the Canary Islands.⁴⁴

As France and Spain did not wage war on each other, the Spanish authorities tried to consolidate the relations of the territory under their rule.

The Spanish Governor, **Francisco Bens Argandona**, appointed in 1903, established good relations with the Ouled Delim, Ouled Bou Sbaa and Arosien tribes. The veteran of the Cuban war overbore the members of the tribes with his unescorted trips in the Sahara area, accompanied by a few Saharawians. However, his friendships with the Saharawians was not looked with favour by the French, and when he met with Sheikh El-Hiba, who was one of the leading personalities of the uprising against France, they protested in an official note against contravening the agreement between the two states. During the 22 years of his governorate he founded the second settlement, Cabo Juby (29 June 1916) of the conclave on the previous location of the North-West African Company of Mackenzie.

The next settlement, which was occupied and fortified by the Spanish under his command, was the city of La Guerra (27 November 1919).

Although the Spanish Government officially banned the occupation of the settlement, they easily occupied the city with three officers and two platoons of the 66 infantry regiment under the shroud of the night. As a matter of course, the leadership in Madrid, previously worried about the attack of the French and the local nomads, declared the entire operation their own success. Anyhow, the capture of the new city counter-balanced the trading influence of the nearby French city, Port Etienne.⁴⁵

703 Spanish soldiers served at the areas of the Sahara at that time, out of which 121 in Villa Cisneros, 159 in La Guerra and 423 in Tarfaya. The strength of the contingent in Tarfaya was increased due to the airfield and the proximity of the French forces. 6 military airplanes (Heinkel aircraft) had been deployed at the airfield since 1928.

In the meantime the new French Governor, General Gaden, developed new plans to pacify the nomads living on the territory. However, the situation in Mauritania and some parts of Western Sahara began to consolidate only later, after the Battle of Trefiya in 1925, where the French completely eliminated the troops of the rebel tribes.

Nevertheless, the raids went on and the situation in the Sahara worsened so far that France threatened Spain with the occupation of Spanish-controlled territories in 1934, if Spain could not hold up law and order there.⁴⁶

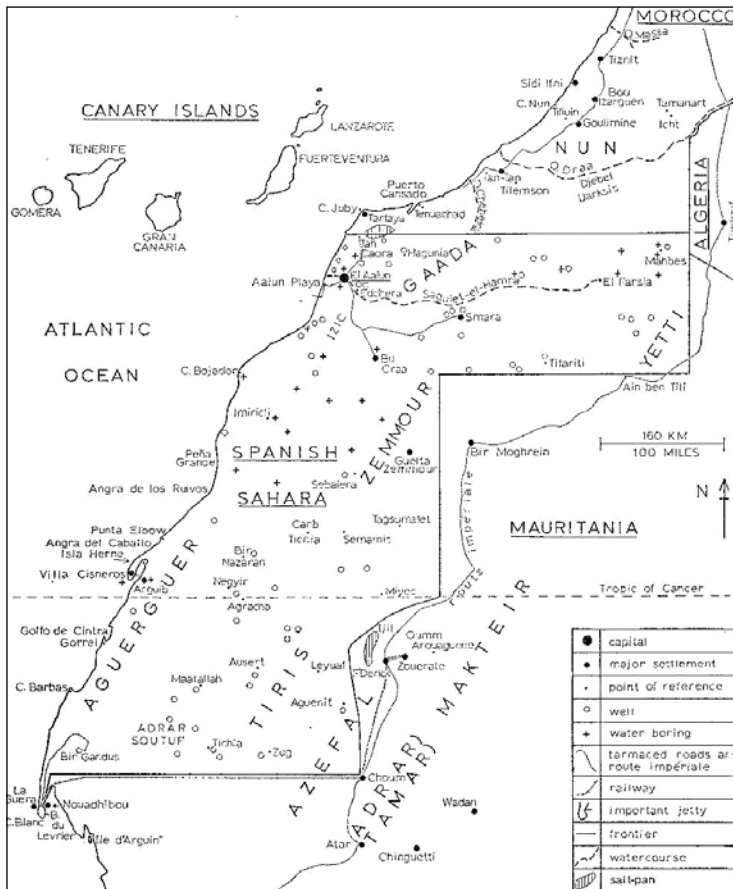
In order to demonstrate the seriousness of the situation the French troops led by **Colonel Trinquet** occupied the town of Tinduf, which was an extremely important strategic point, and was annexed it to Algeria within a few years.⁴⁷ The resistance of the Sahara tribes had become exhausted by then, and when the revolt of Ait Ba Amrane tribe was suppressed in the same year (4th March 1934), the nomads definitively gave up to maraud the French territories.⁴⁸

The Spanish, led by Captain Galo and Lieutenant Carlos de la Gandara, sent their camel detail comprising of Saharawian soldiers to Daora. Following the occupation of the town the scarcely defended city of Smara was also occupied by the Spanish, where they established a permanent garrison.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, they were able to completely occupy the areas of Western Sahara only by 1936, then, they deployed garrisons (Zug, Tichla, etc.) there and renamed the territory Spanish-Sahara.⁵⁰

SPANISH SAHARA

As a consequence of the occupation of the region, local tribes launched several uprisings against Spanish rule. The most significant among these took place in 1938—though it was rapidly suppressed by the units of the Spanish Legion. In fact, only towns got under Spanish control while tribal areas were attempted to be controlled through heavy patrols.¹

The map below shows locations of former Spanish garrisons and military checkpoints:



Source: John Mercer: *Spanish Sahara* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1976)

That time the Spanish Army in the Sahara comprised the following personnel:

527	Officers and senior officers
246	Non-commissioned officers
12,713	Soldiers and police officers

Total: 13,486 troops

The control over the region was primarily the task of the units of the **Spanish Legion**, the Ifni riflemen, recruited from local tribes (**Tiradores de Ifni**), local police forces (**Policia Territoria**) and nomadic cavalry units (**Troopas de Nomadas**).²

The **Spanish Legion** was established by Alfonse XII, King of Spain in 1920 similarly to the French Foreign Legion. Lieutenant Colonel Millan Astray was appointed the first commander of the Legion, who began to set up the first battalion (bandera) in Ceuta that very year. The soldiers of the unit participated in every local battle until 1976, which saw the withdrawal of the Spanish forces. The personnel of the unit also included soldiers from Saharawian tribes although their proportion comprised only a few percent.³

In the Sahara region the following units of the Legion stationed for some time: The 2nd Battalion, 4th Battalion, 6th Battalion, 9th Battalion and the 13th Battalion.

The training and equipment of the units were sufficient: besides camel troops they also had French AMX-30, or AML-90 Main Battle Tanks and Heinkel 111 fighter aircraft.

Tiradores units were established in Morocco (Ifni) with Spanish and Moroccan officers but by the eruption of the Sahara conflict 98% of their officers had been Spanish because of the unreliability of locals.

The majority of soldiers were Moroccan and nearly 40% was recruited from Saharawian tribes around the town. The units had transportation, signals, supply and medical sub-units. First, the troops of the units were equipped with small arms and light weapons, but later on artillery units were also established equipped with 50-, 60-, 81- and 120-mm guns.

The official establishment of **nomadic cavalry units** was achieved in 1926 although nomads of the Sahara had been employed for reconnaissance and other military tasks by the Spanish.⁴

The “Cabo Juby” unit was set up on 27th July 1926 by local military leaders, which was reorganised sub-unit on 10th October 1928.⁵

Later, in order to increase their efficiency infantry units were equipped with horses. In 1930 the personnel of the nomadic unit comprised 30 Europeans (including 6 officers) and 198 Saharawians, who had 62 horses and 183 camels. In 1937 one of the units was stationed in Tan-Tan (Saguia el-Hamra) and the other in Villa Cisneros (Capitan de Gandara).

After the Spanish Civil War the Spanish augmented nomadic troops and established new units so two units stationed in Tan-Tan, one in Smara and another one in the town of Villa Cisneros. Nomadic units were independent of one another and the regular army, and they were under the command of a Government Envoy.⁶ Nomads were tasked with controlling the border area and the tribal territories, collecting information for garrisons, policing and crowd control, and keeping rebelling Saharawians at bay.

The structure of the nomadic unit (company) was as follows:⁷ 25 European soldiers (mostly officers and Non Commissioned Officers); 140 NCOs and soldiers recruited from local tribes; 146 riding camels; 37 camels for transportation; 2 machine guns; 1 small calibre knockdown field gun and a portable radio transceiver.

By the early 1970s all units were modernised and equipped with Land Rovers and Pegazo trucks except for one which continued to patrol on camels.

Although it is not a well-known fact, several Saharawian soldiers served in General Franco's forces though only Moroccans are mentioned by most historians dealing with the Spanish Civil War (14% of Franco's soldiers were Muslim during the war).⁸ In the Sahara region the only event related to the Spanish Civil War took place in March 1937 when Communists kept in the Villa Cisneros prison bribed a guard, seized some weapons, and broke out from their captivity. Since they had no chance to take the entire town they took a fishing boat and almost immediately left the port.⁹

That was also the golden age of Cabo Juby (Tarfaya), recorded in the history of civil and military aviation. For soldiers serving there the town was more infamous than famous as the Spanish armed forces ran a disciplinary company there. Between 1918 and 1936, a civil and military airfield operated in the garrison. Although there was an enormous competition between Spain and France in the region there happened to be no obstacle to building and using Cabo Juby airfield together.¹⁰ The French moved there their air-mail service operating between Casablanca and Dakar (Compagnie Generale Aeropostale), managed by the famous French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry between 1927-28. He wrote his short story "Courrier", published in the monthly "Him navire d'argent" and French Gallimard. This is the short

story that brought him fame in literature. In 1929 the writer was appointed Head of Argentinean Air Mail and left town but remembered the 18 months spent there with pleasure.¹¹

That time Saharawian tribes lived in relative peace and the Spanish began to reorganise the regional administration. They had no real interests in their Sahara colonies as that time there were no data on the phosphate and iron ore deposits in the area.¹² The only income for the Spanish came from fishing industry, and so the colony produced only deficit for the Spanish Government.¹³

It is well-indicated by the fact that in 1958 523 tons of fish and other products were exported at an overall value of 958,015 pesetas while import was twenty times higher: 21.4 million pesetas.¹⁴ Fishing was supervised by the state-founded company IPASA, which built cold stores and controlled seaports. In the early 1950s 26,000 tons of fish was caught annually, mostly off the coast of Villa Cisneros and La Guerra. Besides fishing the company also ran seaweed-gathering and -processing plants but their revenues did not grow significantly. In order to found new bases for the fishing fleet the Spanish Governor deployed troops under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Del Oro who established the town of Laayoune in the Saguia el-Hamra valley, merely 25 kilometres from the Ocean (1940.). The new settlement (El Aaiun) was named after the wells (*ayoun*) in the vicinity and was renamed only after the Moroccan occupation.¹⁵

The Spanish selected El-Aaiun as their administrative centre where the Governors of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro had their residencies. However, the development was very slow as in the region there were only small settlements with little population like Smara, La Guerra, Dakhla, and some minor fortresses, such as Tichla and Zug.

World War 2 had no influence on the region although the German Command considered the area of Spanish Sahara as a potential base for military operations in Africa (The Germans established and run a submarine base in another Spanish colony: Spanish-Guinea).¹⁶ Since not only did Franco-led Spain support the Third Reich but also had Fascistic features itself, the Germans trusted a tacit Spanish support, and were ready to occupy the region with the use of military force at the same time. Just in case the curriculum at the Berlin Military Academy included military topography of Spanish Sahara in the academic year 1942-43. (Spanisch-West-Sahara, Rio de Oro mit Spanisch Sahara und Spanisch-Süd-Marokko, Generalstab des Heeres, Abteilung für Kriegskarten und Vermessungswesen, Berlin 1942.)

This relatively consolidated situation changed after WW2, when in 1946 Ifni and Western Sahara were united under the name of Spanish West-Africa

and new unrests broke out in the area. In the early 1950s local people were involved in the fight of the Moroccan Liberation Army (*Jaich at-Tahrir*) and as one of its results; Morocco offered its support to help their fight for independence.¹⁷

After the liberation of Morocco (April 1956) Moroccan military units fought shoulder to shoulder with Saharawian tribes against Spanish troops stationing in Spanish Sahara.¹⁸ By that time the region got increasingly important for Spain as in the late 1940s Spanish geologist Manuel Alia Medina discovered the first phosphate deposits in the region of Bou Craa.¹⁹ The discovery grabbed the attention of General Franco, visiting the area in 1950, and ordered the Spanish Institute of Geology to send an expedition to confirm the findings of the geologist.²⁰ According to scientists in Spanish Sahara, there is a major, nearly 85%-pure phosphate deposit in the territory. The scientists also found oil, but the Spanish Government did not undertake the exploitation, because the logistical background was insufficient.²¹

Spain had no intention to allow Morocco or any other nation to exploit those deposits promising extra profit.

Officially, however, Morocco was not at war with Spain, moreover, it attempted to maintain good relations with the Spanish Government in order to gain some time to stabilise the internal structure of the newly independent state. Of course, Sahara areas rich in minerals and the Spanish towns along the Atlantic coast (Ifni, Ceuta and Mellila) caught the attention of the leaders of the sovereign state. Therefore, then, Chief of General Staff of the Royal Armed Forces (*Forces Armées Royales-FAR*)—later King Hassan II—provided support both in terms of weapons and information to irregular forces attacking the Spanish colony.²²

The primary objective of attacks of Moroccan and Saharawian troops (mostly from Tekna and Reguibat tribes) was the town of Ifni, which was officially handed over to Spain by the Sultan of Morocco back in 1860. Although the town was taken under siege between October 1957 and June 1958 the Moroccan troops were unable to occupy it.²³ On 23rd November 1957 the Moroccans cut the telephone lines and launched an attack against the airfield, weapon stores, and several points of the town, defended by the 3rd infantry battalion, the 3rd artillery battery, and a unit of the Sahara Police Force (1,500 Spanish soldiers and 500 Saharawian police officers). Since they did not trust the town-dwellers they disarmed civilian and forced them to stay in their houses. The artillery of the attackers kept the town under fire for several hours, then; the barrage was followed by an attack of some 1,200 rebels equipped with automatic weapons. The Spanish troops lost 55 soldiers, 128

were wounded, and 7 were missing in action. The attackers had huge losses, too, and in the following weeks did not attempt any major attacks against the town, however, they eliminated minor Spanish outposts (Tamucha, Mesti, T'zelata de Sbuia, Tiliuin, Sidi Inno, Tabelcut) in the desert.²⁴

The fortress of Tiliuin was defended by a platoon of Tiradores and a platoon of Saharawian police officers with the support of local Bedouins but by 25th November their losses had grown so high that relief units had to be deployed to help them. The relief force comprised Legion soldiers, paratroopers and an 81-mm artillery battery. Although the outpost was saved the defenders had so many casualties and wounded that they had to leave the fortress and retreat to Ifni. Other outposts saw similar events since the Spanish had no intention to give up their positions without fight.²⁵ Nevertheless, by 9th December they had lost all of their outposts and every Spanish unit was forced into Ifni, which was completely surrounded by the Moroccan troops. The siege was taken only 6 months later in June 1958 when the attackers retreated.

Naturally, fights broke out not only around Ifni but in the entire territory of Spanish Sahara. One Moroccan group e.g. attacked and took the unguarded lighthouse of Cape Bojador capturing 7 Spanish workers there and destroyed the entire equipment of the lighthouse.²⁶ Soon afterwards a column of vehicles was attacked near Arbaa el-Mesti but the rebels were forced to retreat.

On 12–13 January 1958 rebels launched an attack against El-Aaiunt, defended by the 13th Battalion of the Spanish Legion. Although the attackers outnumbered the defenders they were not able to capture the town. The victorious Spanish began to pursue the retreating enemy but were ambushed in the sand dunes (Edcherra) near the town. The commander of the Spanish unit (1st Company), Captain Jauregui was fatally wounded at the very beginning of the ambush. Although the majority of the company managed to retreat the 3rd platoon was isolated from the main unit. The platoon kept fighting for several hours losing half of its personnel, finally, Sergeant Francisco Fadrique and legionnaire Juan Maderal Oleaga with their machine gun covered the successful retreat of their comrades still alive and got killed in action. The overall losses of the Spanish counted 37 killed and 50 wounded in action. The two legionnaires covering the retreat of their comrades and sacrificing their lives were awarded San Fernando medal, posthumous.²⁷

As a consequence of the fights, the Spanish were pushed back to the coastal area. There, however, together with the French who were also threatened by the rebels, they planned a joint military operation against Western Sahara

tribes. The joint Spanish-French military operation began on **10th February 1958** (Operation **Ecouvillon or Teide**), in the framework of which allied troops extremely quickly and in some places rather brutally eliminated the resistance of local tribes.²⁸

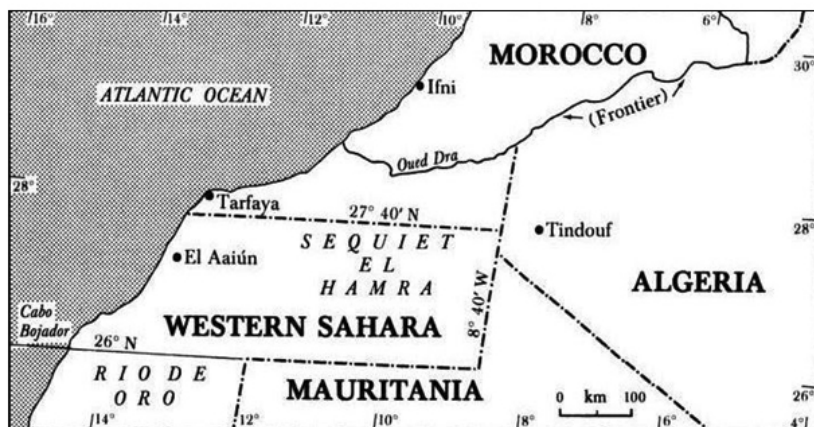
The joint forces consisted of 9,000 Spanish and 5,000 French soldiers and officers, supported by an air force of 60 Spanish and 50 French aircraft. The Spanish units were commanded by General Lopez Valencia, commander of troops on the Canary Islands, and the French and Mauritanian troops were commanded by General Bourgund. Allied troops showed significant differences in equipment and morals. While the French were well-equipped and possessed the armament suitable for desert warfare (they even tried Napalm against rebel forces, which happened to be brand new 'weapon' that time), the Spanish had really outworn equipment (their small arms were from the '40s; they did not have armoured tools, and their Junker-52's, Heinkel-111's and Messerschmitts Bf-109's were made during the Spanish Civil War), together with their logistics support being catastrophic. Despite all these, the allies finally succeeded with the joint operation.²⁹

The Spanish main forces started to retake the area from the towns of El Aaiun and Villa Bens (Tarfaya), while the French launched their offensive from Tindouf (Algeria) and Fort Trinquet (Mauritania). The rebel forces concentrated their troops in the valleys of rivers Tan-Tan and Sagiet el Hamra, taking up positions in caves and the riverbank. However, the area was bombed by allied warplanes and Saharawians lost more than 150 men and most of their weapons in the air raids. Between 10th and 20th February 1958 Spanish mechanised forces (4th, 9th and 13th battalions of the Legion, Santiago armoured regiment, one rifle battalion, and an artillery unit) took Edchera Pass then towns of Tafurdad and Smara.

On 21st February Spanish and French troops eliminated another, 300-strong rebel unit between Awsard and Bir Aznaran. As a result of these operations there remained significant forces only in the region of Agadir, with some 12,000 rebels stationed there. However, when the locals saw the massive allied forces the insurgents sneaked back home. The total losses suffered by the allied forces during the operation was 8 Spanish and 7 French killed in action and a few wounded.³⁰

Thanks to the results of the military operations the Moroccan Government got scared and refused to deliver food or weapons to the rebels and later on concluded an agreement with Spain. In exchange for their neutrality, Morocco was given the Tarfaya region in the northern zone of Sahara, dwelled primarily by Saharawians (**Cintra Agreement, 1 April 1958**).³¹

The next map shows the territories Spain left as part of the agreement:



Source: Ian Brownlie: *African Boundaries*. p. 150.

In the period of time after the military campaign the region had a relative peace. The only incident took place in March 1961 when American, Canadian, French and Spanish researchers of the Union Oil and Company were kidnapped. Later the hostages were freed after the ransom money was paid for them.³²

Meanwhile, the political course of colonialist countries changed. After the Bandung Conference on 19th April 1955 these countries started to give autonomy to their colonies.³³

The rapid decolonisation was also supported and underpinned by UN Resolution 1514, the so-called “Colony Declaration”. The approval of the declaration by the colonising countries was a significant step toward the elimination of colonies resulting in a nearly total redrawing of the political map of Africa in the following 10 years.

In 1962, Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania, the three countries surrounding Spanish Sahara also gained their independence, and in 1965 there were 38 independent countries in Africa. Partly because of this fact and partly because of an increasing diplomatic pressure the option of gaining autonomy by local people emerged.

THE BEGINNING OF THE STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE

At the beginning of the 1960s Western Sahara was already considered to be valuable because in 1947 the first phosphate mine was discovered and later, after a successful search production started. The Spanish started searching for other minerals, and thus, holding the territory became more important. In the meantime, part of the nomads settled down and a slow migration process started.

The Saharawians tried to establish their own political organisations, and to achieve this, in 1967, they created the Saharan Liberation Organisation (**MLS-Harakat Tahrir saguia el-Hamra wa Oued ed-Dahab**). Its first leader was **Mohamed Sidi Ibrahim Bassiri**.¹ Bassiri was member of the Reguibat tribe from the city of Tan-Tan and later he was granted state scholarship for his studies in Casablanca. Following this period he had the opportunity to earn more degrees from the universities of Cairo and Damascus where he came under the influence of the Baathists who professed Pan-Arab ideas. After graduation he returned to Morocco where he became the founding editor-in-chief of a radical newspaper entitled “The Torch” (*Al-Chibab*).²

In 1967 he decided to return home and started working as a teacher of religion in the local mosque in the town of Smara. Using his religious influence, he established his organisation which was secret at first and started the instigations against the Spanish. The Spanish military counter-intelligence took notice of his activity and in June 1970 they prepared a report for the Governor. The report attracted the Governor’s attention to the threats posed by the new organisation which numbered several Saharawians serving in the Spanish Legion, in the local police, and in the Nomad Troops among its members.

The organisation first wanted to pursue peaceful means to achieve its aim: the independence of the Saharan territories. On 17 June 1970 they organised a huge series of demonstrations to protest against the Spanish plan to officially transform the Sahara into a Spanish province. The demonstration was suppressed, 12 people were killed and hundreds got wounded. Several members of the movement, among them 16 soldiers were jailed or deported to the Canary Islands. After his arrest their leader simply disappeared and never turned up again. A significant part of the locals concluded that it was impossible to achieve their aim by peaceful means and consequently more and more people supported the idea of an armed rebellion.³ On 10th May 1973 they established the **Polisario** (Frente

Popular para la Liberacion de Saguia El-Hamra y Rio de Oro) with the aim to fully liberate Western Sahara by means of armed fight. The first leader of the Organisation was **El Ouali Mustapha Sayed**.⁴ The first action was carried out 10 days later, on 20th May, under his leadership when they attacked the Spanish military post in **El-Khanga**.⁵ The attack was characterised by amateurism and a lot of lessons had to be learned for the sake of successfully organising the next raids. 12 soldiers of the Nomad Troops were on duty at the isolated post, some of them went on patrol when they captured two young men hiding around the place. They were arrested and the soldiers had no idea that one of them was El Ouali.

