

Committee: 4th General Assembly

Question Of: The Situation in the Western Sahara

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INTRODUCTION

Western Sahara is a sparsely populated region of Africa's desert, located on the Northwest Coast of the continent. It is home to valuable phosphate reserves and houses rich fishing grounds off its western coastline, which leads to the belief that it may also currently possess untapped offshore oil deposits. Until 1975, Western Sahara was a Spanish colony until its annexation by Morocco, after which it has been plagued by the constant territorial dispute between the Kingdom of Morocco and the indigenous Saharawi population represented by the Polisario front. This conflict originates from the Polisario insurgency, which began in 1973 against the Spanish colonial forces. This continued through the Western Sahara War fought against Morocco beginning in 1975. Currently, the situation in the Western Sahara has escalated following the establishment of terms set by the Madrid Accords.

The war itself was deemed a 16-year insurgency, which ended with a peace deal - a truce of some appearance - brokered and facilitated by the United Nations. It also bore the promise of a referendum on independence which has yet to come to fruition. Along the disputed territory that serves as a border separating the Moroccan west from the Polisario-controlled west there is a buffer strip, also called a "berm", fortified with landmines and other military measures. One of the groups established over the duration of the conflict, the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), is currently a full member of the African Union and has been recognized as an official entity by many governments since its declaration by the Polisario Front in 1967.

Among the media outlets that have become entangled in the conflict are those from radio, television and news networks. Morocco's state broadcaster operates RTM Laayoune and TV Laayoune, while the SADR operates the National Radio and Sahara Press Services, both run and backed by the Polisario. Currently, Morocco remains in control of the majority of Western Sahara territory, including the Atlantic coast, though the United Nations continues to refer to the region as a 'non-self governing territory'. Thus, the United Nations, through their decrees, resolutions and statements, believe that the region of West Sahara should implement self-determination for its people.

DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

Insurgency

Insurgency is defined by the forceful attempt made by a group of people to take control of their country, through means such as overthrowing the current government. Insurgency often happens when a growing group of people, often called rebels, refuse to accept their government's power and claim to the country.

Annexation

Annexation is a concept of international law which refers to the forcible acquisition of a state territory by another state. Annexation is typically seen as an illegal act as per the principles of international law. Annexation is distinct from conquest, or conquering, which involves gaining control by means of officially changing sovereignty, and is also different from concession which is the conscious 'giving up' of territory. Annexation typically follows periods of conflict or military occupation. In the case of the situation in Western Sahara, Morocco annexed the region while it was under Spanish rule.

Guerrilla

Guerrilla warfare refers to aggressive, radical and unconventional methods employed by individuals who identify with an independent unit that carries out harassment and sabotage acts as a form of irregular warfare. The Saharawi are said to employ guerrilla tactics in their fight for independence.

Paramilitary Organization

Again pertaining to the Sahrawi people, a paramilitary is a semi-militarized force with partial organizational structure and tactical training. However, they are not formally part of the country's military force.

Sovereignty

Sovereignty refers to the full right and power of a governing body over itself and its territory without infringement or interference from external powers. Sovereignty typically connotes supreme authority in political theory.

Colonialism

This is the act or practice of one country gaining either full or partial political control over another territory through occupation and economic exploitation. Western Sahara was colonized by Spain, and the ownership of its land was disputed amongst Spain, France, Mauritania and Morocco.

'Berm'

The Western Sahara Berm, which is also referred to as the Moroccan Wall, is a defensive structure that is nearly 2,700 kilometers long and consists of fortified sand. It runs through southeastern Morocco and most of Western Sahara.

Displacement/Displaced Person

Displacement of individuals refers to forced movement of these people from their locality or environment of residence, usually as a consequence of armed conflict and occasionally socio-economic or environmental factors. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) are equally recognized by the UNHCR as persons or groups of persons who have been forced to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence as a result of armed conflict, internal strife, and habitual violations of human rights, as well as natural or man-made disasters involving one or more of these elements, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border".

Political Autonomy

Political autonomy is the state of independence over a government's decisions which are respected and heeded within a political context.

