

Discussion Forum: Self-determination delayed: The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic

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First let me thank Pretoria University and the Human Right Department for keeping an eye on this issue.

I would like to thank the Dean for opening this discussion which we are sure is a contribution that will promote peace and respect of human rights in our corner of Africa.

For years the University has contributed to enlightening on the complexities that seems to characterize the Western Sahara question. Complexities because geographically we are called Western and this area is called South of the same continent and distances can be overcome only by travelling or by information and understanding. This meeting is thus auspicious, especially when lack of clarity is fueled by full speed propaganda and contradicting information spread by Morocco and its Western allies' machine of misinformation.

If we start by situating the theme of the day, let us say, the Sahrawi Republic, is located in northern Africa and bordering the Atlantic Ocean (1200 km), Mauritania to the South (over 2000 km) and the Kingdom of Morocco in the North (400 km) with Algeria, the territory has a border of only 50 km.

For more than five decades, the question of Western Sahara, its people struggle for independence has remained unanswered, and the conflict, that opposed for years the Sahrawis and Spain, (1970-1975) then the Sahrawis and Morocco and Mauritania, (1975-1979), the Sahrawis and Morocco, (ever since) has become a forgotten and neglected international crisis. Still, it is a conflict that cannot and will not go away so long that injustice is committed against a people that do not want to give up despite the complicities and the means used to subdue them. Freedom is indivisible; if one part of African suffers injustice then all of African is enduring the same pain and anguish.

The question of Western Sahara was since 1963 a simple question of decolonization: a people, the Sahrawi people, who live in the Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro, have been colonized in 1984 by the declining European power, the Kingdom of Spain. Ever since, the United Nations, which registered the territory, some 110 000 square miles as a Non-self-governing territory, to which the right to self-determination, a God given right, should apply which has been enforced into law, during long debates, in 1960, nevertheless adopted in Resolution 1514 (XV) of the United Nations General Assembly.

The right of self-determination provides for a people to determine freely their destiny at a time when the colonizer prepares for its withdrawal for the territory it occupies. The colonial power has nevertheless the responsibility to prepare the people to be able to exercise that right in a "civilized" manner, which means that the colonizer should invest time and funds for the setting up of a reliable administration and infrastructure as well as in education for the colonized people to enjoy that inalienable right without coercion.

This did not happen in Spanish Sahara. Spain was as I said a declining power associated to the worst of regimes, Hitler nationalism, and suffering from a long civil war that left the country depleted from its potentialities. No civilized manners, customs or administration was introduced in our homeland. To the contrary, Islam was targeted because it provided a very strong alternative to colonialism and exploitation.

All along the past nineteen century, the Spanish Sahara went through several uprising and organized intermittent resistances against colonials in West Africa. Early 1900, a long war was launched from the "Land of saints" against the new colonial attempts. The Sahrawi resistance against the French colonial army is very well known and French tombs could be found today from Saguia el Hamra to the river of Senegal and within today Mali. They are the cemeteries witnessing the battles between the Sahrawi Gazia and the French colonial army.

Western Sahara was occupied and "pacified" only thanks to French intervention at the turn of last century. Under Spanish colonial presence the territory was managed by the "*ejercito*" the Spanish foreign legion, i.e. a military administration, for that matter, the same military administration was operating in metropolitan Spain, under the command of Generalissimo Franco.

Madrid was poor and provided very little and doing very little and spending very little "to modernize" the colony. Education was a luxury. The Sahrawis created their own Koranic schools, where most of the Elite of the Polisario Front got its first education. The infrastructure was non-existent. The gadget that Spain built in the territory was a long conveyor belt to exploit the huge deposit of phosphate of Bucraa. Asphalt roads were limited to the capital EL Aiun, and the population movements were limited to the colony, of fear that the wind of liberty could blow into the colony. The borders were strictly controlled by the *tropas nomadas* and visiting the neighboring states was prohibited for nationals.

All this exposes the reality on the ground at a time the Spanish Sahara is to become known as the Western Sahara in 1975.

Recent history will tell that the Sahrawis continued their struggle for national liberation and fought a violent war against the Moroccan army, which has enjoyed the backing of France, and the United States when their army was pushed way beyond their borders. The war from 1975 to 1991 resulted in the dozens of thousands of deaths, in the perpetration by Morocco of genocide against the Sahrawi people who fled to neighboring countries (close to half of the population are refugees today in Algeria, where five refugee camps are installed in a barren land; other thousands fled to Mauritania northern towns, and to Spain).

The Sahrawi government administers 40 per cent of the Western Sahara, liberated areas where some 20 000 families live almost permanently and provides basic food, education and health care for the refugees, some 170 000. The refugee camps even though they represent a permanent challenge to the organization because of the lack of resources and the insufficient international humanitarian assistance, they have been

recognized as the best organized refugee camps by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees.

The situation in the camps contrasts the Sahrawi living under Morocco's control.