The commander of the unit reported the incident to the nearest Spanish garrison, but they could not transport the captives because of the raid. The soldiers were taken by surprise and they could not even use their weapons, so the attackers could set their captives free and swiftly left with the weapons. The members of the Spanish patrol that was sent to the scene could only find the nomads who were tied together.⁶

In a short period of time they carried out more attacks against Adjedjimat, Bir Lehmar, Tifariti and Guelta. They attacked the phosphate mines in Bou Craa and damaged the transport installations that linked them with the harbour. Because of these events, the UN sent an investigation team in May 1975 and concluded that the Polisario acted as a liberating, not as a terrorist organisation (although they were supported by Libya with weapons and in other ways as well).⁷

(In 1965 the Moroccan Ministry for Saharan and Mauritanian Affairs established the FLS – Frente de Liberacion del Sahara bajo Dominacion Espanola, the party working for the liberation of Spanish Sahara, which then was put under the supervision of Moulay Hassan Ben Driss, the uncle of the king.⁸) This organisation sent a delegation to the November–December 1966 Session of the UN General Assembly under the leadership of Ma El-Ajnin's grandson El-Abadila Ould Sheikh Mohammed Laghdaf in order to lobby in Morocco's interest. The party even published a newspaper *Nuestro Sahara* under the supervision of Brika Zaruali who was member of the Moroccan government party Istiqlal.⁹

In 1974 the **Saharan National Unity Party (PUNS)** was founded with Spanish support with appointments for some tribal leaders and Jemma members. The party adopted a 14-point programme, in which they mentioned the implementation of the right for self-determination as well as the complete rejection of the territorial demands of the neighbouring countries. This political formation wanted to achieve its aims in co-operation with the Spaniards and

excluded the possibility of armed combat. The preservation of the old society, culture and religion was a significant aim of the organisation, and as such, its representatives and leaders were sheikhs, wealthy people as well as the older generation. A proof of the force they represented was that in 1975 more than 60% of the Jemima members belonged to the National Unity Party. After the Spanish retreat from Western Sahara the organisation ceased to exist.¹⁰

The front for **Liberation and Unity (FLU)** was established with Moroccan support mainly with the participation of soldiers who left the Moroccan military. There is no available information on its activity.¹¹ Already in June 1972 the **MOREHOB (Mouvement de Resistance des Hommes Bleus)** movement was established in Morocco with the aim to liberate Western Sahara, Ceuta and Melilla.¹² Their leader was former policeman Bashir Figuigui, or a soldier of fortune known as **Eduardo Moha**. The only verifiable activity of this organisation was that they sent leaflets to different foreign embassies in which they condemned the Spaniards. When the UN representatives visited Western Sahara they reported that they had not met any person who was member of this organisation or anybody who knew about its existence. Moha first wanted to ask Algeria for money to support the struggle for liberation, but because he did not get any support he moved to Rabat and represented the Moroccan view point from that time on.¹³

As an international reaction to the raids organised by the Polisario on 23rd and 24th July 1973 in Agadir, Algeria, Mauritania and Morocco held a tripartite summit meeting and a joint statement was issued:

"The three Heads of State devoted special attention to the issue of the Sahara which is still a Spanish colony. They reiterated their commitment to the principal of self-determination and they pledged to keep an eye on its implementation. Self-determination should be implemented in a framework which ensures that the free will of the people of the Sahara prevails in accordance with pertinent UN resolutions".¹⁴

On 21st September 1973 General **Franco** announced that he would grant territorial autonomy for the Saharawians and gradually also the right for self-determination.¹⁵ As a result, Morocco started a powerful diplomatic offensive in order to prove their historical rights to the territory of Western Sahara. According to them, the locals had only two choices: either to stay under Spanish rule, or to join the Moroccan homeland. France supported the second version.¹⁶

When on 4th July 1974 Spain made its plan on granting autonomy to Western Sahara public, the outraged King **Hassan II** sent a message on the

same day to the already ill Franco and warned him not to take any unilateral steps concerning Spanish Sahara. In a different statement the King already dismissed the result of the referendum that was accepted at all fora, except if that would mean joining Morocco. At this point he was already preparing for military intervention and appointed **Colonel Dlimi**, one of his most loyal soldiers to be the commander of the border district. In virtually no time the Colonel amassed 24,000 troops along the border.¹⁷

The King derived his right to the Saharan Territory from the so-called “Greater Morocco” line of thought. The expression was first used by Allal el-Fassi the leader of the Istiqlal party on the day Morocco gained its independence.¹⁸ According to the politician who had just returned from exile, their freedom was only partial because the Moroccans had the task to restore the old Almoravida empire, which he simply called as “Greater Morocco”.

On 27th March 1956 at a public meeting the politician talked about the fact that the whole territory between Sahara Tindouf and Atar, as well as part of the Algerian territories belonged to Morocco.

*“Even if Morocco is independent, it is not entirely free. The Moroccan people will continue their fight until Tangier, the Sahara from Tindouf to Colomb-Bechar, Touati, Kenadza and Mauritania are freed and can rejoin Morocco. Our independence can only be complete together with the Sahara. The border of Morocco in the south will be at St. Louis in Senegal”.*¹⁹

The mostly uneducated masses were easy to manipulate and in the fever of the newly-won independence it was easy to fanaticise them, and they really believed that there was a chance for this vision to come true. Seeing the extent of his influence, El-Fassi got even greedier and in a newspaper financed by his party “Al Alam” he went as far as to call the whole of Algerian Sahara, Mauritania and the northern part of Mali an ancient Moroccan territory.²⁰

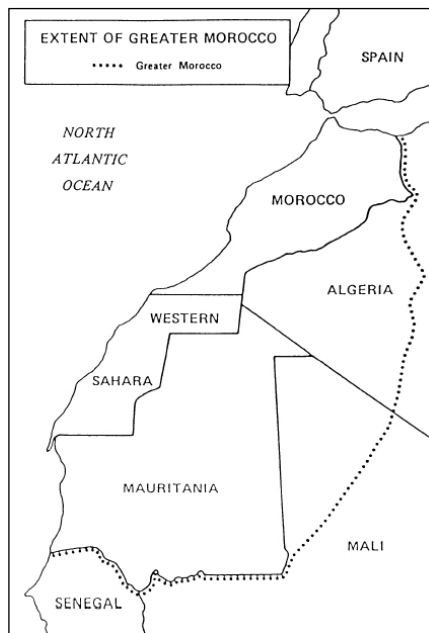
The Moroccan Government did not pay attention to this theory, which they considered unserious and unfounded but they could not allow any other political force, except for the central power, to mobilise the masses. Since the structure of the independent kingdom was only being formed, a rival party or politician who could manipulate the masses would have posed a serious threat.

On 25th February 1958 King Mohammed V in a speech held in the valley of the Draa river on the marketplace of the M’hamid oasis stated for the first time that he would do anything in his power to unify families and to regain the Saharan territory.²¹ The use of military force seemed to be unrealistic since

at that time the units of the Liberation Army in Rio de Oro suffered a harsh defeat from the French and Spanish troops.

In spite of this, in accordance with the Cintra Agreement, Spain handed over Tarfaya and its surroundings without requesting any compensation from Morocco.²² Although this unexpected gesture took the Moroccans by surprise, they immediately announced that they ask the Spanish government to modify the borders, even though this meant the end of a significant part of El-Fassi's dreams. First, they gave up their demand for the northern part of Mali in September 1960, when the first president of the country, Modibo Keita participated in a meeting that established a political-economic organisation called "The Casablanca Group".²³ When the UN recognised Mauritania as an independent state in 1960 the Moroccan territorial demands became unfounded.²⁴

On the map you can see the territory that the politicians demanded for Morocco:



Source: Tony Hodges: Western Sahara. The Roots of a Desert War

“The Sand War” that broke out with Algeria in 1963 was the end of the “Greater Morocco” dream²⁵ and subsequently the Moroccan government had only territorial demands for Western Sahara.²⁶

In spite of the troop concentration on 21st August, the Spanish Government sent a note to the then UN Secretary General, in which they announced their willingness to conduct a referendum on self-determination.

Mauritania also had territorial claims for Western Sahara claiming that the same people lived on the two sides of the artificially created border.

“I cannot help destroy the ties that bind us together: we have the same names, we speak the same language, we follow the same noble traditions, we have the same religious leaders and saints, our animals graze on the same places and we let them drink from the same wells. To sum up, we are members of the same desert civilization that we are very proud of. This is why I call upon our brothers who live in Spanish Sahara to make the dream of a spiritually and economically unified Mauretania come true.”²⁷

These words were spoken by Vice-President **Mokhtar Ould Daddah**, six weeks after his inauguration despite the fact that Mauritania was at the time under joint governance by the French and Mauritaniens, which meant that the territory was a French Protectorate under the French President.

According to the plan of the newly-elected Vice President, the establishment of a new, greater Mauritania would have been possible only by unification with the Saharawian tribes that spoke the Hassania language.²⁸ The Moroccans, of course, protested and called the Mauritaniens “loyal puppies of the French”. To prove his steadfastness the new Vice President demanded a part of the territories handed over by the Cintra Agreement because those were once under the influence of the Tekna tribe.

Naturally, behind the half-unreal demand there was a serious anxiety concerning Moroccan territorial expansion. If the Moroccans had had occupied the demanded territory, a common border of 1,200 kms would have been formed between the two arch enemies. Morocco would not have recognised the border as final, so it would have attempted to put its theoretical demands into practice, which could have meant the end of the independent state of Mauritania.²⁹ This is why Spanish Sahara secured a kind a status quo for Mauritania since the presence of the Spanish troops refrained the Moroccans from any possible military actions.³⁰ Consequently, they had good diplomatic and economic relationship in the background, while officially

they had territorial demands and criticised Spain as a colonial power.³¹ The independent politics of **President Ould Daddah** lasted only until October 1974, when the two countries reached a secret agreement on the division of the territory (26-29 October).³² Algerian **President Boumedien** disapproved these plans, and starting from the summer of 1975 he supported the Polisario, and in June he recognised it as a liberation movement. The Algerians were, of course, not driven by unselfishness but by serious economic interests as they wanted to get hold of the exit to the Atlantic Ocean. This would have made the establishment of an ocean-fishing flotilla and the exploitation of the iron ore mines around Tindouf possible.³³

There were rich mines in the surroundings of the city but without any transport capacity, production would have been unprofitable. However, in case there had been a seaport on the coast of Western Sahara, opening the mines would have become profitable. To reach the Algerian ports on the Mediterranean a 1,100-km-long railway line should have been built, while 510 kms would have been enough to Tarfaya. With the longer version iron ore mining would not have become profitable even after decades (not to mention investments), but the possible use of the Saharan ports could have brought serious profits for the country.³⁴

It should also be mentioned that Algeria and Morocco are arch enemies and up to this date they have had border disputes. This is the reason why Algeria would support any initiative that could weaken Moroccan influence in the Maghreb region.

THE EARLY ACTIVITIES OF THE UN IN THE RESOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM

The recognition of Moroccan and Mauritanian demands based on unproven historic facts, coupled with the ignorance to the right of autonomy of the people of Western Sahara meant a significant step back from UN Resolution 1514 (XV) approved in December 1960. That was the document known as the “Declaration on the Granting of Independence to colonial countries and peoples” also known in some countries as the Colony Declaration.¹

Although Paragraph 2 of Article 1 of the UN Charter provides for the compliance with the principles of the right of autonomy the real result was the Colony Declaration approved at the XVth Session of the General Assembly. This document also states the equality of nations and the enforcement of their right to autonomy even if they are not independent yet. The Declaration calls on the involved countries to a rapid and unconditional elimination of any kind of colonisation.

Article 2 states that *“all peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.”* The Declaration also states that *“inadequacy of political, economic, social, or educational preparedness should never serve as a pretext for delaying independence.”*

In 1961 Spain officially declared that Western Sahara was its overseas province.² The very same year a Decolonisation Committee was established at the UN which regularly put the Western Sahara issue on the agenda from September 1963 on, and on 16th October 1964 its first resolution was published calling on Spain to enforce the right to autonomy in its Sahara territories.³

In the UN organisations Morocco supported the idea that *“Western Sahara and the other Spanish colonies should gain their independence in the shortest possible time, allowing the peoples in the region to exercise power without the presence of colonisers.”*

At the same time Morocco expressed its hopes in the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) that due to historic reasons Saharawians would join Morocco. That time Mauritania supported the establishment of an independent State of Western Sahara, leading to several conflicts with the representatives of Moroccan diplomacy. In such a tense situation and on the basis of Resolution 2229 (XXI) of the UN Decolonisation Committee

approved on 16th December 1965 Spain was called on to put an end to the state of colony of Western Sahara and Ifni.⁴

However, this Resolution was not accepted by Spain and Portugal, therefore, a year later the UN reinforced the right of Saharawian people to autonomy and identified the declaration of a referendum in accordance with the following:

“Public administration in accordance with the thrives of the native population of Spanish Sahara and in co-ordination with the Governments of Morocco and Mauritania and all the involved parties should define the conditions of a UN-supervised referendum in order to allow the native population of the region to exercise their right to autonomy.”

Responding to this Resolution the Government of Spain gathered over 800 sheikhs who submitted a joint declaration to the UN on 21st March 1966, stating their wish to further belong to the Kingdom of Spain. At the same time, the tribal leaders explicitly rejected the idea of accepting the rule of any of the neighbouring countries.⁵

On 11th May 1967 a decree was issued by the local Spanish leadership on the establishment of the People’s Assembly (Jemma), whose members were partly delegated by the authorities and partly elected by the people.⁶ This was an attempt to maintain Spanish influence over the region although between 1967 and 1973 the UN repeated its previous resolution on the right of native people to autonomy and a referendum.⁷

With reference to the UN Resolution of 14th December 1972 the rightfulness of the establishment of the Sahara Arabic Democratic Republic was justified by the Memorandum of the Polisario issued on 20th May 1976.

The Resolution confirmed the “*special responsibility of the UN*” for the organisation of a referendum and the expression of the “*unalienable right of the peoples of Sahara to independence*” was read four times in the text.

Stating that the nomadic way of life of the majority of the population complicates the organisation of a referendum the Spanish authorities delayed its declaration for several years. Both the Mauritanian and Moroccan Governments benefited from this attitude as they could use the time at their disposal for gaining the support of the members of the Jemma.

On 21st September 1973 the Jemma was provided the basic rights for exercising legislative power by the Spanish Government and General Franco made a promise to allow the population of Western Sahara to make a free decision on their future when they wish to do so.⁸

In July 1974 a new Constitution for Western Sahara was declared by Spain, which significantly increased the responsibilities of the Jemima. Then, a mere 6 weeks later, it was also declared that the referendum would be conducted in the first semester of 1975.⁹

As part of the plan, a census of those with a right to vote was conducted resulting in a figure of 73,497 although a part of the nomads living in the desert could not be reached, therefore, they could not be put on the list of voters either. This referendum is not uninteresting at all, as the Polisario, the Government of Morocco and various UN organisations regularly refer to its outcomes.

All tribes living in Spanish Sahara were involved in the 1974 census. On the basis of their geographic location, and social status the Saharawians were divided into different groups. These were called: Arabs, Tekna, Chorfa, Zuaia and Znaga, or Tribus Costeras.

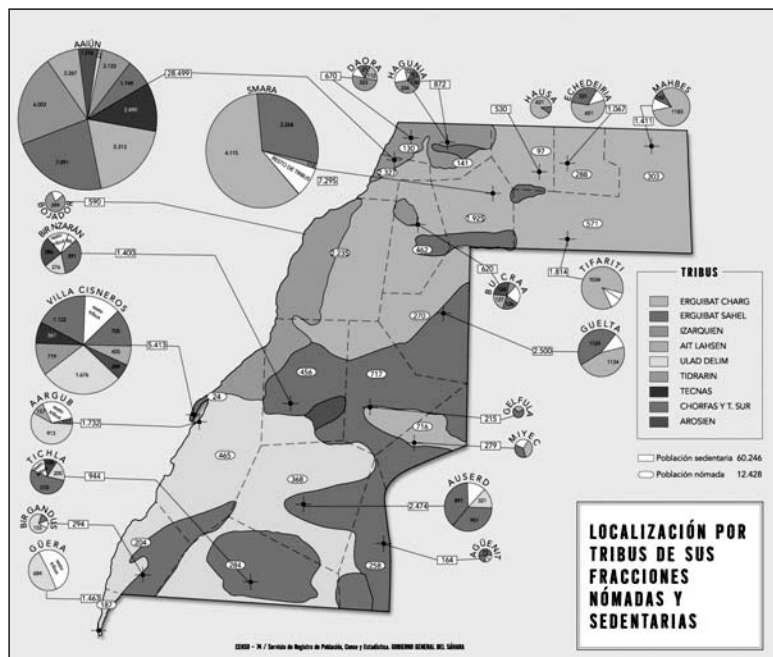
The differentiation between tribes was made as follows: one letter stood for each tribe depending on their population in the territory.

Reguibat was the biggest tribe (over 50% of the registered Saharawians belonged to that), and both groups of the tribe were marked with a separate letter. Although Reguibats are regarded as a single tribe their two groups (Sarg and Sahel) were dealt with independently by the Spanish as they highly emphasised their different features.

As a result of the census, the seven biggest tribes were marked with letters from A to G:¹⁰

- Reguibat Sarg (A)
- Reguibat Sahael (B)
- Izarguien (C)
- Ait Lahsen (D)
- Arosien (E)
- Oulad Delim (F)
- Oulad Tidrarin (G)

The map below shows the location of various tribes during the Spanish census:



Source: IDC Centre, Layoune

The remaining 103 tribes were grouped on the basis of their geographical location in accordance with the following:¹¹

- Tribes originally inhabiting areas north of river Draa but with descendants migrating to the Sahara region. These tribes (Tribus del Norte), i.e. the Northern Tribes, were marked with letter H and consisted of the following ones: Yagout, Ait Musa Ould Ali, Ould bou Aita, Ait Ba Amran, Escarna and other minor tribes (Tribus Varias).
- Tribes of Zuaia and Chorfa descent were the following: Ahel Sejk Ma el Ajnin, Filala, Toubalt, Ahel Berical-la, Tendega and Oulad Bou Sbaa.
- Fishing or shepherd tribes living along the Atlantic coast (Tribus costeras y del Sur) made to pay tax by stronger tribes. These came originally from the southern part of the Sahara (Mauritania, Niger, etc.), such as: Foicat, Imeraguen, Le Menasir, Mejjat, Idegob and other coastal tribes.

Thus letter codes from A to G marked tribes and the codes were further modified into combinations marking sub-tribes and clans. Clans were given the letter codes of their tribes and a two-digit number resulting in the registration of several small groups under the same combination of letters and numbers. (Code H61 e.g. was shared by 17 tribes).¹²

The results of the census in the case of tribes marked with letters A and G were as follows:

A – Reguibat Sarg	(4 sub-tribes and 26 clans)	20,275
B – Reguibat Sahel	(7 sub-tribes and 39 clans)	18,239
C – Izarguien	(2 sub-tribes and 10 clans)	7,984
D – Ait Lahsen	(3 sub-tribes and 13 clans)	3,540
E – Arousien	(2 sub-tribes and 9 clans)	2,858
F – Oulad Delim	(5 sub-tribes and 20 clans)	5,382
G – Oulad Tidrarin	(15 clans)	4,842
Total:		63,120

Categories marked with letters H, I, or J were added another two digits referring to sub-tribes and not to clans.

H – Northern tribes	(29 tribes)	3,373
I – Chorfa and Zuaia	(6 tribes)	4,631
J – Coastal tribes	(68 tribes)	2,361
Total:		10,363

In the case of these tribes there are no precise data on clans and most of them could not be registered as they had no names of their own.

In 1974 during the Spanish census every person in their reach was registered. However, not every registered person (73,497)¹³ belonged to the Saharawians, therefore, three more categories were created:

Spanish	20,156
Allies	548
People temporarily in the area	857

Thus, the final result of the census in 1974 was 95,058 persons.¹⁴ The Spanish were marked with letter Z and although they were also put on the list approved by the UN they had no right to vote.

Under the title ‘Allies’ persons were marked with country codes indicating their home state, such as: MAU, ALG, MAR, GUI, MAL, SEN (Mauritania, Algeria, Morocco, Guinea, Mali or Senegal).

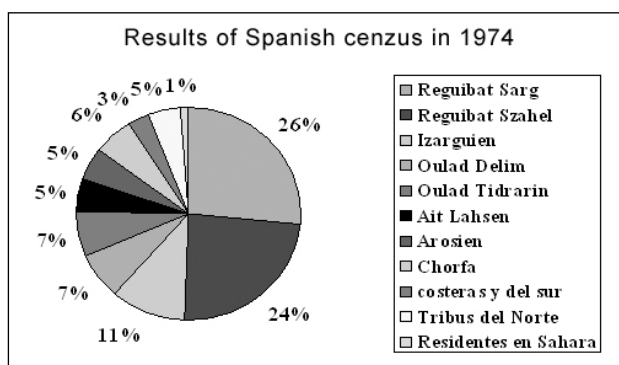
Although these persons were listed by the 1974 census they were not included in the list compiled by the UN. Nevertheless, several of them indicated their intention to participate in the referendum on the future of the region, making negotiating parties agree that a person recognised by any of the tribal leaders as one belonging to their tribe can have full right to vote. Of course, this decision was first disputed by Morocco but when later it was assured that these were only voters in the Spanish-organised referendum and not their descendants tensions were decreased.

The third group comprised persons temporarily staying in Spanish Sahara and since most of them were of Saharawian descent and lived in the area they were registered by the UN as full right voters.¹⁵ Naturally, there had been heated discussions within even the department preparing the referendum and the final decision was made on the basis of the advice of the first head of the Registration Office established by MINURSO, Gabriel Miliev.

Temporary settlers were marked with letter code K:

K – Temporary settlers in the area (10 groups) 857

The figure below shows the results of the referendum:



Source: IDC Centre, Layoune

After the census was accomplished the Jemma was summoned by Governor of El-Aaiun in 1973-74 M. Fernando de Santiago y Diaz de Mendevil, in order to discuss issues related to the organising of the referendum.

139 members of the Tribal Council arrived in the town of El-Aaiun in the composition below:

- Reguibat tribe, 43 representatives
- Ouled Delim tribe, 23 representatives
- Aroussiyine tribe, 11 representatives
- Izerguiyine tribe, 21 representatives
- Ouled Tidrarine tribe, 13 representatives
- Ait Lahcene tribe, 7 representatives
- Ahel Sejk Ma El-Ainin tribe, 5 representatives
- Ait Moussa tribe, 2 representatives
- Ahel Barik-Allah tribe, 2 representatives
- Filala tribe, 1 representative
- Toubbalt tribe, 1 representative
- Tandha tribe, 1 representative
- Ouled Bou Sbaa tribe, 1 representative
- Ouled Bou Aita tribe, 1 representative
- Ait Ba Amrane tribe, 1 representative
- Skarna tribe, 1 representative
- Yagout tribe, 1 representative
- Lafoukai tribe, 1 representative
- Imraguen tribe, 1 representative
- Lemmaur tribe, 1 representative
- Mejjat tribe, 1 representative

The Council unanimously supported the Spanish leadership and approved its plans on the future of the area.¹⁶

The Moroccan leadership hoped that as a result of the referendum Western Sahara would unite with the Kingdom but due to the changes in the political situation in Spain Morocco could not rely on Spanish support. Thus, King Hassan II contacted the International Court of Justice in The Hague (on 17th September). He also promised not to impede the work of the UN commission analysing the situation in Western Sahara.

Consequently, on 13th December 1974 UN Resolution 3292 (XXIX.) was approved on the postponement of the referendum, on the establishment of a board of enquiry and on consulting the International Court of Justice in The Hague. After large-scale preparations and organising activities the delegation

visited Western Sahara, Madrid, and the capitals of neighbouring countries between 8th May and 9th June 1975.¹⁷

Governor of the Sahara Territories General Gomez de Salazar wanted to exclude even the chances of a pro-Polisario demonstration, therefore, everyone involved in anti-Spanish policy was removed from the town. At the arrival of the delegation thousands of local people were gathered to be waving the symbols of Spanish-supported PUNS Party along the highway between the airport and the town. However, the Governor was shocked when they left the airport for the town with the Head of the Delegation, UN Ambassador of Ivory Coast Simon Ake because the crowd that had cheered for the Spanish before threw away PUNS symbols and began to wave Polisario flags and symbols. Wherever the delegation went the following weeks the Polisario and its supporters organised mass rallies and demonstrations while the Spanish were only supported by a weakening PUNS Party.

The biggest pro-Polisario demonstration was held in El Aaiun on 13th May and even Spanish papers reported on over 15,000 demonstrators supporting the opposition organisation.

Not only the representatives of the Spanish Government but ordinary Spanish people were also surprised by the level of commitment of people. These emotions generated counteractions and the Spanish population upset by the pro-Polisario demonstrations and denouncing the organisation sang falanquist songs “Arriba Espana” and “Viva la Légion” on the rooftops of the European quarter. Later, on 15th May more than 200 Spanish women held a demonstration in front of the building of the Governor’s Office demanding that the Governor should silence terrorist supporters.¹⁸

PUNS leaders were similarly shocked by the events and the losing of their seemingly strong leading role. They managed to hold their positions in Villa Cisneros (Dakhla) only where they demonstrated separately from independence supporters but in the same place. This was the only town where the Commission had negotiations with local PUNS leaders representing various positions even within the Party as far as the future of the region was concerned. Some of them envisioned their common future under Spanish rule while others supported the idea of an independent state.¹⁹ It was the opinion of the leader of PUNS that changed the most. When Khalihenna Ould Rashid realised that his Party had lost its firm leading position in local political life and its Spanish allies did not represent a solid background and safe support he immediately changed his previously stable opinion. Until that time he envisaged the future of the area in co-operation with the Spanish and labelled Moroccan territorial demands a nightmare. Nevertheless, on the night of 18th May he and two of his closest

colleagues left El Aaiun and visited Hassan II in Casablanca. Two days later the party leader who escaped from his party took the oath to the King in the name of the Saharawians and denounced the Polisario as a dangerous communist organisation.²⁰ Apart from him only former Mayor of El Aaiun removed by the Spanish took the oath (bayaa) to the King of Morocco.

The reason is that Saharawian leaders considered anything better than unification with Morocco. That may be the reason why PUNS suggestions were not regarded important by the UN Commission, which did not deal with the issue in depth. Ake, and his Cuban and Iranian fellow diplomats toured Western Sahara, where they got convinced that a significant part of Saharawians did not wish to support Spanish rule and wanted an independent state.

After the week-long thorough fact-finding mission the Commission submitted a report to the UN, which included the following:

“the co-operation with Spanish authorities allowed the Commission to visit every major centre in spite of the very limited timeframe at its disposal and collect information on the position of local population. Everywhere the Commission went was met with political mass demonstrations. The Commission had meetings with the representatives of all of the communities of the Sahara. All this made the Commission clearly understand that there is a major agreement among the people of the Sahara on the issue of independence.”²¹

Almost simultaneously with the visit two platoons of local soldiers serving in the Spanish Army (Troopas Nomadas) rebelled against their officers on 10th and 11th May. An officer resisting was killed, then, the rest of Spanish officers and soldiers were locked up in the prison and the rebels joined Polisario troops with their weapons.²² The unit participated in a field exercise near Mehaires in the Gourellia Mountains. The atmosphere was extremely tense all the time and officers checked the personnel more rigorously but a part of the NCOs took also the soldiers' side.