No man's land

No man's land is either land that is previously unoccupied or land that is under dispute between two parties who leave it occupied due to fear or uncertainty. The Spanish colonized Western Sahara under the assumption that the region was previously unoccupied.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The escalating conflict in the Western Sahara can be attributed to a range of numerous factors. The interconnected nature of these separate issues is what continues to add contention and

consequentiality to the issue at hand. The situation in Western Sahara remains pertinent even today, centuries after its instigation, due to the value of the region in question. Western Sahara remains a resource-rich land with great military potential, making it the ideal stronghold for any one of the parties involved in the conflict. Because of this issue, human rights have been called into question in recent years. Turmoil in Western Sahara, as well as violence and brutality on both accounts, has led to a significant increase in the number of displaced persons fleeing the conflict.

Displacement and Refugees

Activities over of the last two centuries have led to a noticeable refugee crisis. Morocco's control of the western region past the berm splitting Western Sahara cuts off the link between the coastline and Polisario territory. This has led to the displacement of Sahrawis as well as the SADR government. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated there are 90,000 Sahrawi refugees seeking shelter in camps in Algeria.

Question of Human Rights

The situation in Western Sahara has escalated in part due to the staggering systematic human rights abuses, as well as countless instances of police brutality and violations of fundamental civil rights. This extends beyond domestic law to violations of international law, such as that against the annexation of territory. Some believe that the people of Western Sahara have endured centuries of repression under Morocco's forces since Morocco replaced Spain as the singular colonizing force. Moroccan forces also remain in control of the media, continuing to block journalists as well as human rights organizations from truthfully investigating abuses occurring in the territory.

Strategic Importance

One of the key issues that has led to the prolongation of this conflict is the strategic importance of the region of Western Sahara. Morocco argues that Western Sahara is far too sparse to sustain an independent government. This has led to the claim made by the Moroccan American Center for Policy that instability in that region could create conditions that allow the growth of terrorist and criminal activities on the border. The location of the region allows for the involvement and consideration of factors such as a political rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, and the subsequent political alliance between Algeria and the Polisario. Above all, Western Sahara is mineral-rich and offers over 700 miles of Atlantic

coastline which is favorable for fishing and oil mining, making it a potentially powerful asset to Morocco's economy if properly harnessed.

Involvement of Non-State Actors

While the actions of the Sahrawi people are believed to be in line with guerrilla tactics as a form of paramilitary organization, more significant accusations have been made against the Polisario Front by Morocco. These claims suggest that financial support for the Polisario Front comes from non-state actor groups such as Hezbollah and al-Qaeda, as well as the Sultanate of Iran who is often labelled a state sponsor of terrorism.

MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED

Polisario Front

The Polisario Front came to origin in 1971 when a group of Sahrawi university students residing in Morocco began the organization of a movement known as The Embryonic Movement for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio De Oro. They initially failed to gain support from numerous Arab governments including Algeria and Morocco, but were backed by Libya and Mauritania. In consequence of their unstable political backing, the movement was relocated to Western Sahara, then controlled by the Spanish, where the Polisario Front began their armed rebellion. The women of Western Sahara are prominent members - soldiers and activists - of the Front.

Sahrawi

Western Sahara, long before colonization by the Spanish and annexation by Morocco, has been home to an indigenous population called the Sahrawis, a group of natives living around the region. They speak the Hassaniya Arabic dialect as opposed to Moroccan Berber, Arabic or Amazigh. Due to their colonial history, most Sahrawis also speak Spanish. Despite Moroccan control in the past years, the Polisario Front fights for independence of the Sahrawi state in Western Sahara through the SADR.

Algeria

The nation of Algeria is seen as a consequential actor in the Western Sahara conflict, supported by their stance in affirmation of the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination. Algeria is believed to play an equally important role in the conflict as Morocco. Morocco believes that Algeria's involvement in

the conflict is to serve its geopolitical interests, seeing as their stance on the issue fluctuates in their communications with the United Nations. The United Nations does not believe Algeria to be a party to the conflict, only recognizing the involvement of the Polisario Front and Morocco. Former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, however, viewed Algeria as a stakeholder. Algeria itself, in a 2006 Geneva roundtable, declared itself an observer.

Algeria houses numerous refugee camps for Western Saharan displaced individuals and refugees. Additionally, the nation has armed, trained and funded the Polisario for over three decades. Over 2,000 prisoners of war from Morocco were once detained on Algerian soil, all of whom have since been released. Following the Green March and the conflict in the Western Sahara, Algeria has seized the property of and forcibly deported thousands of Moroccan civilians, adding to the tension between the nations.