The Moroccan illegal administration comprises over 120 000 troops, 20 000 gendarmes, 20 000 civil servants, including police and over 120 000 settlers which are the eyes and ears of the oppressor. The Sahrawis living in the occupied territories are outnumbered and are estimated less than two hundred thousand.

The colonial policy of Morocco in Western Sahara seeks to integrate at any cost and with any means the Sahrawis to Moroccan society: prohibiting Sahrawi culture, limiting their freedom of movement, prohibiting peaceful demonstrations, prohibiting contacts with foreign visitors. Visitors to Western Sahara must have a special permit, which can be obtained only after a long scrutiny. Media and NGOs as enemies number one of the Moroccan administration and authorities. If they are permitted to visit, they will have to follow a fixed itinerary and be accompanied by plain cloth police from the point of entry to the territory to their exit. The United Nations personnel has complained several times and documented Morocco's vigilance in Western Sahara. The territory is also under a constant media blackout even though the United Nations has been deploying both components of international civilian and military to prepare and organize a referendum on self-determination.

No change, while the UN is present, just as before, the Moroccan colonial administration oppresses, tortures and jails at will any Sahrawi suspected to present minimum challenge to the Moroccan policy. Morocco rejected any human rights monitoring by the UN mission in Western Sahara. France provided the defense of Morocco's colonialism in Western Sahara. France worked to defeat the UN referendum in Western Sahara and it has succeeded so far. Since 1975 hundreds of civilians have disappeared and may have died in detention. Even today

Morocco's colonial laws of arbitrary detention and life long prison for peaceful activists are common practice.

The territory of Western Sahara stands out today as, ostensibly, Africa's last colony. Colonialism is a mode of submission and exploitation of a people and their land. When the land is super-rich, phosphates, uranium, gold, fish, beaches, etc and when the people are rebellious and ungovernable, the repression became quite similar to the Apartheid regime during its heydays.

Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and other European and African Human Right Non governmental organized have documented Morocco's persistent violation of rights in occupied Western Sahara. This typical colonial aggressiveness and savagery are reported by any delegation that will visit the area.

Any discussion on the question of Western Sahara will lead to another. What about a peaceful resolution of the conflict? And since early this month, because the Kingdom of Morocco has accepted to sit with the Sahrawi Republic within the African Unity one may think that the parties to the conflict are getting closer to settling their dispute peacefully.

Conflicting signals are emerging from Moroccan officials as to the existence of a real political will to be awaked from their long colonial dreams and face reality and accept the principles guiding the African Unity and work for through decolonization practices and democratic methods to resolve this conflict peacefully.

On one hand King Mohamed V of Morocco has limited experience in World politics but inherited tremendous centralized powers. By lobbying to be admitted in the AU, he seems to be willing to correct mistakes his father made when the Sahrawi Republic was admitted to the Organization of African Unity but His Majesty seems to be doing other mistakes that could be judged as even worst by expelling the United Nations mission from the Western Sahara --deployed to keep a badly needed ceasefire Morocco's Hassan II strove for and was a witness of his army defeat. The UN mission was invited to help Morocco out of its quagmire to organize a referendum, as a face-saving formula, a formula

Morocco can only fear because its outcome is clear and will lead ineluctably a confirmation of the Sahrawi independence.

On the other at Gergarat, an illegal aperture, the only land passage in the entire Moroccan land borders, in the Moroccan Chinese-type wall built in the heart of the Western Sahara, is used to unload tones of dissimulated dagga into Africa. In the last few months, and as reported today in the Pretoria News, tension has gone a span higher; the UN peacekeepers have been deployed to keep the two armies at distance and prevent a spark that will unleash the resumption of the war. Yes, but the escalation is only the consequence of Morocco stubbornness and rejection of its previous commitment to a peaceful resolution and signing of many agreements negotiated officially with the Sahrawi side under UN supervision. It is the result of recent refusal to receive the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon and his personal Envoy and UN mediator, Christopher Ross. Morocco has created "a dangerous situation" according to Guterres, the UN Secretary General. Morocco boycotted the ongoing peaceful negotiations to which the Sahrawi side has always adhered and continues to welcome. The talks represented the only glimmer of hope for a peaceful resolution. The deadlock is the result of Morocco attempt to dictate the outcome of any referendum and reject any internationally supervised but also organized referendum in the territory.

Because of their own colonial endurance, the majority of African countries have only witnessed and understood the colonial policy exercised on daily basis on the Sahrawi people. Whether through the African Union approach to welcome both the Sahrawi Republic and the Kingdom of Morocco in its fold or through the advanced position of the United Nations and the European community, the framework of a final solution entails the exercise of the right of self-determination by the sole people of Western Sahara remains the wise course for a peaceful resolution of this African dispute.

Never forget that expansionist Morocco sat for over 6 long years with the Islamic Republic of Mauritania in the Organization of the African Unity without recognizing its independence. We hope that this time

Morocco would have learnt from its own colonial experience and shorten the time of the normalization of bilateral relations with the Sahrawi Republic.

The efforts the African states and peoples will make to bring that day closer will benefit African and speed up the huge task of unity and development our peoples have sacrificed for. Thank You very much.