Resting and unable to significant resistance type of officers were disarmed at the time of siesta. I was told the history of the incident by a former junior NCO serving in the Spanish Army and participating in the mutiny, currently Head of Personnel Department of the 4th Military District (Mehaires). On the third day after the mutiny guerrillas fighting against Spanish rule attacked the Police Station in Guelta Zemmour and captured the Saharawian Commander after the police officers changed sides. As a response to this event some 200

soldiers of the nomadic troops were arrested and accused of co-operation with rebels by the Spanish authorities.

Nevertheless, the Polisario control over the desert area further increased. On 27th May armed members of the organisation attacked a local police unit (Policia Territorial) near Ain Ben Tili and captured 14 local police officers. Then, on 14th June the entire personnel of the Guelta Zemmour police station joined the insurgents after those had taken the building of police station in a raid.²³

These events significantly impeded the Spanish authorities in keeping the real situation secret from the Commission, and it was also clear that local population did not wish to remain a part of the Spanish Kingdom as a colony or an overseas county. When the Commission visited Spain and the countries neighbouring Western Sahara (Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania) its members unanimously came to the conclusion that the area should be provided with the right to autonomy. Of course, there were several plans on the transition, and the seemingly final version was agreed upon at the meeting of the Head of the Commission and Polisario leader El-Vali Mustafa Sayed on 29th May.²⁴

In accordance with the plan the Spanish were first to hand over public administration to a “National Council”, then, parallel with their gradual withdrawal from the area the right of control over the area was to be handed over to Polisario fighters. The UN was to supervise the entire process and to exercise the right of protector over the region.

Since Moroccan and Mauritanian territorial demands were also unanimously rejected by the local population the Commission suggested that local people should be able to independently make a decision on their future.²⁵ Then, it was only the statement of the International Court of Justice in The Hague that the UN needed.

THE DECISION OF THE INTERNATIONAL COURT OF JUSTICE (ICJ) IN THE HAGUE

Since the report of the UN Visiting Mission was not favourable for Morocco it officially turned to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in order to ask for the “re-annexation” of Western Sahara. At the same time Morocco was also trying to exert influence on the Saharans. The armed members of the “Movement for Free Unification” (*Frente de Liberacion y de la Unidad-FLU*) which they established in February 1975 and financed conducted several terrorist attacks against Spanish soldiers and Sahrawi civilians on Saharan territory.¹

Before the arrival of the UN Visiting Mission they attacked the military checkpoint in the village of Jdiriya, then, they fired at two Spanish patrol aircrafts and shot dead a Sahrawi businessman as he was returning home. The organisation did not target only Spanish but also Polisario sympathizers especially when they did not have any chance to defend themselves. Eventually, the Spanish authorities had enough of the actions of the FLN and started to organise a preventive military action.

A double agent paid by the Spanish as well falsely informed the leadership of the FLN that the Spanish fort in Mahbas was guarded only by 4-5 soldiers while the others were searching for Polisario guerrillas in the mountains. The gunmen of the organisation walked into the brilliant trap and all of them (44 fighters) were captured by the Spanish. The captives possessed documents which proved beyond doubt that the terror attacks were financed and directed by the Moroccan government. Among the captives there was a Moroccan captain (Abba el-Seikh) as well as several other NCOs and soldiers. The Spanish protested officially, but the attacks continued until a Spanish patrol near Hagounia eliminated a more than 20-strong unit where several leaders of the FLN were taken captive. Since the organisation lost a significant part of the leadership and the Spanish almost fully closed down the Moroccan-Saharan border with troops relocated from the Canary Islands, the organisation could not carry out any more serious actions.²

As a response, the Moroccan leadership amassed troops in the border region, the strength of which was estimated at 25,000 by Spanish intelligence sources.³ The Spanish being concerned that they would lose even their remaining influence on the territory, initiated secret talks with the leaders of the Polisario on a peaceful takeover and suggested that PUNS, Djemaa and the Polisario should be unified.⁴

Although some of the leaders of PUNS and Djemaa started talks with the Polisario, they were not able to put an end to the lack of confidence that had already existed, and as a consequence, it was impossible for these organisations to join forces.

Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs **Pedro Cortina Y Mauri** was also involved in the secret talks with the Polisario.⁵

The Saharans made an offer according to which Spain could use the phosphate mines free of charge for another 20 years as well as a significant part of the fishing rights. In return, the Spanish set free 23 jailed Polisario activists together with the 7 guerrillas who attacked the Fosbucraa mine and the organisation was semi-officially recognised.⁶

The co-operation between the organisation that was illegal until that point and Spain sealed the fate of PUNS, which had become completely insignificant by that time. Finally, on 10th October the representatives of the former leading Sahrawi party officially joined the Polisario in the presence of the members of Djamaa and the mandated members of the Spanish Parliament (Cortes) (Khatri Ould Said Ould el-Joumani és Saila Ould Abeida), although the two parties got united only later.⁷

The Polisario also made attempts to convince Mauritania to side with them and they offered President Mokhtar Ould Daddah to establish a federal state which would unify the two territories under his leadership.⁸

However, the Mauritanian President was convinced that they would not be able to stop the Moroccans and that the ICJ would also support their territorial demands, so he chose to co-operate with Morocco.

Soon after he had a meeting with the Moroccan King and after receiving his guarantees that Morocco would withdraw its territorial claims to Mauritania, he assured King Hassan II of his full support.⁹

Eventually, the week before the Court's decision the Moroccan and Mauritanian diplomats basically managed to win the acceptance of the neighbouring countries (except for that of Algeria), according to which by the end of the year Western Sahara would be returned to the Kingdom of Morocco.

In December 1974 the representatives of the UN member states held a vote on the questions to be submitted to the Court, but Morocco and Mauritania had already reached an agreement on the summit meeting in Rabat (26–29 October 1974) on how to divide the territory, as well as on their common standpoint in the UN.¹⁰

Although Spain suggested that the Court should also take a stand on the question of decolonisation and self-determination the Moroccan and

Mauritanian proposals were adopted with 81 votes for, 43 abstentions and no vote against them.

The UN requested the Court's Advisory opinion on the following questions:

1. Was Western Sahara a territory belonging to no one (*terra nullius*) at the time of colonisation by Spain?
2. What were the legal ties between this territory and the Kingdom of Morocco and the Mauritanian entity?

The International Court of Justice requested the official documents for the investigation to be handed in and started the proceedings on 25th June 1975. Four months later, on 16th October 1975, only two days after the findings of the UN Commission for Western Sahara was made public, the Court announced its decision.¹¹

According to the Court, the Moroccan evidence concerning common history "*was not sufficient to prove that there had ever been de facto Moroccan authority over the territory*". On the basis of the evidence presented, the Court decided that as there was no proof that Morocco had ever collected taxes on the territory, there was nothing to prove Moroccan authority.¹²

During his 1882 and 1886 campaigns the Sultan of Morocco did not even reach the Draa River not to mention Western Sahara. At the same time there was no evidence to prove that the Raguibat tribe had accepted the authority of the Sultan to the contrary of what the Moroccan documents claimed. The fact that Sheikh El-Ajnin requested help from the Moroccan ruler does not prove the recognition of Moroccan authority either.

However, the Court accepted a possible explanation that the Moroccans could have exercised authority over some nomadic tribes in Western Sahara and South Morocco through the **Kaids** who lived in the border region. (For Morocco this sentence was the reference for occupying Western Sahara, in spite of the fact that no international organisation recognised its right to do so.)¹³

As for the international agreements, the Court considered that they "*did not prove the international recognition of Moroccan territorial sovereignty over Western Sahara at the time of Spanish colonisation*".

The Mauritanian claim was also rejected by the Court on the basis that in spite of the existence of different emirates and tribes on the territory of Mauritania there had never been a strong central power, i. e. "*It had no recognisable legal entity*". The opinion of the Court was that irrespective of facts, even if the two countries had historical rights, they could not have any territorial demands because in accordance with modern international

jurisdiction the right to self-determination of the Sahrawi people enjoyed precedence over anything else.

The court voted twice on the decision; first, the result was 14 to 1 and after that 15 to 1.¹⁴ This way the UN and the International Court of Justice reached the same conclusion.

The involved countries reacted almost immediately to the decision. Spain declared that it was content with it, while Mauritania felt that the Court had reiterated its legal claims over the Saharan territory.

Morocco only acknowledged the first part of the decision which stated the possible connection between the Kaids and some nomadic tribes. In terms of Islamic law this was an expression of sovereignty and in conclusion there was no need for a referendum to integrate Western Sahara into the Kingdom of Morocco.¹⁵

Nevertheless, the world was taken by surprise when on the day the Court's decision was made public, King Hassan II announced that he would start a peaceful march towards Western Sahara with the participation of 350,000 people.¹⁶



Camels at the well



Caravan



Desert



Layoune

THE GREEN MARCH AND SUBSEQUENT EVENTS

When Hassan II announced the “Green March”, his hidden purpose was to prepare the invasion of Western Sahara. The announcement was met with enthusiasm and by the end of October already 600,000 people registered for participating in the march.¹ Tarfaya, which was 30 kms from the border, was declared as starting point.² The Spanish Government, taking into account the imminent death of Franco (he had got another serious heart attack) would have liked to find a solution, so when they found out about the action they requested the Security Council to convene in order to prevent the intervention against the territory. However, the UN only asked the parties to display self-restraint, i.e. *“to avoid any unilateral step or any other action which would aggravate the situation”*.³

The members of the Polisario and Jemaa asked the Spanish authorities officially to prevent the planned invasion of the territory even by use of force. Jemaa leader Khatri Ould Said Ould el-Joumani in an interview given for a Spanish newspaper stated that the Saharawians would fight the Moroccans to the end. The leader of the PUNS, Dueh Sidna Naucha initiated negotiations with the Spanish and offered the active participation of the local population in the fight against the Moroccans if the Spanish provide them with weapons. The Moroccan threat brought the hostile parties together, the Spanish living in the Sahara as well as PUNS and Polisario representatives were willing to fight against the invaders.⁴

On 2nd November Crown Prince **Juan Carlos**, who by that time had been appointed temporary Head of State, paid a short visit to El-Aaiun, where he inspected the Spanish troops and stated that “Spain would fulfil its commitments in Western-Sahara”.⁵ However, the next day he had talks with Moroccan Prime Minister **Ahmed Osman** in Madrid where they made arrangements about further talks. The UN statement was interpreted by Morocco as encouragement and on 5th November the King announced in his radio speech in Agadir that he would start the march the next day. As a response, the local Spanish governor, **General Gomez de Salazar** held a press conference and claimed that “the Spanish military would perform its duty and would face the participants of the march if they tried to cross the line of defence couple of kilometres from the border”.

The soldiers in the Spanish Legion, together with the soldiers of the Saharan units still loyal to the Spanish were put on alert by the order of the General.

The urgently convened UN Security Council approved a resolution which disapproved the march and called on Morocco to immediately withdraw the action from the territory of Western Sahara. Furthermore, the Council asked all the parties in the conflict to co-operate on the basis of previous UN resolutions.⁶

In its statement the following day the Spanish government declared that “peace was what it would like first and foremost, but not at any cost.” The peaceful aggression continued, and on 6th November the participants of the march crossed the border and penetrated 12 kms deep into Spanish-Saharan territory.⁷

More than 40,000 people were camping in the desert; they were followed by other tens of thousand. Organising the march and providing logistics was a serious challenge for the Moroccan leadership, but through great efforts they managed to provide for the participants. The National Office ordered complete traffic restriction on the whole territory of Southern Morocco and only vehicles transporting food, water and other provisions for the participants were allowed on the roads. During the march 7,813 lorries and 230 ambulances (470 doctors) were on duty. As the military did not have enough vehicles the King ordered the civilian transportation companies to provide their vehicles and drivers for free during the march. From Tarfaya the aircraft of the Moroccan Air Force airlifted the provisions for the masses. Because of the presence of the Spanish military they did not want to risk sending the almost entirely military vehicle convoy into Spanish-Saharan territory.

The aircraft provided the participants of the march with 23,000 tons of water, 17,000 tons of food and 2,590 tons of fuel. According to the calculations of the Moroccan government, financing the Green March cost the state 80 million French Francs (8 million Pounds) without the additional expenses. Some of the political analysts were of the opinion that the march had been organised months before, as the movement and logistic support of such a mass of people would have been impossible in a few days. 12.5% of the participants (43,500 people) were state employees and the full support and security of the march was provided by the military and the Royal Moroccan Gendarmerie (Gendarmie Royale).⁸

According to the official Moroccan point of view, the march was prompted by the spontaneous indignation of the people as well as by their concern for the Saharan territories and people, which had been part of Morocco for centuries. Irrespective of how it happened, it was a brilliant trick from the King to force the Spanish to withdraw this way, as they would not have had the chance to defeat them by military force. (At that time, the Spanish had a 302,000-strong

well-trained and well-equipped force, while the Moroccans had a 61,000-strong poorly-trained and a poorly-equipped force.)

With this move the king made both his opponents and the most dissatisfied major officers of the army silent (during 1971-72 two coups and assassination attempts were committed against the king by some army officers, both resulting in failure).

The trick also reduced the internal opposition to silence, as in that emotionally heightened situation it would have been very dangerous to oppose the King.⁹ The King, who was considered less religious up to that time, became the unifying force of the breakaway territories and the leader of the followers of the true faith (amir al-muminin).¹⁰ The King called the participants 'divine fighters' (mujahideen), and as a result, the incited mass would have taken the fight with the Quran in their hands against the Spanish colonisers in exchange for earthly and other-worldly compensations.¹¹

The King compared the march to the return of Prophet Mohammed from his exile in Medina to Mecca and this is how he encouraged the participants: *"May the sacred book of Allah be our only weapon in this fight"*.¹²

By the time the King arrived in Tarfaya the whole Moroccan population supported him and Moroccan pop star Jil Jilala, who did not appreciate him too much before that, wrote a song about him and the march. The song was on the first place of the Moroccan pop charts for several weeks.¹³

But the Spanish civilians living on the territory of the Sahara and the soldiers serving there felt that the Spanish Government betrayed them and let them down. Not only them, but even most of the generals and high-ranking officers loyal to Franco were against handing over Spanish Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the person who could have given guidance, old Caudillo got ill at the 17th October government session and had several heart attacks during the following week. Although his followers stood by his politics, and Franco was already in coma, those who were against the agreement started to falter and did not dare to take action. It is true that those days the danger that the military could appoint a new head of state instead of agonising Franco was real. This would have meant that Franco's era could have stayed with small corrections though. The new King and the forces loyal to him recognised this fact and by acting quickly and decisively they did not give any chance to the old system. They reached agreements with the leaders who were considered to be the most dangerous for the new system and convinced the majority of the still undecided generals and high-ranking officers to take sides with them. This way the military could not represent a unified standpoint on the issue of the Saharan territories.¹⁵

The King was supported by those leading politicians as well as those who even under Franco had a good relationship with the Moroccan ruler, for example **Arias Navarro**, the leader of the Council of Ministers, **Antonio Carro Martinez**, the Minister for President's Office and **José Ruiz**, one of the leaders of the Falange Party. These politicians convinced the young King that their militarily and diplomatically weakened country would not be able to handle the economic boycott of Morocco and other Arab states turning against them. An eventual war would pose a serious threat for the 18,000 strong Spanish community in Morocco.

Through diplomatic channels the Moroccans gave a signal to the Spanish that in case they supported the independent state of the Saharawians, they would immediately reclaim the cities of Ceuta and Melilla and would even use force to get them back. The military leaders loyal to the King thought that fighting a successful war would have been impossible because of the division and conditions of the Armed Forces.

General **Gomez de Salazar** later on in 1978 felt aggrieved that before signing the Madrid Agreement nobody had consulted him, in spite of the fact that he had started negotiations with Polisario representatives about the peaceful handover of the territory with the backing of the Spanish government.¹⁶ According to the General, if the Moroccan troops had attacked them, they would have destroyed them within 48 hours in such a special situation.

On 29th October, when Franco was administered the last unction by the representative of the Catholic church, Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs **Ahmed Laraki** started secret negotiations with the members of the Spanish diplomacy. That very same day Laraki and Carro Martinez agreed that the Spanish would demilitarise a 10-km stripe on Saharan territory where the participants would symbolically enter, but they would leave it in 48 hours. This way none of the parties would have suffered any loss of prestige as consequence of an eventual retreat. By the end of the month Laraki was joined by Colonel Ahmed Dlimi, who was in charge of the logistic support of the "Green March", Mauritanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Hamdi Ould Mouknass as well as by other Moroccan and Mauritanian diplomats.

As the talks with the Spanish government on handing over the territory reached the final phase, on 9th November 1975 the Moroccan King ordered the participants to go home since the march had achieved its aim. By that time there were approximately 350,000 Moroccans in the desert for whom the possibility to reach Western Sahara meant getting to the Promised Land. The King managed to convince these people to retreat from the territory that

was still ruled by Spain. He offered the participants settlement on the Saharan territory, which would later be taken under control by Morocco, as well as he mentioned land at a reduced price to these people, and this way he managed to calm down the initial indignation of the masses.

On 11th November the negotiations between the Spanish, Moroccan and Mauritanian governments was announced, and three days later the Madrid Accords were signed, which divided Western Sahara between Morocco and Mauritania and the Spanish announced their final retreat.¹⁷

During the period of negotiations the units of the Spanish Foreign Legion, the Spanish Naval Infantry, Airborne and Police units in the city of El Aaiun surrounded the districts where locals lived and started collecting weapons and arrested those who demanded independence. Local soldiers serving the Spanish (Troopas Nomadas, Policia Territorial and members of the Spanish Legion) were disarmed and disbanded. The governor of the territory took discriminatory measures against the local people, for instance, he prohibited petrol stations from selling petrol to the local people. The Spanish military leadership set down immediately to work out the **Golondrina** Evacuation Plan of the civil population, then, they reinforced the defence of phosphate mines, important buildings and they started evacuating the garrisons in the desert.¹⁸

By 8th November more than 12,000 civilians had been evacuated from the territory by sea and air to the Canary Islands. Spanish merchants sold their shops with stocks and state-run schools were closed down because of the lack of teachers. The Spanish even transported their animals from the zoo to Almeria, exhumed their relatives buried in local cemeteries and transported the remains to the Canary Islands, where they reburied them.¹⁹ So, by the time the parties announced the Madrid Accords, there had been no Spanish citizens in the territory of once Spanish Sahara except for the armed forces and civil servants.

On 12th November leader of Polisario Front El-Vali announced that the Madrid Accords are considered null (15th November), while independently of this Hassan II announced on 15th November that he had closed the Western Sahara file and appointed Ahmed Bensouda governor of the territory in El-Aaiun.

As for the Polisario, the King stated that their leaders were unable to pull together the almost 60,000 Saharawians and they could stage actions only with the help of mercenaries who were unable to fight a desert war against the well-trained Moroccans. This is why the organisation itself did not pose any threat to the state of Morocco. He made this statement being aware of the fact that the approximately 2,500 local troops and policemen previously hired by the Spanish joined the Polisario with their weapons.²⁰

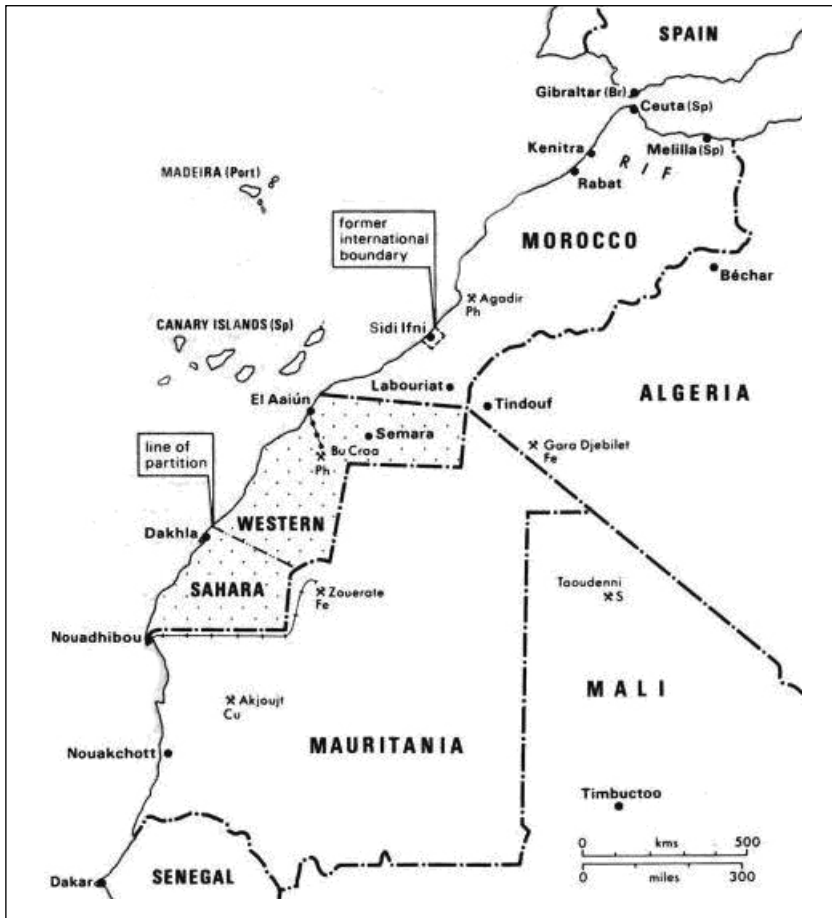
In the UN camp at Megaries Mehdi, one of the cooks who had been member of the Territorial Police in El-Aaiun joined the rebels together with the others after the retreat of the Spanish. According to him, the Spanish let them down and he would have still served them if they had not retreated.

Many more of the soldiers like him serving now in Polisario units but who used to serve with the Spanish Legion, with the Saharan nomad troops or the local police before, applied for a rent of merit to the Spanish Government. In accordance with the current negotiations, the Spanish government would pay service rent to all those who had served at least 10 years in any of the armed units established and led by Spain.

Subsequently, the Moroccan military started their entry into Western Sahara and Spain announced that in a couple of months they would end civil administration on the territory (only Franco could have protested because of the Moroccan occupation but he died on 20th November). The situation was further complicated by the fact that on 28th November in Guelta the Jemma dissolved itself in spite of the fact that according to the three-party agreement the council was intended to play a significant role in settling the situation.²¹

A delegation of people living in former Spanish Sahara held a press conference organised by the Polisario in Algiers on 6th December. The Deputy President of Jemma together with 56 other representatives were also part of the delegation (three of them were also members of the Spanish Parliament, the Cortes). The Secretary General of Jemma declared their joint proclamation on the dissolution of the Council and the establishment of the 41-strong Saharawian Interim National Council. The statement was signed by the 67 members of Jemma as well as by several tribal leaders.²²

On the map you can see the territory divided between the Moroccan and Mauritanian governments in the Madrid Accords:



Source: Ieuan LL Griffiths: *An Atlas of African Affairs*. p. 93.

Since the Madrid Accords recognised Jemma as the official representative of the Saharawians, by dissolving the Council the Saharawians deprived Morocco of the possibility to use the organisation for its own purposes and the other signatories of the Accords were also put into an embarrassing situation.

“The views of the Saharan population, expressed through Jemma, will be respected.” (Article 3)²³

It was under these circumstances that on 10th December the UN passed two resolutions that partly contradicted each other.²⁴

The first Resolution (3458/A) reiterated the right to self-determination of the people of Western Sahara already present in previous resolutions, which stated that Spain and the UN are responsible for decolonising the territory.²⁵ The resolution was passed with 86 votes for, 41 abstentions and no votes against.

The second Resolution (3458/B) acknowledged the three-party Madrid Accords and called on the signatories to ensure respect for the freely expressed aspirations of the Saharan population. At the same time it requested the Secretary General to appoint a representative who would supervise the free referendum.²⁶ The situation in this case was not as clear as in the previous one because 56 countries voted for the resolution, 42 against it and 34 abstained. By the time the resolutions were passed, a significant part of Western Sahara was occupied by the Moroccans.

THE OCCUPATION OF THE SAHARA TERRITORIES AND THE BEGINNING OF HOSTILITIES

By the end of November 1975 the Moroccan army occupied a significant part of the Sahara territories.¹ The invasion forces, in co-operation with the withdrawing Spanish army, launched the operation from two separate directions.

The objective of the units advancing along the coastline was to capture El-Aaiun and the phosphate mines at Bou Craa. According to the first official reports, the Moroccan forces penetrated Western Sahara 100 kilometres deep, and on 28th November the second largest settlement, Smara, was also taken.²

In less than a month a 25,000-strong contingent, that is one third of the Moroccan Army, was stationed in the occupied Sahara territories. 15,000 troops were deployed in the Saguia El-Hamra garrisons (Farsia, Jdiriya, Haousa, Smara), 5,000 men in El-Aaiun, and another 5,000 soldiers were stationed near the southern borders of former Spanish Sahara. The offensive went simultaneously with a mass migration of the population.³

On 11th December Moroccan units captured El-Aaiun (there was some Polisario resistance only in a few places although on 12th December a minor unit attacked the Moroccan troops in the town), while Mauritanian forces, launching their offensive occupied La Guerra, then, Tichla.

By the end of December the Spanish forces had gradually withdrawn from the town, on 28th December the airfield was handed over, then, on 12th January 1976 the last of their soldiers left former Spanish Sahara when Villa Cisneros was abandoned.

Afterwards there were only 150 Spanish civil servants in El-Aaiun in order to implement and supervise the smooth handover of the public administration of the area. The last Spanish citizen who left the town in late February 1976 was Colonel Rafael de Veldes Iglesias and thus the Kingdom of Spain ceased to be a factor in Western Sahara.⁴

Local soldiers made redundant from Spanish military service joined their previous enemy, the Polisario, and established the Sahara Liberation Army for fighting Moroccan troops (SLA).⁵ In spite of the fact that ill-armed Western Saharans tried mostly to defend (and evacuate civil population), one of their minor units attacked the Mauritanian town of Zuerat as early as 29 December. The town, also a mining centre, is located 400 kilometres from the capital deep in the desert. During the attack the infrastructure of the mine was damaged but the town itself was not occupied although it was defended

only by 60 Mauritanian troops. At that time the Mauritanian army had merely some 3,000 trained soldiers, 2,000 gendarmes and a few obsolete fighter planes, which made its units an easy target for Saharawian guerrillas, constantly harassing them. Former foreign legion fortress, the famous Ait Ben Tili, surrounded by Saharawian units, was also defended by Mauritanian forces. In order to help out defenders in dire straits President Ould Daddah requested combat planes from the Moroccan Air Force.

However, not even the Air Force was able to bring relief to the fortress, moreover, one of the Moroccan Northrop F-5s was downed by the guerrillas. Finally, the fortress was captured by Polisario troops on 21st January.⁶

In the following days insurgents attacked the towns of Bir Moghrein and Inal but despite the huge damage inflicted they were unable to capture them because of the concerted counterattacks of the Mauritanian army.

With French assistance the Mauritanian forces were reorganised and in the third week of December launched a counteroffensive near the border with Western Sahara. After a short but bloody battle they took the town of La Guerra and started to push back Polisario fighters and their civil supporters from the area (19th December).⁷ On the next day Tichla fell, but Argoub, a small town near Villa Cisneros was captured only on 11th January after a two-week-long siege. The roughly 200 soldiers and civilians defending the town fought until the very last bullet and the Mauritians managed to take only a few prisoners—seriously wounded soldiers—as the majority of defenders had gotten killed during the battle. Since that time Saharawians had had only one option: to flee.⁸

The refugees went first to the northern area of Western Sahara bordering Mauritania (Amgala, Guelta-Zemmour, Oum Dreiga, Tifariti, etc.), then, they were evacuated to Algeria with the assistance of the Algerian Army.⁹ Besides providing transportation to the refugees Algeria also supplied weapons, food, drinking water and medicine to Saharawian soldiers.¹⁰

As early as that time the first cracks in the Moroccan–Mauritanian Alliance appeared because the Moroccans were worried that the Mauritanian troops could not take Villa Cisneros on time and entered the town under the command of Colonel Dlimi. A Moroccan garrison was established there in spite of the fact that in accordance with the Madrid Agreement the town would be controlled by the Mauritians. Although a Mauritanian administrative centre was set up in the town the real power was represented by Morocco.¹¹

On 27th January 1976 Moroccan military units attacked an Algerian convoy at Amgala (**first Amgala battle**) and the Algerian troops withdrew after a several-day battle, as they had suffered heavy casualties.¹²

Thanks to its significant water supply Amgala is a very important place in the Saguia el-Hamra valley, where a Polisario logistics base was established with Algerian support. Refugees were provided with food and medicaments from this place, and they were also further transported to safe havens in Algerian territories. The unexpected Moroccan attack inflicted heavy damage to the Algerians and 99 of their soldiers were captured.¹³ The furious Algerian High Command demanded an immediate retaliation and the breakout of a war between the two countries were prevented by the bold and decisive action of Algerian President Boumedien. From that time the Algerian leadership increased its material support to the rebels but held back its troops from further clashes.¹⁴

The retaliation came fairly soon—between 13th and 15th February Polisario units defeated Moroccan troops in the second **Amgala battle**.

As for the balance of power Moroccan and Mauritanian troops had superiority although the combat worthiness of the Mauritanian units equipped with French weapons and trained by French specialists was rather low.¹⁵ The rebel forces consisted of a few thousand volunteers equipped with small arms, mortars, and some antitank missiles and SAMs from the Algerian and Libyan armies.¹⁶ As the performance of the Moroccan troops in the desert was far from what Hassan II had expected from them the Moroccan Air Force raided the refugee camps in order to put an end to war in the quickest possible way. From 22nd February several air raids were launched against refugee camps Guelta-Zemmour, Tifariti, and Oum Dreiga. The bombings were approved by Colonel Dlimi and it was also him who approved the use of napalm bombs which are more efficient than conventional ones.¹⁷ However, those bombing raids were nearly inefficient from a military aspect as their victims were mostly children, women and elderly people.¹⁸

The Royal Moroccan troops also applied methods that had already been used by the Spanish before: poisoning wells, machine-gunning herds, looting civilian population, tortures, and even public executions.¹⁹ As a result of such events and atrocities, the mass migration of civil population accelerated. By the end of February the number of people, mostly children, women and elderly people living in refugee camps in Algeria had increased to more than 100,000.²⁰

The Spanish troops were supposed to withdraw by 28th February 1976 but had left the area earlier, thus abandoning its population.

Although the UNHCR realised the desperate situation of refugees in camps it could not respond immediately, therefore, called on those sympathising with the Saharawians to help.

The Algerian Government was not prepared to receive and supply so many refugees either, which led to critical medical and hygienic situation in the camps soon.

On the actual situation in the camps a report was compiled by the members of a Swiss group of medical doctors, who had arrived in the region with the help of the International Red Cross in order to support the refugees.²¹ This is how the members of the group—Dr. Elio Canevaschini, Dr. Emmanuel Martinoli, Dr. Marie-Claire Martinoli and Dr. Marc Oltramare—tell about their experience:

“We have the sensation that both the Algerian Government and the Red Cross are able to provide only limited assistance to the refugees, therefore, we regard the rapid international co-operation and immediate help to refugees of extreme importance. The number of refugees is growing by the day due to newcomers, and the majority of the mass of people is comprised by women, children and elderly people. The proportion of children under 15 is 45% and that of babies under 1 year is around 6-7%. The refugees are accommodated in 14 camps and their number is over 70,000. Their accommodation poses a serious problem as 3-4 families share a tent. Due to infections and other diseases there is a grave risk of epidemics. Firewood is another serious problem as these people often have to go 200 kilometres for collecting firewood. Then, it is equally divided among the refugees but still there are some who lack firewood. Food supply also presents difficult problems as the monthly supply of a refugee is 6 kg of flour or wheat, 3 kg dried vegetables, 2 kg sugar, 2 kg powdered milk, 3 kg dates and 1 kg of tea. The refugees are living under very bad conditions—many of them are traumatised or suffering from burns from the bombings. They are treated by 3 doctors, 15 assistant doctors and a few enthusiastic volunteers.”

On the basis of the mandate provided by the General Assembly in December 1975 UN **Secretary General Kurt Waldheim** sent a special representative to Madrid, Rabat, Algiers and Western Sahara in order to initiate negotiations on the soonest possible implementation of UN Resolutions.²² His Special Envoy was Swedish UN diplomat **Olaf Rydbeck**, who started his work on 7th February when he visited El-Aaiun, Smara and Dakhla. He was deeply shocked by the news on the events that took place in the territories occupied

by the Moroccan and Mauritanian forces (bombing of refugees, escalation of guerrilla war, etc.) and in his report clearly stated that on the basis of what he had seen it was impossible to organise a free referendum in Western Sahara. Thus, the tour of duty of the UNSG Special Envoy was unsuccessful and “Morocco could continue the reunification of the territories of Western Sahara to the motherland.”

On 16th February the Jemma was summoned (out of its 102 members 57 came to the conference but not all of them supported the Moroccan and Mauritanian territorial demands),²³ thus, the vacant seats of those supporting the rebels were handed over to representatives loyal to Morocco. The new Council sworn in to Hassan II but neither the UN, nor the Polisario, nor even Spain accepted the new Jemma as the legal representative body of the Saharawians since the genuine Jemma was dismissed in November 1975.²⁴ That time Spain submitted a report to the UNSG and declared a withdrawal from the territory.

Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs **Oreja** said on the events in an interview to *Le Monde* on 21st August 1979:

“We maintain good relations with Morocco, however, the interpretation of an international issue is different. Spain does not regard the 25th February 1976 oath of the Jemma (in El-Aaiun) to the King of Morocco legally binding. The Jemma did have a meeting in order to receive information on the Madrid Agreement. During the session Jemma Members were requested to give a statement on the future of the area. Then, the Spanish Governor withdrew although his presence would have been important for making the Jemma Resolution legally binding. Afterwards Morocco and Mauritania divided the area, thus violating the Madrid Agreement, which had provisions on the public administration of Western Sahara and not on exercising sovereignty.”

Responding to the Moroccan measures President of the Sahara Interim National Council Uld Ziou on the main square of a refugee camp in Ait Ben Tili, near Bir Lahlou, declared the establishment of the Sahara Arab Democratic Republic at midnight 27th February.²⁵ In front of celebrating people the black-white-green flag (with a red triangle on the left side and a red crescent and a five-pointed star in the white part) of the new state was raised, then, Polisario leader El-Vali held a press meeting where he said:

“The declaration of the Sahara Arab Democratic Republic is the expression of the will of our people. It is also in concert with the UN Charter and the Charter of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). We are ready to fight even for several generations since the King of Morocco intends to escalate the war.”

On 5th March 1976 Ahmed Baba Miske introduced the first Government of Western Sahara in Hotel Saint-Georges in Algiers. Madagascar was the first country to recognise the new state and later on another 78 countries followed suit.²⁶ In spite of the fact that later, due to diplomatic pressure, many of them suspended the relations with the Sahara Arab Democratic Republic, it keeps maintaining some official relations with 54 countries. However, the declaration of independence did not trigger many changes as the Moroccan Army continued to occupy the territory.

On 14th April 1976 the allied powers, occupying most of the territories, officially signed the treaty on the division of the area and on drawing a new border line between the two countries.²⁷ Morocco received the two biggest towns, El-Aaiun and Smara, and the phosphate mines, thus increasing its areas by some 35%²⁸ while Mauritania was given Villa Cisneros and a long section of the coast line with good fisheries, however, the inland area comprised only desert and nothing else.²⁹ That is, the treaty on the division of the area clearly favoured Morocco.

AFTER THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE – THE ESCALATION OF THE CONFLICT

Once the new state was declared the UN Secretary General decided to delegate the Swedish UN diplomat Olaf Rydbeck to help bring about a possible agreement. In his statement of 25th March 1976 the Secretary General detailed the purpose of the delegation: to obtain the opinions of the Moroccan and Mauritanian Governments about Resolution 3458 of the General Assembly. The planned visit elicited strong objection in Moroccan public opinion, and the Swedish diplomat's visit to the refugee camps in the vicinity of Tinduf on 31st March led to serious tension between Morocco and the UN.¹

On 4th April 1976 Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs **Ahmed Laraki** informed the UN Secretary General that the special representative will not be authorised to continue his mission in Rabat.² Shortly afterwards the Government of Mauritania also announced, that the diplomat's visit would not be timely. Following these reactions, the Secretary General himself initiated negotiations with the UN ambassadors of the involved countries, but could not achieve any significant results.

The Polisario re-opened hostilities. The series of attacks known as the **May 20 Offensive** commenced in earnest on 11th May, when co-ordinated assaults were launched against El-Aaiun, Smara, Bou Kra, Bir Moghreïn and Chinguetti, and damaged the phosphate-carrying conveyor-belt system.³

Before launching the offensive the Saharawians warned the foreign citizens working in the phosphate mines and the Mauritanian iron-ore mines that if they do not leave the area they would be treated as enemies. At that time over 280 highly-trained French experts, employees of COMINOR (Comptoir Minier du Nord) worked in the Mauritanian iron-ore mines. The Mauritians were supposed to guarantee their safety. The warning was labelled as a terrorist threat, and those affected did not take it seriously, so the attack against Mauritania's capital, **Nouakchott**, by Polisario units on 8 June 1976 was a serious surprise.⁴

The fact that a military unit of about 600 men was able to march unnoticed more than 1,000 km through enemy territory indicated a thorough knowledge of the terrain, and the support of the local population. The attack lasted nearly one hour; the selected targets (including the presidential palace) were subjected to mortar and machine gun fire. Some of the local units fled, but the Saharawians were not able to exploit their success because their leader, El-Vali Mustafa Sayed was also killed during the attack.⁵

At the same time the Polisario also attacked **Tan-Tan, Jdiria és Guelta-Zemmour** in the northern areas. At that time the Saharawians had already changed their tactics: they had realised that in the face of mechanised and well-equipped Moroccan units they could not successfully defend the population centres still in their possession, and reverted to guerrilla warfare with which they were already familiar, and which had brought them greater success.

Since tribes related to the Saharawians lived throughout Mauritania and southern Morocco, they could count on support from a part of the population during nearly all of their attacks. Polisario units consisting of several hundred men could move with relative ease not only through the occupied territories, but on the territory of enemy states, as well.

The Moroccans firmly held the towns and forts handed over by the Spain, but their supply lines were under constant attack.

Mauritania, beset by economic and ethnic tensions, was the weaker of the two countries, therefore, the Polisario was more active in the territories occupied by itself, than in those occupied by Morocco.⁶

On 15th January 1976 President Oud Daddah appointed a trusted veteran politician, **Hamoud Ould Abdel-Wedoud** as Governor of the territories occupied by Mauritania.⁷ The new governor initiated an administrative reorganisation of the territory and turned it into a separate region called Tiris el-Gharbia, with Dakhla as its capital.⁸ The new region was subdivided into four districts (Dakhla, Awsard, Tichla and Argoub).

They created three military districts in order to establish firmer control of the occupied territories. The headquarters of the first district was established in the town of Awsard; its commander was Colonel Viah Ould Mayouf, who had prepared the occupation of the territory and directed the war against the Polisario. The headquarters of the second district was deployed in Zouerat; its commander was Lieutenant Colonel Ahmed Ould Bouceif, who was responsible for Mauritania's north-eastern territories. Bir Moghreïn and Ain Ben Tili were under him also. The headquarters of the third district was established in Dakhla, Lieutenant Colonel Ahmed Salem Ould Sidi was assigned to command it.⁹

About this time the task of settling the refugees in camps was completed, and the Saharawians could begin the systematic destruction of the financial institutions of the two occupying countries.

In the spirit of the Sahara-Arab traditions—and due to low standards of training and a shortage of heavy weapons—the Polisario organised guerrilla operations (ghazzi). Their units (kataeb), equipped with Land Rovers and light personal weapons, would cover several hundreds of kilometres, deliver a

quick raid, then disappear.¹⁰ Since the Mauritanian desert is nearly twice the size of France, the military and law enforcement forces available to the local authorities were insufficient to keep the territory under control.

Insurgent attacks made transportation of phosphate excavated from the Bou Craa mines impossible (between 1976 and 1979 the Fosbucraa company lost 1.722 billion Pesetas due to the attacks). The rail line connecting the Mauritanian iron-ore mines to the seaport was regularly damaged which caused serious problems to Mauritania, whose main source of earnings was iron-ore.¹¹ The Mauritanian political leadership was shaken by the attacks, but they thought that the situation could be salvaged by some quick changes in the armed forces leadership.

Thus, the Chief of Staff was immediately dismissed. Lieutenant Colonel **Ahmed Ould Bouceif**, commander of the second military district replaced him.

This was the first time the Mauritanian leadership criticised the activities of the Moroccan army, since they had been expecting the Moroccans to start a counteroffensive against the Polisario. However, the Moroccans settled into defensive positions and did not pursue the Saharawians retreating into the Sahara. As a result, Polisario fighters launched attacks against the Mauritanian towns of **Nema** and **Tisitt** from territories occupied by Morocco.

Due to the escalating attacks the Mauritanian army's strength was increased to 17,000 men (of these 10,000 officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers belonged to the black minority; this would eventually generate serious tensions within the army and lead to several mutinies), and purchased modern weapons.¹² Training of the new recruits was accelerated in the training centre established with French assistance in the town of Atar. However, none of these measures brought any significant success.¹³

In this auspicious military situation the III. Polisario Congress was held on 24th August 1976. In addition to the press, several official government delegations (Benin, Algeria, Bissau-Guinea, Libia and some others) also attended. Members of the former Jemma and the Deputy Secretary General of PUNS (Sahara National Unity Party) also participated. During the Congress the first Constitution of the Sahara Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was approved, which meant the final ratification of the draft the Sahara Provisional National Council had published in February.

That was the time when new Polisario leader **Mohamed Abdelaziz** was elected Head of the Council of Ministers. Although the delegates agreed to continue the armed struggle they also decided to commence a diplomatic offensive in order to inform the world on the real situation. As a result, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Sahara Arab Democratic Republic **Hakim Brahim**

even participated in the Geneva Congress of the Socialist International as an observer. Since every diplomatic contact was extremely important for the new state it tried to establish contacts with every country, regardless of its political leanings, in order to gain the broadest possible recognition.

SADR representatives participated as an official delegation in the XIII. Summit of the Organisation of African Unity in Port Louis (Mauritius), where 29 African countries voted for the Western Saharawians' right to self determination, independence and territorial integrity. As a consequence of the voting, Morocco announced suspension of its activities in the organisation. The diplomatic offensive, launched with the assistance of Algeria, brought some success, since by the first half of 1977 the Western-Sahara state was recognised by nine African countries (Algeria, Angola, Benin, Burundi, Bissau-Guinea, Madagascar, Mozambique, Ruanda and Togo).¹⁴

Naturally, as a result of this, they also tried to increase the effectiveness of military operations, thus, on 1st May 1977 the insurgents launched another attack against Zuerat in Mauritania. The town was defended by a garrison of nearly 1,000 men as well as a 60-km barrier of 3- to 5-metre-deep ditches reinforced with barbed wire.

There were nearly 250 French miners (among them military advisers), employees of SNIM (Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière) and their families in the town. Although the expert responsible for their safety, **Jean-Charles Eudeline** had repeatedly recommended evacuation of the families his recommendations had been overruled. The guerrillas opened their attack at 05:00 o'clock with a co-ordinated mortar barrage. The attack lasted about four hours, during which the power station, the fuel tanks and the mining equipment were so heavily damaged that production had to be suspended for a while. During the battle two French experts were killed and six others were taken prisoner by the attackers. As a consequence to this, most French personnel and their dependents (altogether 449 persons) were evacuated to France.¹⁵

The suspension of production caused serious damage to the Mauritanian economy. At that time Mauritania was able to handle its problems stemming from the situation in Western Sahara only through military assistance from Morocco (as a result of the 13th May 1977 military agreement, some 10,000 well-trained and well-equipped Moroccan soldiers were stationed in Mauritanian territory), and financial assistance from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.¹⁶

In spite of the freshly arrived Moroccan troops, Polisario units launched another attack against Nouakchott, then, after the successful operation they withdrew without losses.

The attacks generated protests from France. French Minister of Foreign Affairs **Louis de Guiringaud** accused Algeria of organising the attacks, and demanded the release of Frenchmen taken prisoner. The Algerian leadership rejected the French accusation in an official communiqué.

France then sent a 200-men military unit to secure the capital, and from the end of November strengthened the defence of the larger Mauritanian population centres with Jaguar strike aircraft from Dakar airbase (**Operation Lamantin**).¹⁷

The Mauritanian situation worried France because the country was a former French colony and belonged to their military and economic spheres of interest. Mauritania had emphasised separation from France after gaining independence (introduction of its own currency, Ouguiya, and nationalisation of the iron-ore mines), yet a thousand ties linked it to the former colonial power. When even the capital came under Polisario attack, the frightened president turned to the French leadership and requested their urgent assistance. A new military assistance and co-operation agreement was soon signed, and France sent fifteen military instructors to the Atar military academy, to assist in training Mauritanian officers.

However, these steps only encouraged the guerrillas, who took two more French mining experts prisoner. Then, French president **Giscard d'Estaing** immediately created a crisis team in the presidential palace in order to solve the situation as soon as possible.

The crisis team included Minister of Defence **Yvon Bourges**, Minister for Co-operation between the Armed Services **Robert Galley**, Chief of Staff of the French army General **Guy Méry**, and the president's representative **Louis de Guiringaud**. Calling on experts of the army and the intelligence services, the crisis team began to develop possible plans in the rooms of the headquarters beneath the Elysée Palace (COA-Centre Operationnel des Armées).

Due to the high risk factor and difficulties in locating the French hostages, the Chief of Staff rejected the possibility of a commando-style rescue operation. After a short debate his opinion was accepted by the other participants. General Méry then recommended negotiations to free the hostages, and at the same time deploying forces in Mauritania to defend French interests. The participants accepted the General's plan and immediately started to execute it.¹⁸

Some of the French supersonic combat aircraft stationed at Oukkam airbase in Senegal were placed on alert, since they could reach Nouakchott's airspace in less than 50 minutes. The unit of 1,300 French soldiers deployed at the airbase was reinforced by an extra 300 troops. During the night of 1st

November a force composed of rapid response units under the command of General Michael Forget landed at the base in Senegal, then, a few days later the General and 60 of his specially-trained soldiers redeployed to Atar, in Mauritanian territory.

Command of the Ouakkam base was taken over by Colonel Huret, who was also responsible for the logistic support for Operation Lamantin. On his arrival Forget immediately began to develop communications routes between Ouakkam and the Mauritanian bases. Meanwhile, Breguet-Atlantic aircraft of the French Navy carried out reconnaissance patrols over Mauritania. Although these aircraft had originally been used for detecting submarines, they and their trained crews constituted an important element of the operation. In addition, the French also used long-range Mirage 4 reconnaissance aircraft to map and photograph less well-known regions. In accordance with the request of the Ouakkam airbase, the aircraft were launched from Bordeaux, France.

The purpose of the reconnaissance flights was to locate the Polisario units and observe their movements, then, inform the Mauritanian military and gendarme units preparing for a counterattack, as well as the French strike aircraft. In order to support the operation, the Moroccans sent another 600 troops to areas occupied by Mauritania, where soon there were 1,200 Moroccan soldiers, and further units were arriving from Morocco. In January 1978 there were 2,400 soldiers stationed in the area of Zouerat-Nouadhibou, 600 at the Akjouj iron-ore mines, and a further 2,800 men in Tiris el-Gharbia. The Moroccan Air Force deployed three F-5 fighter-bomber aircrafts to Nouadhibou airfield, in order to participate in combined operations.¹⁹

It seemed unlikely that the Polisario would challenge such a powerful force, therefore, the Mauritanian leadership restarted rail traffic on the Nouadhibou-Zouerat line, which had already been shut down for a month.

However, the Saharawians attacked the first freight train and took the French engineer prisoner, along with the train's Mauritanian military escort.

The French were incensed, and on 25th November they transferred a further four Jaguar combat aircraft from their base in Toul to Mauritania, in order to participate in the counterattack against the Polisario. This type of combat aircraft was far more modern than the Northrop F-5 used by the Moroccans. The French army commissioned these long-range aircraft in 1971. Each was equipped with two 30-mm cannons and an anti-aircraft missile jammer system. At that time the French had six Jaguars, two KC-135 F, two Breguet-Atlantic and four Noratlas aircraft at Ouakkam airbase.

The Jaguars were first used on 2nd December against guerrillas attacking the rail line near Boulanour, then, on 12th December in the vicinity of

Zouerat.²⁰ As a result of the air strikes, the Polisario offered to release the French prisoners taken in Mauritania, but the French forces continued their attacks. The Polisario commenced talks with then UN Secretary General Kurt Waldheim, and on 23rd December released the French prisoners without any conditions.²¹

The French leadership would have liked to continue the operation, but due to the press-campaign of the SADR and the protests of several human rights organisations they finally instructed the General Staff to withdraw the French forces. After this, although they continued to aid the Mauritanian government, France took no active part in operations against the Polisario.²²

The guerrillas, no longer threatened by French air strikes, immediately renewed their attacks against Mauritanian targets (rail lines, mines, etc). By that time Mauritania was facing serious economic and internal political problems, and these attacks hastened the country's withdrawal from the West-Sahara conflict.

PEACE TREATY BETWEEN MAURITANIA AND THE POLISARIO

Although “Operation Lamantin” caused serious damage to the guerrillas it was not able to stop them; on the contrary, having analysed their experiences, they divided into smaller groups and continued to attack Mauritanian targets.¹ In 1977 and 1978 their attacks paralysed communications and halted iron-ore mining which contributed with a significant portion to Mauritania’s total budget. They rendered inoperable 26 engines of the COMINOR Company (valued at 1 million dollars each); their repair took several months, and some drivers refused work because of the constant danger. In 1977 the company had to cancel 150 scheduled trains, which caused 22 million dollars (18 percent of iron ore exports) lost revenue to the country. In storage sheds in the iron-ore mines nearly a million tons of iron-ore waited for shipment to the port of Nouadhibou; the government could not market it due to a shortage of transportation capacity. The country was already listed among the poorest in the world, and this time, as a result of guerrilla operations, it had to face an almost complete halt of iron-ore mining, which provided the basis of its economy.²

Of course, the war was not the sole reason for the economy’s weaknesses. Every nation that had no oil reserves and therefore had to buy oil in the open market—Mauritania among them—was seriously affected by the international oil crisis that broke out in 1973. Furthermore, due to a crisis in the steel industry, the market price of iron-ore had been in decline since 1976. Since the market price of copper was also very low mining copper in the country’s copper mines in Akjouj became so uneconomical that the mines were closed down in May 1978. As a result of these mine-closures many people lost their jobs.³

This table shows the iron-ore export of the period:

	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978
production (million tons)	11.9	8.6	9.4	7.5	7.1
export (million tons)	11.7	8.7	9.7	8.4	6.5
export (million USD)	123.5	137.6	153.7	127.0	93.4

Source: Tony Hodges: The Roots of a Desert War. p. 258.

The next table shows the country's balance of payments for the period: (The values are in billions of Ouguiya):

	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978
export	6.4	9.2	8.0	9.1	8.2	7.5
of this iron-ore	4.6	5.9	6.2	6.9	5.7	4.6
import	6.9	11.1	13.3	18.1	17.7	16.3
deficit	0.5	1.9	5.3	9.0	9.5	8.8

Source: Tony Hodges: The Roots of a Desert War. p. 258.

The official rate between Ouguiya and USD at this time 74, 43

(source: <http://www.country-data.com/cgi-bin/query/r-8538.html>)

Although there are several regions suitable for agriculture in the country, due to the use of primitive implements and to several years of drought, Mauritania had to import food (in this period domestic production covered less than 60 percent of food consumption).

The next table shows grain output between 1973 and 1978:

	1973-74	1974-75	1975-76	1976-77	1977-78
grain production (tons)	50,000	45,000	36,000	21,000	14,000

Source: Tony Hodges: The Roots of a Desert War. p. 259.

Although the government's revenues declined significantly, military expenditures were raised by nearly 50 percent in 1976 (From 1.2 billion Ouguiya to 1.8 billion), then, in 1977 by another 26 percent—military expenditures amounted to nearly 30 percent of all government disbursements.

The cost-increases were somewhat limited by the fact that Saudi Arabia assumed the cost of some arms purchases and provided the price of weapons bought from France as aid.

In order to increase government revenue, a new tax—fittingly named “solidarity tax”—was introduced in 1976.⁴ In spite of the new tax, the standard of life for both civilians and military declined to an all-time low, and more and more people began to voice their reservations about the government's and the president's performance.⁵

The government could maintain order only by calling in further Moroccan troops for assistance, but this could not halt the guerrillas, and shook the

military leadership's confidence in the president's policies concerning the Moroccan alliance in May 1978.⁶ The fact that the Mauritanian political leadership requested the assistance of the French Air Force against guerrillas attacking the capital shows the extent of the panic in the country.⁷ The French minister of foreign affairs, Louis de Guiringaud lost no time to emphasise at a press conference that French combat aircraft conducted operations at the request of the Mauritanian government not in Western Sahara but in Mauritania. In spite of this the Polisario press statements claimed that the French aircraft had carried out attacks not in Mauritanian territory but in the vicinity of Oum Dreyga (Western Sahara).

Mauritania had to face not only economic difficulties, but also the problem of the black minority (Wolof, Soninke, Peuls and Toucouleuts tribes).⁸ Twenty-five percent of the population belonged to these minorities, which provided most of the urban intellectuals, a significant portion of the officers and men of the army, and most of the agrarian population.⁹ The black minority had serious objections to the Mauritanian leadership's Arabisation efforts, and in 1966, when the use of Arabic became mandatory in state education mass protests broke out all over Mauritania.

This problem has not been completely solved to this day; this was the reason for a mutiny in 1987-88 by 500 black officers and men cashiered from the army, which led to the death of several black and Arab officers. The question of the black minority almost led to war with the neighbouring Senegal, too. Thus, black officers of the army seized the opportunity, and on 10 July 1978 they took part in the coup against President Mokhtar Ould Daddah.¹⁰

The bloodless coup was organised by the then (March 1978) appointed Chief of Staff, **Mustafa Ould Mohamed Salek**, and so he became President and Prime Minister at the same time.¹¹

Salek began his military career in 1961, he participated in the defence of Nouakchott in June 1976, then, he was appointed commander of the third military district (Atar region). In this position he gained the confidence of the army commanders and the friendship of many senior officers, so he could be certain of the army's support during the coup.

Morocco was not happy about the changes, however, the Polisario announced a unilateral ceasefire with Mauritania, with a commencement date of 12 July. Since there were nearly 10,000 Moroccan troops deployed in Mauritanian territory the country's new leader used careful language in his radio address on 14 July: "The goal of the new government is to end the war in accordance with the interest of the people, and in co-operation with the Kingdom of Morocco."¹²

The government announced a new agricultural policy, launched an agricultural development programme with the involvement of foreign capital and encouraged private venture projects.

Salek announced that in the territories occupied by Mauritania—Tiris El-Gharbiya, the new Mauritanian name for Rio de Oro—he would support a free referendum organised in accordance with UN resolutions. At the same time he requested the Government of Morocco to withdraw its troops from Mauritanian territories.¹³

In spite of this, on 12-13 January 1979 as a result of negotiations between the two countries several agreements were ratified; they agreed on establishing a common development bank and a joint sea transport and fisheries enterprise, and agreed on broadening co-operation in mining, housing construction and education.

On 6 January 1976 the increasingly impatient Polisario leadership urged the Mauritanian Government to start official peace negotiations.¹⁴ Since the ceasefire did not apply to Morocco, on 4 January Saharawian troops crossed the river Draa, the historical and actual border, and attacked the Moroccan town of **Assa**.

Although the Moroccan troops did not sustain a significant defeat the next day Hassan II called into session the National Security and National Territorial Defence Council. A few days later he sent a letter of complaint to **President Nimeri of Sudan**, who was serving as President of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) at that time. After the successful raid the Saharawians launched the “**Boumedienne Offensive**”, named after the President of Algeria.¹⁵

They carried out the first attack only about 10 km from Laayoun, against Lem Siyed settlement (16-17 January 1979). In the two-day battle they destroyed two large Moroccan columns. This was the first occasion when a motorized Moroccan unit, equipped with armoured assets, was defeated by the West-Saharan soldiers. The Polisario statement listed 600 dead, 250 wounded and 51 prisoners among the Moroccan officers and men. They also took 4 armoured vehicles, 60 cross-country vehicles, destroyed seven tanks, 96 trucks, one F-5 fighter aircraft and four helicopters.

The Algerian president, Benjedid Sadli, enthusiastic about the successes of the West-Saharans, on 24 February also requested Ould Salek to commence peace negotiations.

On 28 January a Polisario unit of about 2,000 men and 200 cross-country vehicles entered Moroccan territory again. The West-Saharans attacked and for a few hours occupied the town of **Tan-Tan** in the centre of southern

Morocco, which served as a logistic centre and a base for the Moroccan Air Force. After the successful raid the attackers withdrew to the desert, carrying with them their Moroccan prisoners.

The international press was intrigued by the fact that they made a 500-km march through territories controlled by the Moroccan army. Thus, although Morocco denied that the raid occurred, the world knew about it.¹⁶

On 6 April 1979 a new government was inaugurated in Mauritania. The new Prime Minister, Lieutenant Colonel **Ahmed Ould Buceif** wanted closer co-operation with Morocco. However, when he departed for a conference of CEDEAO (Centre Economique du Developement de l'Afrique de l'Ouest - West African Economic Development Centre) on 27 May, his aircraft crashed into the ocean during landing. There were no survivors. His successor was Lieutenant Colonel **Mohamed Khuna Ould Haidalla**, who had been the Minister of Defence in Boucief's government. On the day of his inauguration the new prime minister announced that President Salek had resigned and **Mohamed Mahmud Ould Ahmed Luli** was nominated to take his place.¹⁷

The new leadership was more amenable to a peaceful settlement, especially after a unit of the Polisario had attacked Tisla, the southernmost town of Western Sahara under Mauritanian occupation, and took prisoner the local prefect and several soldiers.¹⁸

The attack shocked the Mauritanian leadership, and prodded them to begin peace negotiations at the earliest possible time. Still, the next step of Mauritania shocked the whole world, when at the 16th Summit of the OAU it voted for a ceasefire agreement and referendum over the independence of the Western Sahara. The resolution was supported by a two thirds majority (33 countries), thus, the Moroccan position was rejected. By way of protest the Moroccan delegation left Monrovia before the conclusion of the summit.¹⁹

After the Monrovia Resolution, on 5 August Mauritania and the Polisario (as representative of the people of Western Sahara) signed a peace agreement in Algiers, according to which Mauritania recognised the Polisario and withdrew all its territorial claims in Western Sahara.²⁰

Although the Moroccan King received Mauritanian Head of Government Mohamed Khuna Ould Haidalla after the announcement, he was already planning his response.

On 10th August Colonel **Mohamed Ould Bah Ould Abdelkader**, former Commander-in-Chief of the Mauritanian Air Force, issued a statement supporting Morocco in the name of the **Committee of Free Mauritanian Officers**. The members of the Mauritanian delegation learned of the statement and returned to

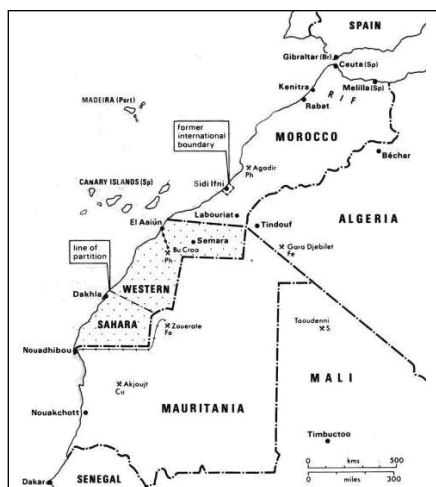
Nouakchott from the formal dinner given in their honour. The Committee was dissolved in a matter of hours, thus, the possibility of a coup was avoided.

The day after the agreement was signed five Hercules C-130 aircraft landed at Dakhla, with several hundred Moroccan soldiers on board. Officially they arrived to relieve the Moroccan contingent of the Dakhla garrison, but in fact they set up their camps around the town's important buildings. Although the garrison's Mauritanian commander found the allies' behaviour suspicious not wanting to exacerbate an already tense situation, there was no reaction to events, and the Mauritanian troops were not placed on alert either.

In the evening on 11th August four ministers of the Moroccan government arrived in Dakhla, which at that time was the administrative centre of Tiris El-Gharbiya. The superior Moroccan units, reinforced by the 750 paratroopers who had been redeployed from Zaire's Saba province and by other troops, occupied the town in a short time, without interference from the Mauritanian garrison.²¹

In a few days Morocco occupied the entire area under Mauritanian occupation, then, they took the *cadi* of Dakhla and 360 individuals from 16 Western-Saharan tribes to Rabat, where they swore loyalty to the King on 14 August. The occupied territory was immediately annexed to Morocco under the name of *Ved Ed-Dahab*.²²

The map shows the Kingdom of Morocco enlarged with the territories taken from Mauritania:



Source: Andrew Boyd-Joshua Comenetz: *An Atlas of World Affairs*. p. 124.

The Mauritanian government dared not to oppose Morocco since Moroccan troops were stationed in several areas of Mauritania, which did not have sufficient armed force available.

Although Mauritania condemned the occupation of the territory in official statements, it could not do anything against it. On 20th August the leaders of the country submitted a memorandum to the world organisation and asked for considering the peace treaty as the proof of neutrality for the Islamic Republic of Mauritania in the Western-Saharan conflict.²³ They could only submit a note of protest to the UN Security Council on 27th November, in which they accused Morocco of violating Mauritania's territorial sovereignty. Pressured by the world organisation, Morocco finally withdrew its last forces Mauritania (Bir Moghreïn, Zouerat) on 26 December.

Following this event the relationship between the two countries became very tense; they broke off even diplomatic relations for a while. Mauritanian leaders were so afraid of a potential Moroccan attack that they asked for help from France. At the end of October, after some minor talks the French military leadership approved another 150 military personnel to protect the Mauritanian capital. The Moroccans, however, did not deal with their former allies as they fully focussed on consolidating their power over the newly captured territories.

As a response, Mauritania officially not involved in the conflict any more, in quiet resignation allowed Polisario guerrillas to use its territory as a sort of logistical base.²⁴

EVENTS AFTER THE OCCUPATION OF THE AREA BY MOROCCO

When the Mauriticians withdrew their troops, only the guerrillas attempted armed resistance to Moroccan troops occupying the area of Rio de Oro.¹ Although in the battle of **Bir Anzaran** they inflicted heavy casualties to the Moroccans and destroyed a large part of the garrison they managed only to slow but not to prevent the occupation of the area by Morocco. After Polisario leaders realised that they were unable to hold the settlements against better-equipped Moroccan troops they returned to proven guerrilla warfare.² The bigger Moroccan Army could not prepare and successfully counter Saharawian units harassing and raiding occupation forces.

In the occupied territories several Moroccan garrisons were established but they failed to control desert regions, where small enemy units could move relatively at will. Small Polisario bases were built—most of them hidden underground—which served as safe havens before and after raids. The majority of the bases were located in the Saguia el-Hamra valley, which was appropriate for hideout, and in remote places in the Zemmouri Mountains. (I myself saw one of these bases in the Gourellia Mountains, relatively close to a UN Compound in Mehaires).³ In order to avoid being spotted by reconnaissance planes the guerrillas moved at night. When the units were on the move in daytime they used all-terrain vehicles without any glass parts (all windshields and mirrors had been removed) so that their reflection would not give their positions away.⁴

Laayoun, Tarfaya, various settlements, the bridge on the river Oued Chebeika, linking Tan-Tan and Tarfaya were favourite targets of guerrilla attacks.⁵ However, the real targets for guerrillas were the Bou Kraa phosphate mines, where they managed to make phosphate production nearly impossible, similarly to the Mauritanian raids.⁶ Their primary target was the almost 100-kilometre-long conveyor which was used for transporting phosphate from the mines to the port of El-Aaiun. The conveyor was damaged at several places by the attackers and the Moroccans did not manage to achieve any results with their countermeasures although they tried to repair damaged parts and protect the area with patrolling.⁷

The table below shows the changes of Moroccan phosphate export from Western Sahara mines between 1975 and 1979:

	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
Export (tons)	2,638,000	277,000	25,000	441,000	139,000

Source: Interview with Larbi el-Omari, Director of Fosbucraa phosphate mines, 20th June 1978, El-Aaiun (Mining Annual Review, 1980)

The following table shows the revenues of Moroccan State Treasury from Sahara phosphate export between 1974 and 1979 (billion Dirhams. The average official rate between the Dirhams and USD is 4,10)⁸

1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
4.1	3.4	2.2	2.1	2.0	2.3

Source: World Bank, Morocco: Economic and Social Development Report (Washington, D.C., 1981)

Due to the raids by Polisario units phosphate mining almost entirely ceased in the Western Sahara and was restarted only after the building of the Berm, a defensive wall envisaged by General Dlimi. Naturally, the Polisario was never able to completely eradicate phosphate production and export as Morocco has its own phosphate mines, too.⁹

The most delicate issue for the Moroccan leadership was the fact that Polisario units launched attacks against military and economic targets in Southern Morocco, as well.

One of the targets of the guerrillas was Sidi Amara in the valley of River Draa (27th August 1978), where one of the Moroccan army units (Forces Auxiliaires) was ambushed and almost totally destroyed. Then, on 30th September border station Guelb Ben Rzouk on the Algerian border was taken.¹⁰ SADR Defence Minister warned King Hassan II, if his troops do not withdraw from Western Sahara the raids will continue and the organisation is ready to launch military actions even in Rabat, Agadir, or Tangier. In fact Saharawian units were active only in the Quarkziz Range, the Bani Mountains, the Draa valley, and in some regions of the Atlas Mountains, and never got close to the above-mentioned towns and cities.¹¹

That was the time when a highly confidential report landed in front of the leaders of the State Department of the USA, analysing the spending of military aid to Morocco. The report was written by Richard Knight, who was

in the region in early 1979 and took several photos illustrating the fact that Moroccan troops fight the locals with weapons delivered by the USA.¹²

Morocco, similarly to other loyal Arabic allies of America was armed with F-5 fighter planes and C-130 transport planes with the necessary ammunition, bombs and missiles¹³ under the condition prohibiting the use of those weapons outside Morocco since the USA officially did not regard the Sahara region belonging to Morocco.¹⁴

Nevertheless, the Moroccan Government justified the use of air force, often against civil population, with the fact that Western Sahara is not an independent state but integral part of the Kingdom of Morocco. On the basis of the case Richard King wrote a declaration published by the New York Times and the Washington Post.¹⁵ Those articles stirred a major scandal in the Senate. Although the issue was frozen Morocco started to search for new arms suppliers and found some among the arms manufacturers of the Apartheid-driven South-African Republic. (This is how still up-to-date Ratel and Eland armoured personnel carriers and certain small arms were purchased).¹⁶

The following table shows the funds in the budget spent on defence and inland security between 1974 and 1982 (million Dirhams):

	1974	1977	1981	1982
Defence sector	838	1,560	3,014	3,750
Inland security	693	871	1,766	2,145
Total	1,531	2,431	4,780	5,895
Total budget spending	5,815	8,886	18,178	22,554

Source: World Bank, Morocco: Economic and Social Development Report (Washington, D.C., 1981)

As it is clear from the data above the Moroccan leadership was continuously increasing both the defence and security budgets parallel with the increase in the personnel of armed forces and gendarmerie.¹⁷

The figures below show the growth of the personnel in the Gendarmerie between 1974 and 1982:

1974 56,000; 1975 61,000; 1976 73,000; 1977 84,650; 1978 89,000; 1979 98,000; 1980 116,500; 1981 120,000; 1982 141,000

Source: Tony Hodges: The Roots of a Desert War. p. 293.

However, regardless of the increase of Moroccan troops' strength or of their use of the most up-to-date weapons the guerrillas managed to entirely destroy and demolish well-fortified garrison of **Lebuirat** on 24th August.¹⁸ The town and its garrison were defended by 1,200 troops of the 3rd mechanised infantry regiment of the Royal Army against the guerrillas raiding the neighbourhood for several weeks. Two unsuccessful attacks had already been launched against the town (6th July and 10th August), and although the town was not taken the garrison was significantly weakened. The combat moral of Moroccan troops significantly dropped as they burnt out in the four-year-long service without rest and recreation.

Commander of the unit Lieutenant Colonel Mohammed Azelmat requested immediate help from his superiors in his report but he was not taken seriously and his nightmare came true (the copy of the fax was found on the spot). That time frequent sand storms caused huge problems for the Moroccan Air Force; no airplane was able to take off which deprived the surrounded garrison from air support. The unit ordered to bring relief to the besieged garrison was ambushed by the Polisario near Zag and forced to retreat. During the 24th August attack resistance was eliminated and the garrison occupied for over 24 hours by intruding Western Saharans. Moroccans suffered heavy losses; according to reports, 812 dead, 111 captured, and several main battle tanks and armoured vehicles were destroyed.

According to the official communiqué of the Moroccan Ministry of Information, "an investigation was initiated in order to identify responsibility and to find those involved." As a result of the investigation commander of the garrison and 9 officers who had escaped with him were executed, while another 36 NCOs and soldiers were imprisoned. In February 1980 they were pardoned by the King's amnesty. The battle has a Hungarian line, too, as reporter of the Hungarian Television Mr Alajos Chrudinak made a documentary film on the events in the region. (Nota bene: Algeria, flirting to Socialist Bloc and providing support to the Polisario that time was given huge support from the Soviet Union in the Arab World.) Thus, the reporter—already in the region for over 3 weeks—could see the battle and was one of the first reporters who could take photos of the occupied garrison. His film was awarded the "Golden Lion" prize at the 1980 Film Festival in Venice.

Rebel units continued to attack the Moroccan troops occupying the region, and on 5th October opened fire at Southern Moroccan town of Zag for diversion of attention, following the next day, on 6th October, with the second largest town in Western Sahara, **Smara**.¹⁹

The town was well-reinforced by the Moroccan troops and several Mirage warplanes were stationed in its airfield. The Royal Army deployed some 4,000-5,000 well-equipped soldiers and Mirage F-1s against the insurgents.²⁰ Nevertheless, the attackers took the upper end. After the battle local representative of the army acknowledged the loss of 121 soldiers with the unit commander, Colonel Driss Harti, while several of them were captured by the guerrillas but there was no reliable information on them.²¹

The next battle took place on 14th October at the town of Mahbas, 60 kilometres from the Algerian border. The town was abandoned by its civil population back in 1975, thus, Mahbas was used as a forward base by the Moroccan troops, in order to prevent Polisario infiltration. The base was defended by 780 soldiers and officers against some 1,200 attackers.

In the 24-hour battle the attackers prevailed and managed even to halt the relief troops arriving from the town of Zag. According to Moroccan military reports, more than 20% of the personnel of the garrison had fallen and the proportion of wounded had been even higher.²²

The next Polisario attack was carried out inside the country in the Bani Mountains. The small Berber town of Akka is located north-west of Agadir in its close vicinity, therefore, raids aimed at it and its neighbourhood raised fear in all those who expected military actions only in Western Sahara. The next raids hit the town of Tata and the oasis of M'hamid, where Mohammed V first declared his country's aspirations for Western Sahara.

The attacks nearly shocked Moroccan military and political leadership that launched operations **"Uhud"** (the place where Prophet Mohammed fought his famous battle in 625) and **"Imann"** (Faith) against the Polisario on 5th November 1979.²³ Both operations were commanded by Dlimi, newly promoted to General, deploying 7,000 soldiers and several Mirages and F-5s. The General also employed Saharawians, with a thorough knowledge of the desert. Although the majority of Saharawians supported the Polisario, several of them served in the Royal Moroccan Army forming independent units. Their most famous units were the 8th rifle regiment and the Maghzen (anti-insurgent units). Most of them were recruited from Southern Morocco, where militant Saharawian tribes with military experience and traditions lived. From among these tribes most soldiers came from the Ait Oussa tribe belonging to Tekna Alliance, which was a traditional enemy of the Reguibat tribe.²⁴

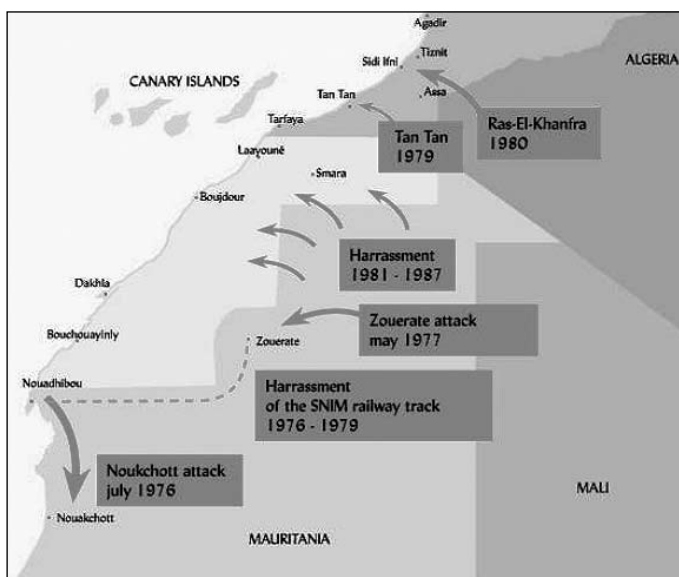
In the newly-established units also fought local people who had served in Polisario units then were captured. They served in the Moroccan army for their own and their families' freedom. Moroccans successfully utilised lessons learned from previous events and slow-moving military convoys were replaced

by well-armed rapid jeep-mounted troops.²⁵ During the operations Moroccans reached the Algerian border without meeting any significant resistance, and there built strong defence positions. In response to this step on 1st November 1979, on the 25th anniversary of the beginning of the national liberation war the Algerian leadership held a military parade, an unprecedented event for 10 years. The Moroccan Government understood the hidden warning of Algeria and military operations were ceased along the Algerian border.

As a result of new clashes and the demands of several human rights organisations, Morocco was called on by the UN General Assembly on 21st November 1979 to withdraw its troops from Western Sahara.²⁶

That was the time when the UN recognised the Polisario as representative of the people of Western Sahara and suggested that it should “participate as a full party in the search for a fair, lasting, and final political resolution of the Western Sahara issue.”

The map depicts the locations of major battles between Moroccan, Mauritanian and Polisario troops:



Source: <http://www.esisc.org/documents/pdf/en/the-polisario-front.pdf>

Since military operations proved to be unsuccessful Hassan II launched a diplomatic offensive in January 1980. He sent his representatives to nearly 25 African countries in order to interpret the Moroccan positions. Some of the representatives succeeded as long as some countries first suspended, later on broke off relations with the “shadow government” of the Saharawians. Encouraged by these, the king’s diplomats continued the ‘offensive’ until SADR was rather recognised only by third world or developing countries (mainly from Africa and South America), and the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (from Europe). Interestingly enough, the Soviet Union that—as leader of the socialist bloc—considered an important entity in its sphere of interest, as well as supported the Polisario with financial means and weapons via Algeria, never recognised the Sahrawi state.

On 13th February 1980 Polisario attacked the town of Boujdaor, then, between 1st and 11th March the fighting continued in the Ouarkiz Valley and the Tizert Highlands.²⁷ Although the Polisario did not win the battle its diplomatic campaign proved to be successful making the Morocco Government re-evaluate its political course.

3rd March 1980 saw the first visit of Hassan II in occupied Western Sahara, where he promised those local people who were loyal to him to provide them with rights and opportunities equal to those of the Moroccans. The total integration of occupied and secured territories into Moroccan public administration started parallel with the settlement of poor Moroccans from Morocco into towns. The Government supported mass migration and settlement through various concessions in order to make settlement in the desert more lucrative.²⁸ As there was no infrastructure or job opportunities, most of the settlers were provided with state aid and food supplies (and this has been the case ever since).

In May 1980 Hassan II elaborated the “Strategy of Walls” on the Algerian and Mauritanian borders with the help of General Dlimi. Soon it proved to be efficient allowing the Royal Moroccan Army to control occupied Western Sahara.²⁹

The purpose of the newly-built chain of fortresses was to keep Polisario guerrillas away from occupied Sahara territories. First, barbed wire obstacles and ditches were built, then, sand and stone walls were erected.³⁰ The first wall was accomplished in 1982. It started at the town of Smara and reached the Atlantic Ocean at the southern part of Boujdour.³¹ Since then further walls have been built and by now the overall length of the defensive system with 300 reinforced watchtowers and observation posts has grown 2,400 kms long.³² The chain of fortifications were manned by 120,000 soldiers.³³

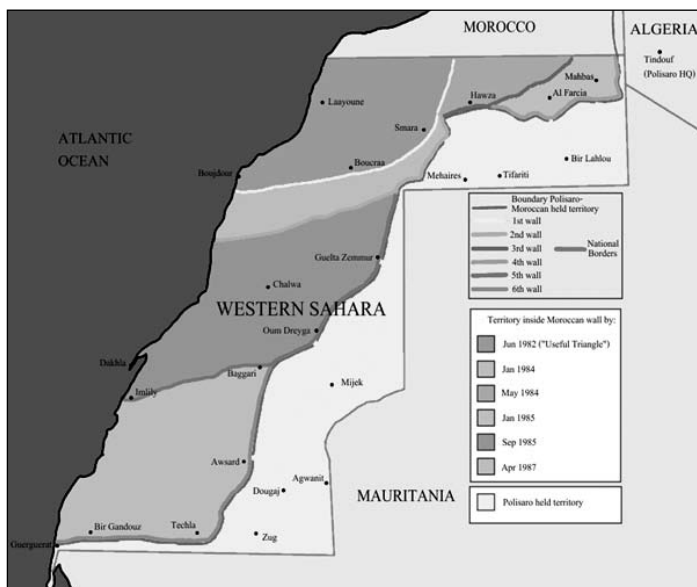
At the same time the Sahara Arab Democratic Republic was officially recognised by the Organisation of African Unity which made Morocco suspend its participation in the work of the organisation.

On 25th February 1982 the Organisation of African Unity recognised the Sahara Arab Democratic Republic as full member.³⁴ However, this move triggered vehement protests from Morocco and although it did not return into the Organisation Morocco did not make any counteractions against the Organisation either.

As a follow-up step, on 12 November 1984 the Organisation of African Unity approved Resolution AHG104 on the self-determination of the Saharawi people. Consequently, Morocco immediately left the Organisation.³⁵

Meanwhile, in October 1987 the sixth section of the wall was accomplished built in Western Sahara by Morocco which immediately triggered a political and diplomatic crisis between Morocco and Mauritania, for a part of the wall is located in the territory of Mauritania. Thus, Morocco wantonly occupied a part of an independent state, violating international law.³⁶

The map below shows the defensive system dividing the occupied territories and making them easier to control:



Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/0a/Western_sahara_walls_moroccan.gif

Nevertheless, as a diplomatic success Morocco managed to restore its diplomatic relations with Algeria (10th May 1988), then, by early July all border-crossing points between the two countries had been re-opened.³⁷ Slowly though negotiations are in progress between Morocco and Algeria which sometimes makes Algeria-supported Polisario suspicious but it is unable even to protest due to its position.³⁸ Once, for example, retired Chief of General Staff of the Algerian Armed Forces Khalid Nezzar happened to say at a press conference that Algeria did not need a new state on its borders.³⁹ This announcement was food for thought for diplomats all over the world and for Polisario leaders, too. Then, as the Algerian Government did not officially confirm the statement of the ex-general it remained labelled as private opinion.

According to some experts there may be a power struggle in the background between conflicting political groups supporting either an Algerian-USA or an Algerian-French alliance. In any case the question remains open: how Algerian home policy develops and how long Algerian politicians can play the “Polisario Card” against Morocco.



Nomads in the desert



Polisario girl



Saharawian family at Guelb Char



Small miracle in the desert – water as gift

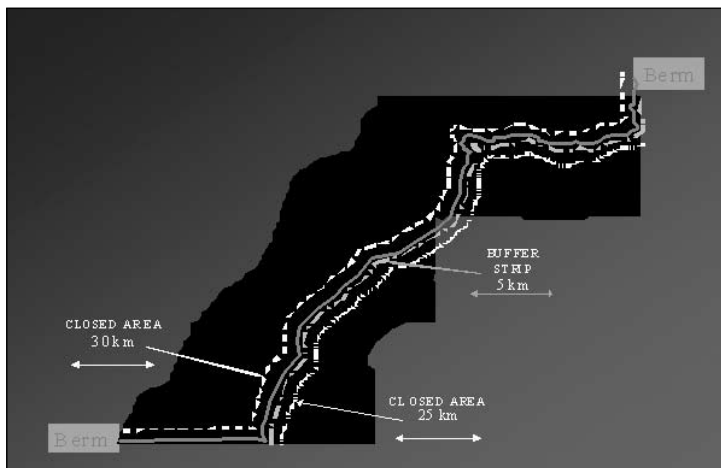
THE UN RE-ENTERS THE NEGOTIATIONS ON THE SETTLEMENT OF THE FUTURE OF THE REGION

On 7th June 1988 at the 4th Summit Meeting of Arab Countries King Hassan II did not attend the supper of Arab heads of state because of the presence of the delegate of the Sahara Republic. Instead he withdrew on board of cruiser Marrakesh on ancor in the port of Algiers. For observers it seemed that there would never be peace between the warring parties. Nevertheless, that very year both Morocco and the Polisario accepted the UN-brokered peace plan for Western Sahara.¹

The referendum allowed the people of Western Sahara to freely decide whether they would live in an independent country or as one of the provinces of Morocco, with certain rights and liberties.

In the early 1989 the King met with the leaders of the Polisario and had negotiations on the referendum and a possible union with Morocco. One year later the UN Security Council approved Resolutions 158/90 and 160/90 on the settlement plans for Western Sahara and a free referendum.² In 1991 the UN established mission MINURSO (Mission des Nations Unies pour l'Organisation d'un Referendum au Sahara Occidental) whose objective was to supervise the ceasefire between the two parties.³

As a result of the ceasefire every party could keep the territories under their control and the border ran along the walls erected by Morocco (Berm).



Source: MINURSO (1991)

A 5-kilometre wide strip of the area on the Polisario side of the wall was declared a restricted area (Buffer Strip) where only UN observers were allowed to move.

There are another 30-kilometre wide strip on the Moroccan side of the wall and a 25-kilometre wide zone on the Polisario side (areas with limited restrictions). In these areas any military exercise, maintenance of military posts or other installations were allowed with UN permission

Meanwhile the Moroccan King continued the relocation programme in the framework of which thousands of Moroccans were settled down in the towns of Western Sahara in order to achieve a favourable outcome of the referendum.⁴ The expectations were that new settlers given right to vote similar to those of people living in the region for ages would influence the referendum in favour of Morocco.⁵ To this end it was the Saharawians who insisted on a referendum based upon the data of the 1974 Spanish census, that is only those who were registered that time and their immediate descendants were participate in the voting. (73,497 people).⁶

Then Moroccan authorities tried to prove that Saharawians previously displaced from their lands had settled down in Morocco. In their opinion on the basis of their origin these people and their descendants (some 120,000 persons) should be granted the right to vote at the referendum on the future of the area.⁷ Then UN representative **Johannes Manz** objected of the measures which he labelled simply tactical moves. Then, UN Secretary General (UNSG) **Javier Perez de Cuellar** had the task to ease the tensions and broker a peace between Manz and the Moroccan authorities. However, Manz resigned as he felt the world organisation had fallen into discredit.⁸ Unfortunately, this seemed to be valid as the Moroccan authorities were working hard to make the peacekeeping forces tied themselves up in knots right at the beginning of the mission.⁹ Anyhow, the position of the Secretary General together with that of another UN Secretary General (former Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs **Boutros Boutros-Ghali**, who maintained extremely good relations with the Moroccan leadership) favoured Morocco.¹⁰ Thus, the elections scheduled for 1992 were postponed because of the divisions over the rights to vote as, according to the Polisario, it was only the aborigines who had the right to make a decision on the future of the region and the newly-arrived Moroccans would not.¹¹ Moroccan authorities disputed this opinion and demanded equal rights for those Moroccans who immigrated into Western Sahara in the past years. The disputes almost led to the suspensioin of the UN-supported ceasefire and although the warring parties came to an agreement their relations remained rather cold for quite a while.¹²

The situation in 1996 was further complicated by the fact that the UN personnel were unable to continue the registration of potential voters as both the Polisario and the Moroccan Government boycotted their activities.¹⁶ Since the personnel of the world organisation could only work under very restricted circumstances, upon the recommendation of the Secretary General the mission had been cut back.¹⁷

Thus, the UN restarted brokering a peace agreement between the warring parties.¹⁸ In spite of the suspicions and the unfriendly atmosphere in Houston, Texas, new rounds of negotiations began on the future of the area in September 1997.¹⁹ The talks proved to be successful and resulted in the approval and publication of the Houston Agreement, a repeated confirmation of the 1991 UN Peace Plan. The agreement revitalised bilateral relations between the Moroccan Government and the Polisario.

That very same year, not long before the conclusion of the agreement another important event took place with an impact on the course of negotiations. From that year further co-ordinations were done by former US Secretary of State James Baker, then as UNSG Special Envoy.²⁰ The same year negotiations went on in London²¹ and the unexpected happened: after several decades of hatred and hostilities the delegates of the Moroccan Kingdom and those of the Polisario made a direct contact on 23rd June and, under UN umbrella though, launched talks in Lisbon, Portugal.²²

Then, UN workers in the refugee camps could start the registration of potential voters and by August 1998 had shortlisted members with the right to vote of tribes acknowledged as of Saharawian origin.

In November of the same year UNSG **Kofi Annan** paid a visit to the area and through his personal presence tried to promote the settlement plan progressing very slowly.

As a result of the meetings on 15th June 1999 MINURSO workers began to register the members of the three tribes whose origins were disputed. In UN registers they were marked as Groups H 41, H 61, and J51/52,²³ while Morocco labelled them as A'it Usa, Aft Baamrane, Aft En-Nos, Azoafit, Cheraga, Aft Yarra, Beni Buvahl, Beni Zerual, Chenacla, Entifa, Rif, R'hamna, Seraghna, Ulad Settout, Ghomara, Zanti and Lamiar tribes.

Even in spite of the disputes between Morocco and the Polisario that year saw the accomplishment of the first public list comprising the names of 86,381 potential voters. In fact 147,249 people applied for voting and their data were registered by the UN workers. Later on these people were cross-checked on the basis of pre-defined criteria (proven ethnic origin) and could be put on balloting lists.²⁴

According to Moroccan statistics, however, only 84,251 people were entitled to vote, grouped as follow:

1. Saharawian descendants dwelling in Morocco: 46,255
2. Saharawians eligible to vote, in refugee camps: 33,786
3. Saharawian descendants dwelling in Mauritania: 4,210

In any case, over 79,000 people applied for voting from tribes of disputed origin but only 51,220 people filled in the voter's form and out of them just 2,130 were accepted.²⁵

The demand of the Moroccan Government that people of disputed origin should also be granted the right to vote was based on the fact that those are descendants of Saharawians who had fled to Moroccan territory. As evidences the following cases were disclosed to UN officials by the Moroccan authorities:

1. In 1884 after the town of Dakhla was taken by the Spanish several hundreds of local people from the tribe of Oulad Slim fled to Moroccan territories.
2. When the town of Tarfaya was occupied by Spanish troops led by Colonel Penez, most of the inhabitants of the region fled to Morocco. (1919)
3. In the year when the Spanish established their first garrison in Layoune, several Saharawians moved to the areas under Moroccan rule. (1934)
4. As a result of Operation "Ecouvillon" conducted by the French army a lot of Saharawians fought among Moroccan insurgents while their families lived in Moroccan territory. (1958)

Due to the lack of evidence the Moroccan position was rejected by the UN representatives, therefore, the majority of disputed tribes did not get registered for voting. After the registration process was accomplished, in April 2000 James Baker visited Algeria, Morocco and Polisario-controlled territories upon the request of the UNSG. Although he had talks with every party involved in the dispute he returned to New York without any concrete results. Then, in May and June the representatives of the Moroccan Government restarted the negotiations with Polisario officials in London but the negotiations were disrupted due to lasting and significant differences in the positions.²⁶

Later on another meeting was suggested by Baker in Geneva, where issues related to the future of the area, release of Moroccan POWs, and follow-up of the halted settlement were discussed.²⁷ Unfortunately, there was no agreement achieved, therefore, Baker proposed a third version to Polisario leaders in August (**Framework Agreement** or Baker Plan).²⁸

In its framework the Moroccan Government offered a significantly increased autonomy to the Western Sahara region. Due to the postponed

referendum (which happened as many as 12 times to that date) the tensions grew so high that the Polisario was considering the restart of military activities and concentrated large forces along the Berm.²⁹

According to James Baker, the problem would be resolved if Saharawian people accepted a comprehensive autonomy under the rule of Morocco and the referendum of the future status of the area could be held later (after a 5-year-long period of coexistence). Thus, all local people (including settlers) could have the right to vote if they have lived in Western Sahara for over one year.³⁰ After some hesitation Morocco accepted the proposal while the Polisario repeatedly rejected such kind of modification of previous UN resolutions.

Although Baker met with Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika supporting the Polisario and tried to convince him on the advantages of the new proposal the talks halted.³¹ Then, Mauritania, Algeria and the Polisario were invited to Pinedale, (Wyoming, USA) where promoting the settlement plan was discussed, without major progress though (27-29 August 2001).

During the negotiations Moroccan King Hassan II died (23 July 1999) and his son, hardly known to public, General of the Army **VI. Sidi Mohamed**, follower of European fashion, got his throne.³² The initial measures of the new Monarch were popular as he sacked his father's officials (including the Minister of the Interior)³³ opposing peace with the Polisario, he gave political prisoners amnesty, thus, many people were grateful to him for their regained freedom. Alas, those hoping for a rapid peace process were discouraged as the new Monarch continued the Western Sahara policy of his father with the use of more peaceful and democratic methods though.³⁴

Unfortunately, many of the Polisario leaders claimed that the UN was an impotent organisation—that is it does not work at all—while others stated that the UN clearly supported Morocco, therefore, it would be sensible to enforce Polisario rights with the use of weapons.

This comes partly from the frustration caused by the fact that Moroccan Government although the occupation was a huge burden for national economy was able to finance it (primarily from US and other aids).³⁵ There was certain development in the occupied areas generating a solid living standard, thus, the majority of people accepted the occupation as such and 'enjoyed' its economic advantages.³⁶

It is also important to understand that Morocco skilfully exploits the fact that it is the oldest, and one of the most valueable Arabic allies of the USA (since 1787) as due to its strategic location and as the second largest Arabic country (some 30 million people) it plays an important role in the Muslim World. Especially now when the majority of relatively reliable USA allies

proved to be false and their leaders—unofficially though—provided support to or maintains close links with terrorist organisations opposing American interests.³⁷

In this light it is easy to understand that Morocco has been provided one fifth of the US aids earmarked for Africa since 1950. It is only Egypt, which receives more American support.³⁸ The total sum of military aid to Morocco was USD 1 billion while the economic aid was around 1.3 billion US dollars annually.³⁹

Morocco's importance as a reliable ally was especially highlighted during the Reagan era when the US armed forces were allowed to use Moroccan airspace, airfields and seaports without any limitation.⁴⁰

France was another important ally to Morocco, from where 300 million Francs arrived between 1980 and 1984 (mainly as aid in French-made weapons).⁴¹

The tables below show the quantity and type of armament delivered to Morocco by the USA, France and other countries, either as aid, or at discount conditions between 1975 and 1997.

Between 1975-1988:

Arms supplier	Amount	Type of armament
Austria	121	Kürassier light battle tank
France	24	F-1CH Mirage warplane
	15	F-1EH Mirage warplane
	24	Sa-341 Gazelle combat helicopter
	24	Alphajet aircraft
	30	AMX-13 light battle tank
	360	VAB armoured personnel carrier
	100	AMX-F-3 155mm. field gun
Germany	70	UR-416 armoured personnel carrier
	10	Do-28 transport aircraft
Italy	28	SF-260 training aircraft
South Africa	100	Eland és Ratel armoured personnel carrier
Switzerland	10	AS-202 training aircraft
USA	100	M-48 Main battle tank
	420	M-113 armoured personnel carrier
	60	Vulcan type, 20 mm air defence gun
	37	M-48 anti air artillery gun
	55	155 mm. artillery gun
	6	F-5A warplane

	14	F-5E warplane
	6	OV-10 search and rescue aircraft
	15	C-130 transport aircraft
	2	KC-130 tanker aircraft

*Source: IISS, Military Balance 1979-1980, 96;
 IISS, Military Balance, 1987-1988, 107-9; IISS, Military Balance, 1989-1990, 108-10;
 Dean, Air Force Role, 16, 42, 44-47, 59, 61-62.*

Between 1989-1997:

Arms supplier	Amount	Type of armament
France	15	VAB-VC1 Armoured Personnel Career
	10	AMX-10 Armoured Personnel Career
	35	FH-155 mm artillery piece
Italy	2	Assad class cruiser
Spain	7	CN-235 transport aircraft
	4	Lazaga Class frigate
USA	1	C-130 reconnaissance aircraft
	2	UH-60 helicopter
	300	M-60 Main Battle Tank
	20	M-113 Armoured Personnel Career
	20	M-44 155 mm. artillery piece
	26	M-198 155 mm artillery piece artillery piece

*Source: IISS, Military Balance, 1987-1988;
 IISS, Military Balance 1989-1990, 109-10; IISS, Military Balance, 1995-1996, 142-43;
 IISS, Military Balance, 1996-1997, 125, 128-29.*

However, in Polisario-controlled areas there has been no significant development as the organisation has not received any significant help from other states except from Algeria. The majority of people are still living in refugee camps in Algeria including the families of soldiers serving in the (Liberated zone), where mostly Bedouins live, and apart from a few minor towns and villages there are no settlements.⁴²

The Polisario is in difficult situation both in the field of the economy (close dependence from Algeria and some aid organisations) and diplomacy (resolutions on the future of the region are approved in the UN). This fact makes the Polisario and the SADR wait, providing Morocco further advantages and opportunities for strengthening its positions. After the Baker visit in January-February 2003 the mandate of the MINURSO was extended for two more months (until 27th May 2003), then, to 31st April 2004. Since that time the UN continues extending the mandate of MINURSO.

However, it should be seen that after 11 years and after spending nearly 500 million USA Dollars several UN Member States and senior officials wished to see some progress. They did not cover their disappointment, and in spite of the resistance of France a fine-tuned version of the Baker Plan was approved by the Security Council in 2003.⁴³ Although the new plan contained concessions for both parties, according to independent political analysts and other experts, it continued to favour Morocco.

In accordance with the final plan a referendum should be held on the future of the area in four years or five at latest and until that time Western Sahara would have wide autonomy within the Moroccan Kingdom (**Settlement Plan**).⁴⁴

An organisation (**Western Sahara Authority-WSA**) would be set up to prepare decisions related to the area, organise daily life and to be a liaison to Moroccan official organisations. During the transition period WSA would be responsible for local financing issues, local taxation, education, fishing, security issues, and other problems having an influence on the life in the area. However, foreign relations and the defence sector would remain under the supervision of Morocco. At the end of the transition period a referendum would be held in order to make a decision on the future of the disputed area. Meanwhile under UN supervision the repatriation of refugees would also start to Western Sahara. The local population would have the chance to choose whether they would prefer a fully independent new state, autonomy within Morocco, or a full integration into Morocco.⁴⁵ In the referendum any person would be able to participate if they are over 18 years old, and have lived in Western Sahara since 1999 as a registered dweller, those who were UN-registered and labelled entitled to voting, and those who live in refugee camps and are officially shortlisted as “to be repatriated” by the UNHCR.

Although Moroccan authorities were unable to achieve those soldiers serving in the area (170,000 people) would be provided with the right to vote the outcome of the voting would be very close for either party because of the new settlers from Moroccan territories.⁴⁶

This risk is signalled by the fact that the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs submitted a protest note to then UNSG Kofi Annan criticising the Baker Plan and the role of the Algerian Government in the elaboration of the plan. In the years past the Moroccan position became less rigid and it supports the plan if it concerns only the issue of autonomy and does not propose independence.⁴⁷

While the Moroccan Government has not officially responded the Polisario surprised everyone involved with its official welcoming statements and the fact that the organisation accepted the new plan.⁴⁸ In the opinion of several

experts the cause is that the Polisario is entirely exhausted and unable to conduct armed fighting and has also been weakened by internal conflicts as a large part of common people and leaders got tired of the nearly three-decade-long conflict. Meanwhile, Morocco pursues a wait-and-see policy well aware of the fact that no power is able to make it withdraw from the occupied lands.⁴⁹ Although in the area the Polisario-supporters have grown stronger and are close to declare Intifada for gaining independence, due to the indifference of the global public or avoidance of conflict (it is easier to run a peacekeeping mission than to eliminate an armed conflict) the current situation seems to remain either through a referendum or without it.⁵⁰

MINURSO

In 1985 the Secretary General of the UN and the **Organisation of African Unity** decided to set up a mission aimed at the final settlement of the disputed territory. Both the Kingdom of Morocco and the Polisario agreed on the purpose of the mission but the agreement was achieved as late as 30th August 1988.¹

In 1990 the Secretary General of the UN submitted a report (S/21360) to the Security Council, which comprised a finalised plan offering a peaceful resolution for the armed conflict having been escalated for numerous years. The draft was approved by the Security Council on 29th April 1991 as ‘Resolution 690’ and thus a UN mission (**United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara**) tasked with resolving the future of and the rule over a territory was established.²

This plan provided a transition period during which the **Special Representative of the Secretary General, SRSG**, had the responsibilities to prepare and implement all decisions and resolutions linked with a prospective referendum on the future of the area. The question was how the local inhabitants decide—would they wish to support the idea of an independent state or would prefer to live in an area integrated into Morocco. The SRSG was also tasked with directing civil employees, military personnel and police officers of the mission, and with the establishment and operation of the office of **The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)**.

Originally, the MINURSO was planned to have 800–1,000 civil employees, 1,700 military observers and a 300-strong police unit.³

The mission was tasked with the following:

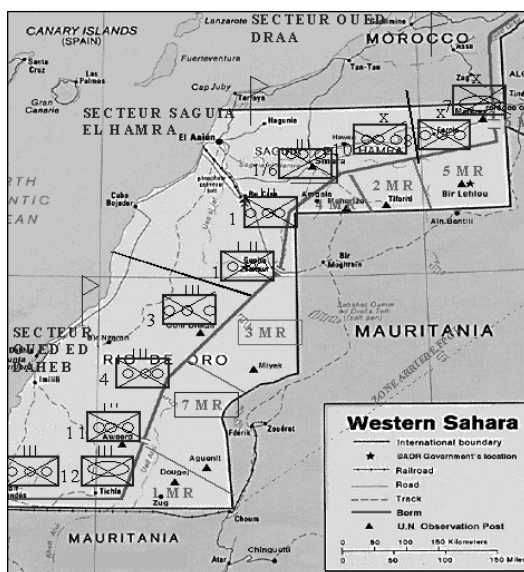
- Controlling the ceasefire and verifying the decrease of strength of Moroccan troops in Western Sahara;
- Observing Moroccan and Polisario forces in certain regions with special regard to troops concentrations or other military build-up;
- Taking measures for releasing political prisoners from Moroccan prisons;
- Supervising the exchange of prisoners of war (POW);
- Accomplishment of repatriation encouraged by the UN. In the framework of the action refugees would be freely returning to their previous homes;

- Identifying and registering those entitled to participate in the referendum to be held on the future of the area;
- Organising and ensuring free and fair elections then declaring its official outcome.⁴

On 24th May 1991 an official proposal was submitted by the UN Secretary General regarding the starting day of the ceasefire between the warring parties (6th September).

All involved parties agreed upon the date nevertheless it seemed that no ceasefire agreement could be achieved due to the conflict situations. In the region of Bir-Lahlou and Tifariti a general anti-Polisario offensive was launched by the Moroccan High Command in the month before the ceasefire was due. After initial success Moroccan troops withdrew behind the Berm.⁵

The map below shows the post-offensive situation and the military districts and sectors established by the opposing parties:



Source: MINURSO (1991)

The diplomatic efforts of the UN proved successful and the official ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario was declared. After the

agreement 100 military observers were deployed to the region in order to control the compliance with ceasefire and soon this number increased to 228 and some administrative and logistic elements.⁶

That time the MINURSO was tasked with observing the ceasefire agreement and prevention of potential clashes. The mission HQ was set up in the town of Laayoun and two sector commands were established in the controlled Sahara areas with their HQs in Dakhla (Sector South) and Smara (Sector North). Moreover, a Liaison Office was also established in Tinduf, Algeria, in order to ease the co-operation with Algerian authorities and the Polisario.⁷ The next step was taken in 1993 in the form of the establishment of an office for processing the data of people entitled to participate in the referendum and responsible for preparing the balloting lists. The preparation phase was accomplished in August 1994, which was followed by the collection and processing of the data of potential voters.⁸ This activity was significantly impeded by the fact that the opposing parties often complicated the work of the office workers and challenged the voters delegated by the other side.⁹

Organisation work was in progress not only in Morocco but also in Mauritania, and on 23rd October 1995 UNSG Representative Erik Jensen met with Mauritanian President Maaouya Ould Sidi Ahmed Taya. The purpose of the meeting was to set up an office in Mauritania, too, for the registration of Saharawian descendants dwelling in the country. As a result of the negotiations, the UN was allowed to open its office in the town of Nouadhibou, and the collection of data of potential voters' belonging to ethnic Saharawians could be started. However, due to the multitude of problems the registration of potential voters was halted by the UNSG in May 1996. Then, the number of office workers and police officers was reduced by 20% (28th May 1996).¹⁰

The work in the office was re-started as late as December 1997 and was finally accomplished on 3rd September 1998. Then, mainly military aspects of the mission got in the focus, such as enforcement of the ceasefire, patrolling, inspection of military units, and demonstrating the presence of the UN.

In accordance with the latest resolution on 31st October 2003 the entire Office and Police Section was "temporarily" disbanded and the material they collected and processed was transferred to the UN HQ in Geneva.¹¹

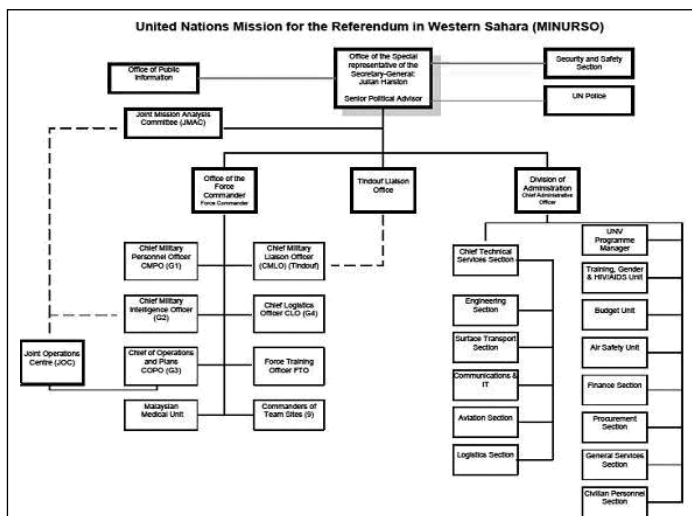
THE STRUCTURE OF MINURSO

MINURSO is subordinated to the United Nations Secretary General but the leadership rights are exercised by the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSBG), who is the Head of Mission at the same time. Today, the Special Representative is Mr. Julian Harston from United Kingdom.

The military commander of the mission is the Force Commander (FC), who is invited by the UN Secretary General and consented by the Security Council. The military counselor supervises his job in the UN Headquarters, New York, and informs the Special Representative of the Secretary General at the same time.

The MINURSO HQ is located in Laayoune, in the centre of the territories occupied by Morocco. 231 military personnel serve in the mission, including the commanding General (currently, Major General Zhao Jingmin). There are 203 military observers, while 27 personnel serve in jobs connected to leadership, service and the security the mission (there is a medical group of Malaysians and an administrative group of 7 Ghanaian non-commissioned officers) and other 6 police officers.¹

The following chart shows the structure of the mission:



Source: MINURSO (2008)

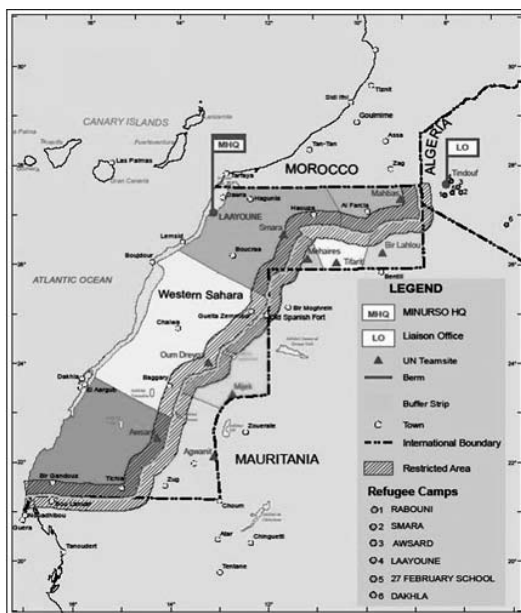
The following states have delegated military observers to the mission:

Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, the Republic of Guinea, South Korea, Egypt, Salvador, France, Ghana, Greece, Honduras, Croatia, Ireland, Kenya, China, Poland, Hungary, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nigeria, Italy, Russian Federation, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Uruguay.

Apart from them, 146 personnel from various countries all over the world and 113 local employees contribute to the work of the mission.²

The Department of Identification of the mission are closed down temporarily. The Civilian Police office was closed as well, but later it was opened and nowadays 6 police officers are working in the mission.

The area of the mission:

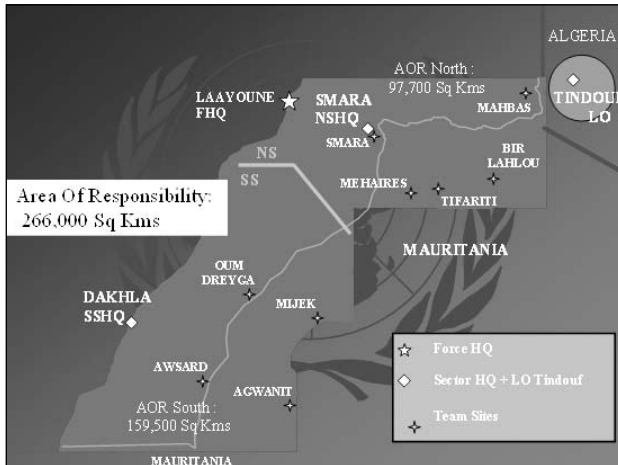


Source: MINURSO (2008)

The operating area of MINURSO had been divided into two sectors: the centre of the Northern sector was located in Smara city while the centre of the Southern sector was in Dakhla on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean. Later the

missions leaders terminate the sectors system and every peacekeeper under the direction of Layounne Headquater.³ In this chapter of the book I write about my experiences in Western Sahara. I know that some changes have happened lately, but my intention is to introduce the system (with sectors) I worked for.

The former sectors and their camps in the area of the mission:



Source: MINURSO (2005)

Team sites were established at the appropriate places of the sectors, where they were able to control a certain area due to their location.

The officers selected for the military observer position and trained either by the UN or the delegating states serve in these team sites. MINURSO has an unwritten law, which states that two military observers from the same nation should not serve in one team site, if possible, unless in special situations. Naturally, this can only be applied effectively to soldiers from countries with small contingents. The same principle is to be applied to soldiers serving in the headquarters. Another chapter discusses the structure of the camps and the work carried out there. The present part will be elaborating on how the headquarters and its different departments function.⁴

In general, the staff serving at the headquarters are divided according to the current NATO organisational structure. The tasks of the Staff Officers is regulated by the **Standard Operating Procedure for Peacekeeping Operations (SOP)**.

The main duties and obligations of the Staff Officers serving at the headquarters include:

- To prepare suggestions in professional matters for the Commander and the Chief of Staff (COS).
- To co-operate with civilian organisations, to co-ordinate and manage their professional work.
- To co-operate with other military departments (G1-Personnel, G3-Operations, G4-Logistics service, etc).
- To prepare and check personnel serving in team sites and are subordinated to them professionally.
- To prepare different documents for MINURSO and New York HQ.
- To provide up-to-date information on professional matters to the Chief of Staff (COS).

The personnel serving in the Staff Command:

Chief of Staff (COS)

Based on the agreement between the Malaysian government and the UN, the position (Colonel) can be filled by Malaysia. In case of the absence of the military commander, he controls the work of the military observers, monitors everyday affairs, organises and supervises the professional and military work done at the HQ.

South Sector Commander (SSCDR)

Based on the agreement between the Chinese government and the UN, the national position (Colonel) can be filled by the People's Republic of China.

The tasks include the co-ordination, command and control of human resources and other tasks, while informing and obtaining the approval of the military commander of the mission. He is entitled to represent the mission in all matters (disciplinary, military, human resources, etc) concerning the sector, to maintain contact with the Moroccan authorities and the local Polisario leaders.

North Sector Commander (NSCDR)

Based on the agreement between the French government and the UN, the national position (Colonel) can be filled by France. His position is equivalent to that of the South Sector Commander.

Senior Liaison Officer (SLO)

Based on the agreement between the Russian government and the UN, the national position (Colonel) can be filled by the Russian Federation.

His tasks include the management of the military liaison office in Tinduf, controlling the work of the military observers serving here, maintaining contact with the Polisario leaders and the Algerian government.

Chief Operations Officer (COPO)

Based on the agreement signed by the government of Ghana and the UN, the national position (Lieutenant Colonel) can be filled by Ghana. From the beginning of the mission until January 2003, the United States of America appointed the officer for the position and only after they had left the mission the position was transferred to Ghana.

His primary tasks include the control of the operational level of the mission, the organisation and supervision of the military and patrolling tasks. The advisor of the Chief of Staff is responsible for working out and applying different operational and service instructions of operational matters, and also for preparing and classifying mission reports (OPORDS, etc) and informing the control centre in New York. He is responsible for organising and holding training courses and meetings organised at the headquarters, preparing and controlling the services. He deals with the security matters of the headquarters, by involving the civilian security service (Service) and the Moroccan security and law enforcement agencies.

Chief Military Personnel Officer (CMPO)

The position can be applied for by officers of any nation, and generally officers from African countries are selected. (In 2003 and 2004 Lieutenant Colonels from Ghana, Egypt and Nigeria filled the position.)

His primary tasks include the organisation and control of personnel tasks (arranging leaves, reports, personal descriptions, preparing identification cards, orders, etc). He evaluates the reports of the military observers and prepares them for review by the commander. He represents the commander in disciplinary and other matters (accident, death, etc) concerning the military observers and organises and supervises the work of the Investigation Commission. He acts as the advisor in personal matters and prepares the roster for both duty officers and patrols at the headquarters. He maintains contact

with the Chief Medical officer, coordinates the round-trips of the military observers arriving for medical check-ups or treatment between the camps and the headquarters.

Chief Logistics Officer (CLO)

The position can be applied for by senior officers of any nation. His tasks are to provide full logistic service (food, petrol oil and lubricant, drinking water, furniture, other equipment, etc.) to the mission and supply the military observations posts. He carries out his tasks in co-operation with the General Service Section-Integrated Support Services. He is responsible for the preparation and application of the logistics regulations and orders. He is to visit the team sites regularly in order to personally check the sectors and the logistic services there.

Senior Co-ordination Officer (SCO)

Based on the implicit agreement within the mission, the position can be filled by South American (Salvador, Honduras, Chile, Uruguay) senior officers on a rotational basis. His main task is to supply goods to the staff canteen, organising and co-ordinating freetime activities. He is responsible for providing accommodation to military observers going on leave, or arriving to the headquarters for duty and to organise and co-ordinate various military holidays (national days, official events). Military protocol and maintaining contact with the representatives of electronic and printed media are also his responsibilities.

Force Training Officer (FTO)

Senior officers of any nationality can apply for the position. All training matters belong to him (professional courses, organising Arabic, French and Spanish language courses, publishing journals and regulations). He prepares weekly and monthly reports, updates the military training programmes of the mission and checks the execution of the trainings (UNMO Mission Training Programme – MTP).

He checks the training, the expertise of the personnel serving in the sectors and organises lectures and training courses for them if necessary. Besides his training tasks, he also fulfills the positions of the Sports Officer of the mission.

Force Medical Officer (FMO)

Based on the agreement between the Malaysian government and the UN, Malaysia can fill the national position (Lieutenant Colonel). His task is to co-ordinate the job of the Korean medical team and to manage and control the organisation of all health, medical and hygienical tasks related to the mission.

Commander of the Malaysian Medical Unit (CMMU)

In accordance with the current international agreements, the medical supply of the mission is provided by the military medical team of 20 members delegated by the Malaysian Armed Forces under their own command. The commander of the unit is responsible for the work of the team and the providing medical care for the mission, in cooperation with the Moroccan military hospital (Casablanca) and the navy hospital of the Spanish Armed Forces (Las Palmas).

Aide-De-Camp (ADC)

Due to the implicit agreement of the mission and the special requirements accompanying the agreement (command of the French language and contact with the Moroccan military organisations), the position is filled by the captain of the French contingent. He organises the trips, meetings of the commander within Morocco, maintains contact with the leaders of the local organisations, participates at official meetings and takes the minutes there. He organises the correspondence at Commander's Office, participates in organising and co-ordinating the administrative work and executes the commanders commands.

Military Assistant of Force Commander

Generally, the position is filled by a captain from the same country as the commander. His tasks include organising the commander's meetings, taking minutes at the meetings, doing the correspondence of the commander, going through and classifying the incoming daily mail, preparing the draft of the commander's official speeches, copying it if necessary. He takes photos at official events, records and archives the events for later use (internal publications, press, etc). In case of the absence of the ADC, he takes over his tasks, but he in command.

Military Assistant to the Chief of Staff

The position is filled by a captain selected by the Chief of Staff, who is of the nationality of the commander. He fulfills administrative tasks for the Chief of Staff. He prepares and organises the programmes of the Chief of Staff, maintains contact with the different military organisations and sectors. Basically, his job description is identical to that of the Military Assistant.

Force Sergeant Major (FSM)

In accordance with the current agreement, the position can be filled by a non-commissioned officer, sergeant-major or warrant officer from Ghana. He has significant role in organising various military events; he is responsible for observing the dress-code of military observers, and acts as the advisor to the commander of the mission in disciplinary matters. The FSM organises, controls and checks the work of non-commissioned officers subordinated to the office of the commander. He escorts the Commander on his official trips and helps the military assistants organise the programmes.

The following departments function at the Mission Command:

Personnel Department

The tasks of the Personnel Department include all the personnel tasks (travelling, service trips, unexpected death, accidents, medical checkup or treatment, etc) related to military observers at the MINURSO Staff, including the preparation of identification cards, of various reports, reviews, providing help in religious and conscience matters, setting up and operating disciplinary committees. Besides the commander, two commissioned officers and two non-commissioned officers work for the department.

The non-commissioned officers do registration, and administrative work under the DCMPO's control but their superior is the Force Sergeant Major.

Planning and Operations Department

Reconnaissance (G2) and operations-planning department are integrated mainly due to the shortage of human resources. The work of the department is led by the Chief Operations Officer (COPO). Their tasks include all types of military planning, information gathering, the processing and evaluation of

information within the mission and the coordination of the work of military observers (patrolling and other service duties).

Five officers serve in the department (the deputy of the Chief Operations Officer, the Air Liaison Officer and three other Staff officers).

Deputy Chief Operations Officer (DCOO)

He is responsible for organising the work of the officers working in the department, maintaining contact with the operational and intelligence officers of the sectors and the camps, checks the gathering, evaluation of information, and sending the reports to the Operations Centre in New York.

Air Liaison Officer (ALO)

He is responsible for organising and coordinating the air transport, air reconnaissance, trainings and rescue activities of the mission. His task is to ensure that military observers apply and do not violate air safety regulations. He prepares flight manifests and organises special flights in co-operation with the local military and civilian air traffic services.

Staff Operations Officers (SOO)

Their tasks include checking the daily operation of the team sites and preparing, controlling and checking the services, processing and evaluating the incoming intelligence (ORBAT) for the mission commander. They take part in working out different orders, controlling the observance of military and ceasefire agreements, and in case of violation start investigating the case. They prepare the daily, weekly, monthly and other periodical reports (SITREP, etc) for the leaders of the mission and the UN. Deputy of Chief Operational Officers, Air Liaison Officers and Staff Officers must be senior officers.

Logistics Department

Like anywhere else, this department has the most responsibilities and work load, as there is always need for fuel, food, drinking water and other logistic supply. The transport of the supply is done by three helicopters (MI-8) and three Antonov transport planes due to the large distances. This requires daily contact and continuous coordination with the other departments involved.

generators and other technical equipment used in the team sites. He is entitled to assign any kind of task to the garages on behalf of the military organisation and he organises the temporary deployment of technicians to the team sites.

Transport and Plans Officer

He is responsible for the repair and maintenance of all vehicles used by the military observers, for fuel, lubricants and airplane fuel supply. His tasks also include finalising the reports of the Logistics Department and sending them to the consignees.

Supply Officer

He receives the requests for supplies from the team sites (except for food and fuel), which is provided dependent on the current needs and the stock available. He maintains daily contact with the Procurement department, civilian logistic personnel, the ones responsible for the store-houses and Receiving and Inspection.

Food Officer

All tasks connected to the food supply of military observers belong to him. He monitors the food supply tasks in the team site, the results of the weekly and daily reports, checks and approves requests for food supply. He controls the quality of food together with the Hygienic officer, co-operates with the civilian logistic and supply companies. His tasks include checking of the invoices received and only he is entitled to authorise any payment to the companies supplying food for the mission.

The positions of the Logistics Department can be filled by senior officers, however, if a candidate is suitable for the job, the military commander of the mission can authorize a captain to be selected for the position, as a professional position.

Welfare and Co-ordination

This is the smallest department of the mission and it is responsible for supplying the canteen with goods (cigarettes, alcohol, confectionery, etc) organising and co-ordinating freetime activities all over the area of the mission. Apart from the mission commander, there are two other officers serving at the headquarters.

Welfare Officer

He runs the shops of the mission, purchases goods, calculates the prices of the products and it is his duty and responsibility to transport the goods to the team sites. He is in charge of the money of the welfare fund of the military observers and if necessary purchases cultural items (DVDs, CDs, videos, cassettes, board games, etc) and sports equipment from the fund. He organises the sports and cultural programmes in co-operation with other departments.

Co-ordination Officer

He is responsible for providing accommodation to the military observers arriving from the team sites to Laayoune, receiving the newcomers, organising and coordinating various military and official events (National days, awarding medals, etc). He maintains contact with Moroccan and Spanish hotels, travel agents and other tourist organisations to provide discount air tickets for officers travelling home for holiday.

Communication Department

Due to the fact that the mission is located in three countries and the insufficient infrastructure of the area, the communications experts developed their own communication system independent of the host nations the mission. The personnel serving in the communication department, in cooperation with the civilian experts (UN employees) operate the radio (long and short waves, VHF and HF) and telephone system, operate, maintain, repair the IT and telecommunication (facsimiles, computers, photocopy machines, etc) equipment.

Two senior officers serve in the department:

Force Communication Officer (FCO)

He co-operates with the leaders of the civilian communication department. They plan the purchase of the equipment together, co-ordinate the work of the military, civilian and repair departments. He receives the communication daily reports from the team sites and sectors, which he sends to the Chief Staff Officer after processing and evaluating them.

Assistant Force Communication Officer (AFCO)

His primary task is to help the work of the Force Communication Officer, and to observe the deadline of the planning tasks. He supervises the operation of the communication systems between the headquarters, sectors and team sites and to troubleshoot (computer security, daily maintenance, etc) in cooperation with the civilian departments, if necessary. He maintains daily contact with the Force Communications Officers of the sectors and team sites and is also responsible for their professional training and control.

Below you can read about the organisations co-operating with other military parts of the mission. I do not have an insight into the work of the administrative department as this is not a very important area for military observers, however, I have written about the police department, the identification and the refugee offices in detail, as their work influenced the events of the mission for years. Presently, two of these organisations have been suspended temporarily in the mission but can re-open anytime following a decision in the future (the police department already working).

CIVPOL

When the UN in its Resolution 690 decided to establish MINURSO (29 April 1991), it was clear that certain tasks cannot be accomplished by the military observers due to the lack of appropriate training, so the UN Secretary General recommended delegating police forces to the mission.

In his report (S22464-46. paragraph – 19 April 1991), the Secretary General proposed to employ 100 police officers immediately to aid the work of the staff preparing the census. They would have increased the number of staff by 200 in order to secure the repatriation of refugees to the territories occupied by Morocco.

The police force worked hand-in-hand with the staff of the Identification Commission and Registration Centres from the very beginning. The work started in July 1993 under the command of Police Colonel Jürgen Friedrich Reinman.⁵

The first police unit was composed of 19 personnel (4 Germans, 5 Belgians, 5 Malaysians and 5 Togans), who also carried out the security tasks of the mission but their primary task was to escort and protect the employees of the Identification Centre during the preparation period for the census.⁶ The moment the identification of eligible voters started the number of police officers increased proportionally with their tasks, thus the UN Secretary-General authorised the employment of as many as 26 police officers in his

report (S/1991/819 – 12 July 1994), and by the end of the year 55 police officers had been in service (S/1994/1257 – 5 November 1994).

Resolution (973/1995) of the Security Council authorised the increase of police staff to 160 but it never manifested. There was a downsizing again followed by an increase in the number of staff. The highest number of the police staff was 91 in January 1996.⁷ At that time, there were 19 Identification Centres established in Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria, where police officers served together with the civilian staff. The task of the police officers included maintaining law and order in the identification centres and providing the possibility of uninterrupted work for the civilian employees.⁸

The UN established identification centres in Laayoune, Dakhla, Boujdour, Smara, Tan-Tan, Goulimine, Assa, Rabat, Casablanca, Marrakesh, Sidi Kacem, Zagora, Taroudant, Tata, Zourat, Nouadhibou, Elkela, Meknes and Tinduf.

The primary tasks of the police force during the identification period were the following:

- To provide registration and the opportunity to vote for anybody who would like to participate at the referendum deciding about the future of the territory, after presenting their legal documents.
- To take a photograph and fingerprints of the eligible voters in order to simplify their identification later.
- To escort tribal leaders and all people who supported the work of the UN, preparing the referendum.
- To protect personnel and facilities.
- To collect the documents processed during the identification process and to transport them to Tinduf and Laayoun and finally to the UN centre in Genova (346,000 documents were transported to Genova by the end of December 2003).
- To provide escort for the finance officers transporting the salary of the UN employees and the military observers and the security of the venues of payment.
- To organise joint patrols together with the military observers in the region of Laayoune and Tinduf.
- To participate in military observer training (driving in the desert, navigation- and GPS-training).
- To plan the establishment of the police forces of Western Sahara having received autonomy, their training and checking they comply with the democratic norms.

- To assist the work of the security service and to accomplish other tasks requiring security technological experience and police expertise.
- To give advice in police and security policy issues for both the military and civilian leadership of the mission.
- To participate in the repatriation programme.
- To conduct investigation of disciplinary and criminal cases in MINURSO in co-operation with the local authorities.
- To co-operate with the UNHCR in refugee matters.

81 police officers (including Hungarians) served in Western Sahara and the neighbouring countries in the time period after the census. There were only 26 police officers in the mission in June 2003.⁹ The police unit was dismissed after the identification process and due to the suspension of the identification centre for an indefinite time period. But as written previously, later 6 police officers arrived in the mission again, and today they are working in the Headquarters.

The police unit had an excellent disciplinary conduct, nevertheless, two police officers had to be sent home before completing their service due to causing road accidents and their poor command of English.

Identification Centre (preparing the census)

The Identification Centre or Census Preparation Office was established by Security Council Resolution 690 (April 1991), as one of the organisations of MINURSO.

The employees of the office started the preparatory work immediately after the office was opened. They requested the Spanish government to issue the documents containing the data of the 1974 census (Spanish Census) and started the data-processing. The result of the census then was 74,343 people, although some Saharawians had been registered more than once as a member of different tribes.¹⁰ This could occur as the staff of the census were often confused about the fact that one person can be a member of several tribes and sub-tribes due to kinship.

After processing all data of the Spanish Census, a database was ready for future activities.

The staff of the office started registering the eligible voters for the referendum about the future of the territory on 20 June 1993 on the basis of the data of the previous census. The first two identification centres were established in Laayoune (Western-Sahara) and Tindouf (Algeria). Due to the insufficient personnel and

financial background the registration work could only start on 3 November 1993. The Head of Office sent the registration documents together with the filling instructions to both the Moroccan and the Algerian governments.

Due to political reasons, the work in the Mauritanian office could only start in late February 1994, despite the fact that the UN officially published the data of the Spanish census overviewed and corrected by its staff. There were only 72,370 people registered. This document was especially important as this provided the base of the census carried out in the future. According to the original plans, people or their descendants living in then Spanish Sahara in 1974 could vote about the future of the territory.

Due to the pressure of the opposing parties, however, the UN changed its original plan concerning the requirements of eligible voters. Five pre-conditions had to be met in order to be registered on the list:¹¹

1. Being registered on the list prepared by the Spanish authorities in 1972.
2. Living in Spanish Sahara during the 1974 census but not being registered for some reason (this was very likely due to the migration periods of the nomadic tribes).¹²
3. The immediate kins were registered but the potential voter was not registered for some reason.
4. If the potential voter's father was born and lived in Spanish Sahara.
5. If the potential voter lived in this area for six years continuously from 1 December 1974 or for 12 years with some interruptions.

The official list was published on 29 November in both Laayone and Tinduf cities (including the refugee camps).

The representatives of both parties (Morocco and Algeria) handed over the registration documents (sent to them before hand) and their recommendations to the UN staff on 16 May 1994. The office staff started data-processing the incoming material and the identification process immediately. This meant that a person whose personal data was registered on the computer had to appear in the identification centre where their identification was confirmed and photographs and fingerprints were taken. This was necessary to prevent forging of votes or multiple registration of one person. The representatives of both opposing parties—the Moroccans and the Polisario—intended to manipulate the office staff.¹³

On 28 August 1994, in Tinduf, the confirmation of data and the checking of voters registering to vote started in the refugee camps.¹⁴ However, due to the lack of data-processing staff, the work was very slow. The number of office staff reached its maximum capacity only in 1998, which speeded up the process.

By that time, the office had established 19 Identification Centres in Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria, four of which were located in Western Sahara, four in refugee camps, two in Mauritania and nine in Morocco.

The first phase of the identification process started on 28 August 1994 and finished on 23 December 1995. The gathered data could only be processed completely by 3 September 1998.¹⁵

Out of the 179,497 potential voters only 84,262 met the UN requirements, so they all were entitled to participate in elections to be held in the future.¹⁶

The non-contested tribes appearing in the first phase and the 1st Provisional List of Voters of Saharawians was published on 15 July 1999 and were made accessible for the Algerian, Moroccan and Mauritanian governments.¹⁷

In the second phase, the contested tribal groupings, 51,220 applicants were registered as potential voters in the identification centres but only 2,163 met the requirements and were put on the 2nd Provisional List of Voters. The second list was made public on 15 June 1999 and similarly to the first list this was also sent to the governments of the three countries and the Polisario leaders.¹⁸

The work of the Office is well illustrated by the following:

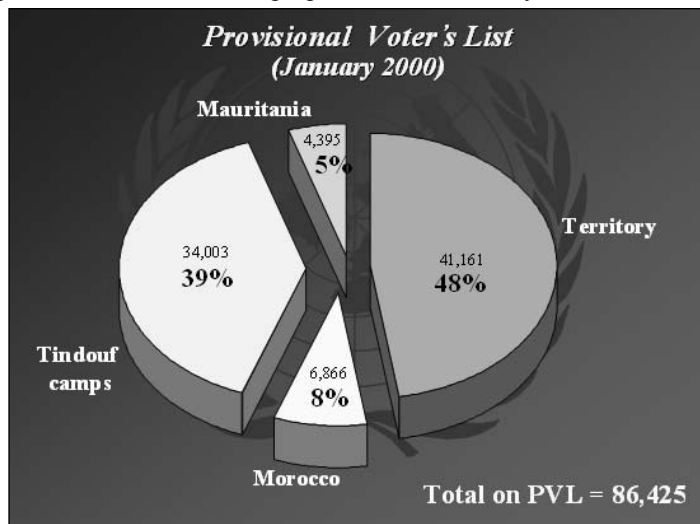
- 244,643 registration sheets were processed;
- 243,625 invitations were sent out for the registrations in the identification centres (179,437 in the first phase and 64,188 in the second phase);
- 198,469 people completed the identification process (i.e. after registration, went to the identification centres, had their photographs taken, confirmed their personal details with their fingerprints and signature);
- 86,425 people met the requirements of the UN and the Office organised to inform them.

Then, in February 2000 the situation between the Moroccan government and the Polisario had become so tense that working in the identification centres became impossible and they were closed down. Afterwards the employees of the UN processed the results of the data-gathering phases and corrected the forms stored on the computer. As the opposing parties were not able to reach an agreement, on 15 January 2002 the UN decreased the number of employees in the office to 40. Due to the lack of other tasks, the UN workers continued to archive the materials, while other colleagues did research and conducted the analysis of the information gathered during long years and prepared studies for the UN. The final decision about the office was made in July 2003, when the leadership of MINURSO was informed that all ongoing tasks must be

completed by the end of October and the documents must be sent to the UN centre in Geneva.

The transport of the processed documents started on 8 September and finished on 6 October. The staff left the territory of the mission at the end of the month.¹⁹

The following chart shows the countries where Saharawians live, and their proportions there in the lists prepared and verified by the UN:



Source: IDC Centre, Layoune (2003)

Refugee Office (UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)

The organisation started working in 1975-76 among the Saharawians fled from Western Sahara and living in the refugee camps established in Algeria.

Although the office is not part of the structure of MINURSO and follows orders received from New York independently, there has been good and close co-operation between the organisations since the very beginning. One of the major tasks of the office would have been to organise the return of the Sahrawi refugees to Western Sahara—so far, this has not been achieved.²⁰

The organisation had established and maintained good relationship with the opposing parties and very often acted as a mediator organisation to solve problems.²¹

The office staff forwards the food offered by the non-governmental aid organisations to the camps where they hand it over to the local authorities supervising its distribution. Despite this fact, the food received as aid does not always reach the needy but ends up on the black market.

I have personally seen food items (sugar, flour, etc) carrying the logo of the UN, originally from international aid being sold in shops in villages.

This may be why the leader of the World Food Programme warned the UN representatives in the summer 2003 about the serious food shortage in the camps. Basic food items (sugar, flour, rice, semolina and canned fish) were already scarce at the beginning of spring and there were not enough vegetables and fruits for the refugees.

According to the UN, in such a situation there is a great risk of an epidemic, so, on 16 October 2003, the Security Council in its Resolution S/2003/1016 demanded that the international organisations get involved in the solution of the problems and help feed the refugees in the camps with every possible means.²²

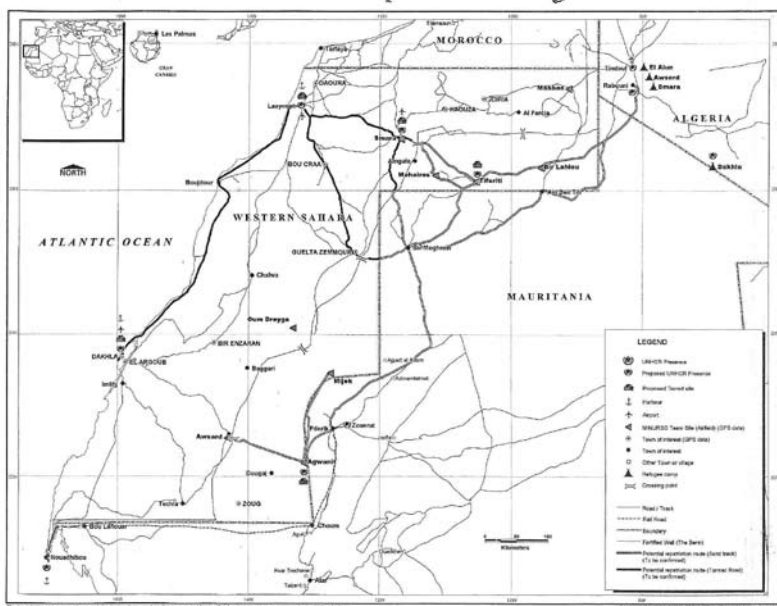
The organisation helped several times to maintain contact between the refugees in the camps and their relatives living on the territories occupied by Morocco. They organised and co-ordinated meetings between the relatives occasionally.²³

Negotiations were initiated between the government of Morocco and the representatives of the Polisario to establish a regular postal service and telephone connection (confidence-building measures) between the refugee camps and the occupied territories.²⁴ This was not so simple as the Moroccans demanded the right that the letters arriving from the refugee camps should be forwarded to the addressees by the Moroccan postal service, but this would not guarantee the intactness of the letters. Naturally, the UNCHR did not accept the proposal so the UN would continue to guarantee the intactness of the letters and their safe delivery. In March 2003, an agreement was reached, which guaranteed the uninterrupted operation of the postal service, and not tapping the telephone conversations between the refugee camps and the relatives from the Sahara. On 15 April, the UNHCR announced that there were limited postal service and personal telephone calls available between the refugees in the camps and the occupied territories.²⁵ The telephone line was shut down by Morocco after one day. It re-started only on 11 January 2004. Until 2006, according to the report of the office, 60,000 calls were made between refugee camps and the occupied territories.²⁶

The third important element of the programme was to provide constant contact and meeting opportunities between refugees in the camps and their relatives left behind in Western Sahara.²⁷

This may be an even more delicate issue than the postal service and its operation. The first suggestion of the Polisario was that only people who were registered in the Spanish Census, or met the requirements of the UN to vote about the future of the territory should be allowed to attend family get-togethers. Morocco would provide opportunity to meet other family members to anybody with a relative living in Western Sahara. In 2004 the UNHCR organised the first encounters between relatives. In the first round 1,200 people attended these meetings, mainly coming from refugee camps. In 2005 19,000 people registered for the programme, and with the mediation of the office 1,476 people could meet up with their relatives.²⁸ The action had to be halted for a while as the required financial means were missing. Later on it was re-launched, and ever since it has been smoothly running.

UNHCR Western Sahara Repatriation Programme





Tea with Polisario fighters



Guelb Char patrol



Loading a car in Mijek

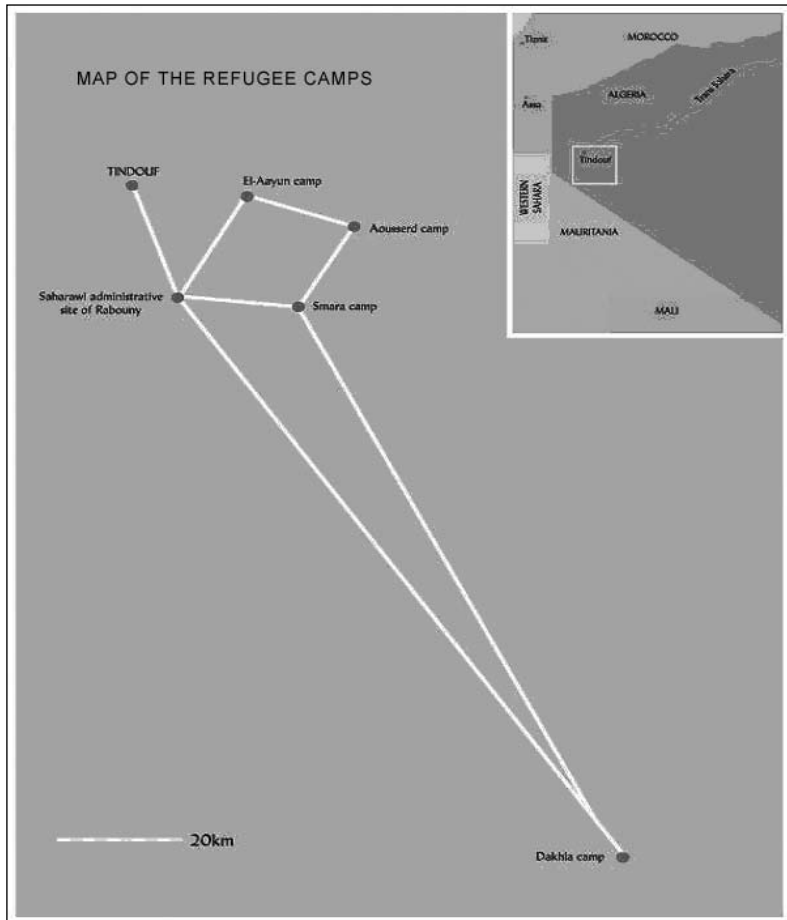


Mreira well

LIFE IN THE REFUGEE CAMPS

In the end of 1975 and the beginning of 1976 the first refugees arrived near the town of Tindouf, which is located 30 kilometres from the Algerian-Moroccan border. Since then four large refugee camps have been established where there are 140,000 or 160,000 persons living now.¹

The following figure illustrates the location of the camps:



Source: <http://www.esisc.org/documents/pdf/en/the-polisario-front.pdf>

The camps were named after the towns located in the territory occupied by the Moroccan army to express that the refugees do not lose the hope of their return. The camps were given the following names: El-Aaiun (centre of the Saharan territories), Smara (the second biggest city, a sort of religious and spiritual centre), Dakhla (formerly Villa Crisneros, which functioned as an administrative centre during the Spanish period) and Asward (a town located in the interior of the country).²

The natural environment on this landscape is rather hostile; in summer the daily average temperature exceeds 50°C in shadows while the winter period is extremely windy and cold.

The camps were built near wells, despite this there is no established water supply, and portable water is transported by tanker trucks. Apart from this there are catchments built to safely contain and preserve water.

The camps are called *wilaya* in Arabic which means province or region. These are divided into districts (*daira*)—there are usually 6-7 districts in one camp—and these districts are divided further into neighbourhoods (*hay*).³

The camps were established far from each other taking into consideration the possibility of a successful Moroccan airstrike which would destroy the main leadership and other targets, had the camps been built close to each other.⁴

In the camps every unit has an elected leader (or chosen by the Polisario) who is responsible for the organisation of the every day life. Many of the important positions are taken by women since most men are serving in the so-called “liberated territory”.⁵ Thus, women are fulfilling key roles which support the development of a system different from the traditional Arab “family model”.⁶

In every camp gardens are created where the refugees try to establish and promote fruit and vegetable production with more or less success. A “national garden”—independent from the camps—was also created.⁷ Despite the salty and sandy soil they managed to cultivate several vegetables successfully. However, the inhabitants of the camps are not capable of self-sufficiency and significantly depend on the donations of the UN and other organisations.⁸ Nevertheless, the garden project fulfilled the aim set by the Sahrawi leadership, to acquaint the population leading a nomadic lifestyle with gardening which supports their permanent settlement. There was also a chicken farm created next to the national garden though it does not have a significant role in feeding the camps.

In the camps every family has its own tent though as time has passed many built houses of sand bricks, which include kitchen, storage room and sometimes bathroom, too. There are little gardens created around the houses and many are pondering on settling down permanently.⁹ However, there are certain obstacles, namely that there are no available jobs in the camps or even

in the neighbouring territories, thus, that there is no hope for the population and they are condemned to poverty. The other problem is that even though Algeria uses the refugee issue as a weapon against Morocco it does not support the settlement of the refugees in Algeria and does not allow the refugees to leave their camps.¹⁰ This is why the majority of the refugees feels the situation hopeless and would like to emigrate abroad, away from poverty to find work and live far from their homes.

Naturally, the Saharan government tries to keep the hope for their return home alive in the people with all possible means which is complicated by the fact that most of the youth living in the camps has never been on the territories occupied by Morocco, thus they try to thrive in other countries.

Compared with the state of health care in the Arab states the camps have developed and well-functioning medical organisation even in these conditions. Before the 1980s child death and chronic diseases were frequent and in many cases there were epidemics in the overcrowded camps, taking many lives.¹¹ Diseases are eliminated now and prevention is more emphasised. Although the rate of child death has been reduced, still 134 babies die out of 1,000 newborns. Life expectancy still does not exceed 50 years. There are small hospitals operating in every district—run by local doctors and nurses—where emergency cases are taken care of. There are central hospitals built in the camps where the more serious cases are dealt with. The National Hospital created in Camp Dakhla possesses the most advanced equipment and staff of experts, mainly foreign doctors (most of them are Spanish and Cuban).¹² From our perspective these institutes are poor and they are equipped deficiently.

The HQ of the camps and the Saharawi Government are located in nearby town of Rabouni. Parliament, the Government, the Office of the MINURSO, the “Saharawi Red Crescent”, the National Women’s Society and other organisations dealing with donations and co-ordinating the society’s life moved there, in that town.

The first school (it is called “The 27th of February”) where emphasis is placed on the education of women was founded there. The name of the school is a memorial of the declaration of the nation-state on 27th February 1976.

The development of the school system has not been over yet but there are kindergartens, elementary schools in every camp and two boarding high schools. The two schools are named after 9th June and 12th of October as a memento of the Martyr’s Day and the Day of National Unity. The schools are great help in the elimination of illiteracy which reached 95% in the 1970s but by now almost 90% of the camp-dwellers have acquired the skill of reading and writing.¹³

Women have a prominent role in the field of education since they form the bigger part of the adult population.¹⁴ Women's education is managed and controlled by the National Union of Saharawi Women (NUSW).¹⁵ This organisation was founded in 1979 and it has more than 10,000 members among Saharawi women living in refugee camps and foreign countries. There are schools founded just for women where they can master useful expertise like household skills and carpet-making.

Every year 300 women take medical, household and other courses organised for them. The organisation places emphasis on the mental care of those women who were in Moroccan prisons or victims of sexual harassment and violence during the battles. The Union of Women is led by a council of 57 persons who are elected every five years by the Congress. The leader of the Council is also member of the Polisario leadership. The Union established good relations with other international organisations defending the rights of women. In many cases members of the Union are invited to give lectures abroad on the situation in Western Sahara and on the life in the refugee camps.

Apart from the education of women, medical programmes also have a great importance, for that reason some talented students can have a chance to study abroad (Cuba, Spain, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya) every year to become doctors or nurses. Naturally, they get opportunities to study in other universities too though in very limited numbers. Education is important in the camps too because the aim of the SADR—as they are preparing for their return—is to raise a leading, technical, and intellectual middle-class which will be capable of organising and managing the life of a future state.¹⁶

The Ministry of Culture of the SADR started collecting folk tales, folk songs and other pieces of art (pipes, wood-sculptures, carpets etc.) partly to prove that the Saharawian people are not Moroccan and partly to preserve their national culture. There are some talented artists living in the camps who can present their works on exhibitions mostly organised with the help of foreigners.¹⁷

The Polisario recognised the importance of press in an early stage. Not only did they take journalists to the occupied territories but also created their own news agency called Sahara Press Service.¹⁸ Parallel to this operates the El Karama which deals with the Saharawian rights of freedom on the territories occupied by Morocco.¹⁹

The capabilities of the internet are also exploited, many home pages are in operation like the Arso,²⁰ the SADR's official page or blogs as Sahara Libre, presenting the life of occupied territories and refugee camps, and there is information on other pages of foreign organisations dealing with Western

Sahara issues (**Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara, Western Sahara Campaign UK, Western Sahara by Khatry Beirou**, etc.).

A significant part of the information posted on these pages is false, especially the one concerning the size of the population living in the refugee camps. Even the most optimistic guesses estimate this number at most to 140,000 persons.²¹ A UNHCR egyik becslése szerint 165 000 fő élhet a táborokban, de a menekültek pontos számát ők sem tudják.²² However, the International Red Cross and other non-governmental organisations supply food provisions for 155,000 persons. There have not been any complaints from the camps about the amount of the aid so far.

Unfortunately, the aids do not necessarily reach the indigent but the black market. Food packages with the symbols of the donating country can be found at local dealers even though these must not be sold since they are donations. In this perspective it seems strange that the Polisario and other web pages related to it report 180,000-200,000 refugees. The notion of using propaganda to get more aid is not unknown among the Polisario.²³ In 2003, when a commander of the MINURSO visited a refugee camp he was presented a garage and its workers. However, the shop was cleaner than a chemist's and there was no sign of oil spots typical to these places or any other sign of car repairing. A similar thing happened in a lab of computer education where the computers in their factory wrapping were presented as device of education used regularly. But tricks like these are used by the Moroccans, too, in order to manipulate the UN and other international organisations.

A separate and independent organisation was founded in Tinduf by the relatives of the people who went missing in the war or during the Moroccan occupation.

The organisation of the AFAPREDESA (Association of Families of Prisoners and Disappeared Saharawi People Refugee Camps) was founded in the refugee camps on 20th August 1989.²⁴ The organisation opened and managed offices in Paris and later in Madrid as early as 1996. Their main profile is gaining intelligence on perished Saharawians and providing mental and financial support to the people who were held captive in Moroccan prisons since the majority of them are victims of mental and physical diseases because of the maltreatment suffered in the prisons.²⁵ There are still hundreds Saharawians registered as lost since their families have no information about their relatives.²⁶ The AFAPREDESA has good relations with the Amnesty International which called off its conference scheduled to be held in Morocco (1999) alluding to the constant violation of human rights which was partly based on the information received from AFAPREDESA.²⁷

It must be admitted, however, that in the refugee camps the Polisario kept in custody several thousands of Moroccan POWs who had been captured back in the 1970s.²⁸ Most of the prisoners were old and weak with different illnesses. Although the Moroccan government first denied that these people had ever existed, and later demanded their release at various forums, the Polisario did not agree either to exchange prisoners, or to ransom, or to make them free immediately.²⁹ Back in the days when the 1991 ceasefire agreement was signed, the settlement plan contained that after the referendum that decided upon the future of the territory all prisoners would be released unconditionally.³⁰ The referendum has not taken place for 12 years now, thus, the prisoners could not return to their families. Those Moroccan soldiers in custody were visited by the International Red Cross, which was monitoring the conditions in the camps, twice a year. In their reports, Red Cross staff pointed out that most of the prisoners had become washed-out; were ill and were not provided with proper medical attendance and other life conditions. From reliable sources it was leaked that they were even forced to work, as opposed to international regulations.³¹ To show mercy and goodwill, the Polisario released some of them from time to time—mostly the elder and the ill.³²

For instance, at the end of October 2003 with the mediation of the International Red Cross 300 POWs were released (at this time I myself was at the spot). The prisoners were then transported to the Moroccan airbase, Chahid El Hafed, by a special plane provided by the Red Cross. This move was welcomed by many countries and the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan himself in numerous communiqués.

Although the release of the prisoners was seen by human rights organisations and the United Nations as a positive action, sharp criticism was directed towards the Polisario because of those still kept in custody. Former French President François Mitterand's wife, Daniella Mitterand and her NGO, the Fondation France Liberte heavily criticised the Polisario as it had kept old and ill people under horrific circumstances in its camps. In their statement they called upon the Polisario to immediately and unconditionally release all POWs.³³ Finally, due to the intensified pressure coming from the international community, on 18 August 2006 the Polisario released the last group of 404 Moroccan prisoners.³⁴

Unfortunately, similarly to the Moroccan POWs, the Saharawian prisoners' case remains unsolved, too, since there are still 151 POWs and hundreds of civilian prisoners in Moroccan prisons without any hope for gaining freedom.³⁵ The Moroccan Government does not wish to enter into negotiations about this issue though they closed some of the most infamous prisons (Qualatt Mgouna)

and started supporting the enforcement of human rights.³⁶ At the same time they divert the international forums from the violation of basic human rights (for example, if Saharawi children do not wish to study Moroccan history they are “regulated” using police force) by stressing the ill fate of the Moroccan prisoners. Anyhow, maybe there is a chance of mutual prisoner exchange with the supervision of the UN or the Red Cross.

Various relief organisations operate in the camps collecting and distributing food, cloth, money and other donations. The English War on Want was the first organisation that appeared in 1984 and has been operating in the refugee camps ever since.³⁷ First it helped with stabilising the health care and restraining the diseases, then, the organisation took part in the development of the gardening programme and in the creation of the National Garden. Later stores were built with the help of fire departments from Lancashire for the safe storage of aids. Its “Toys Make Children Happy” programme is also successful in collecting and providing toys for the children living in the camps.

The programme of the Norwegian People’s Aid organisation is slightly different from the usual charity work.³⁸ They organised training courses on recognising landmines and other unexploded shells and avoiding accidents.³⁹ Many people who were wounded or lost a limb by stepping on a landmine were involved in the programmes. The number of the accidents has been significantly reduced since the organisation started its preventive work in 1998 but there are still many victims mainly because of the landmines deployed by the Moroccan army and the unexploded shells fired during the battles.⁴⁰ When I served as peacekeeper in MINURSO an accident happened in a few kilometres from the UN compound (Mehaires) where I was serving as a military observant. The result of the accident was that a Bedouin boy was seriously wounded on his leg and he lost one of his hands because of touching an unexploded shell unwarily. Unfortunately, there are many landmines which can be triggered by the vibration of a car passing nearby or just by the heat in a 10-km radius around the Berm and in those parts of the desert where battles had been fought (almost everywhere).

There are Hungarian relief organisations working in Western Sahara and the most significant among them is the Hungarian Baptist Church Charity Service. Minister Sándor Szenci and his wife are dealing with mentally and physically disabled children in the camps and many of them make spectacular progress after the training courses. The Szenci couple also started an adoption programme which allows the financial help of a child’s medical treatment or education for one year through a certain monthly sum.⁴¹

Another organisation operating here is the Sahara Foundation which organises educational opportunities for talented Sahrawi children and took up the responsibility of cultural good will mission.⁴²

Unfortunately there are fewer and fewer relief organisations trying to help the refugees, consequently the situation in the camps is catastrophic again. The reason can be that the food sent by the International Red Cross and other organisations (World Food Programme, etc.) is not enough anymore to feed refugees. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) submitted its report (Anthropometric and Micronutrient Nutrition Survey-Saharawi Refugee Camps, Tindouf, Algeria, 2002) to several countries and international organisations and requested immediate help.⁴³

When I visited the UN's base in Tindouf (23rd-26th July 2004) I met the representatives of organisations which tried to find a solution to the food problems in the camps. The activists of various organisations arriving in Tindouf were invited by the UNHCR and apart from taking part in a conference they also visited the refugee camps. On one of these occasions I had the opportunity of escorting them to the refugee camp of Aswaard.

It is hard to describe the life of these people but I think that even Gypsy people living in Hungary's slums have better living conditions than these people. In my opinion the best solution would be to abolish these camps and to guarantee the inhabitants their resettlement to the territories of Western Sahara possibly with some financial support.

Morocco established a programme for this and houses were built for the repatriated refugees in the cities of the occupied territories. However, most of the houses are empty since the Polisario does not let the inhabitants of the refugee camps to resettle in territories governed by Moroccan authorities and many of them are forced to stay in the camps.⁴⁴ In this manner the Polisario continues using the camp-dwellers living in poverty as a weapon against Morocco.

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