Spain

Spain has been an actor in the situation in Western Sahara since the mid-19th century. A large portion of the conflict has stemmed from Spain's initial colonization of the region, which they believed to be a no-man's land. However, both Spain and the European council soon found out that the land was inhabited by native and indigenous populations. This was the root of the conflict, which escalated due to the involvement of more parties as well as trade and land ownership treaties that were deemed unfair on the Sahrawi people. In 2011, the Spanish Foreign Minister called for the United Nations to evaluate the security threat posed by Polisario refugee camps in Tindouf, and begin work on curbing the corruption and maldistribution of international aid there.

Morocco

Morocco has been involved in the conflict as long as Spain. Their involvement began during the Tetouan War during which they suffered severe economic and agrarian losses to Spain, after which Spain colonized Western Sahara. In 1957, Morocco lays claim to Western Sahara and annexes it, prompting outrage from not only the Sahrawi people but also the United Nations. Morocco fails to meet the United Nations' original mandates to decolonize Western Sahara, and this leads to the rise of the Polisario Front as an insurgent group. Morocco's involvement in the conflict continues to this day and has been historically marked by trade treaties, violent treatment of Sahrawi people, construction of 'Bern', and an eventual autonomy plan.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

1859

Spanish forces defeat the Moroccan army in the Tetouan War, after which Morocco is compelled to pay monetary reparation to Spain, as well as land concessions from its northern and southern territories. Spain established trading posts in the South of Morocco as part of this deal.

1884

The colonization of Western Sahara by Spain. Western Sahara used to be previously populated by Berber tribes.

1885

Spain informs relevant European powers of its newly acquired sovereignty over the African region at the January Berlin Conference. Involved European leaders agree under the assumption that Madrid had claimed territory that was previously no man's land.

1904

France and Great Britain agree to sign a treaty incorporating Western Sahara into Morocco's ownership as an integral part of their land, following a series of new revelations and discoveries by both British and Spanish parties. However, in the same year, France signs conflicting agreements with both the UK and Spain, ultimately dividing the land of the Sahara between French and Spanish spheres of influence, thus disregarding its agreement with the UK.

1934

The area of Western Sahara becomes officially known as a Spanish province called Spanish Sahara.

1957

A newly-independent Morocco lays a historical claim to Western Sahara, leading to the annexation of the region. This follows a conflict in 1956 where Spanish forces refuse their requested removal from the region.

1965

United Nations mandates the decolonization of Western Sahara by the Kingdom of Morocco in Resolution 2072, urging Spain to take immediate action.

1973

The indigenous Saharawi movement, known as the Polisario Front, is established to lay claim to Western Sahara. Their ideology in their formative years was to establish a completely independent state in Western Sahara.

1974-1975

The International Court of Justice, through UN General Assembly resolution 3292, is asked to provide an Advisory Opinion on the historical ties between Mauritania, Morocco and Western Sahara, to which it replies that there were ties of allegiance between tribes and the Moroccan Kingdom. Therefore Western Sahara, was not indeed, no man's land.

1975

King Hassan of Morocco ignores and defies a ruling from Prague that issued a decree in favor of the rights of the Saharawi people to self-determination. Instead, he orchestrates the 'Green March', a movement of 350,000 Moroccans into the Western Sahara region, from which Spain withdraws.

1975-1976

Morocco annexes over 66% of Western Sahara after the retreat of colonial power, Spain. Meanwhile, Polisario guerrilla troops declare the official birth of the SADR, the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic, whose government operates from its exile in Algeria. Innumerable Sahrawi refugees seek refuge in camps set up near Tindouf in western Algeria.

War is declared by the Polisario Front against Morocco.

1975-1991

The Polisario Front engages in the 16-year long guerrilla war against forces from Morocco, culminating with a ceasefire brokered by the United Nations

1979

Mauritania withdraws from the conflict and the region, providing Morocco with the unhindered opportunity to annex its share of land/territory.

1991-2000s

The United-Nations brokered ceasefire ends the war in Western Sahara. However, Morocco fails to hold the agreed referendum on independence. A multitude of talks and negotiations sponsored and facilitated by the United Nations fail to yield any breakthroughs in the course of the conflict.

2009

In a letter to the UN Secretary General, Morocco accuses the Polisario of violating the 1991 ceasefire agreement by sending 1400 Algeria-backed Polisario people across the border into a closed military zone.

2010

A group of Sahrawis called the Gdim Izik pitch base in Laayoune to protest unemployment in the city, and upon peaceful government intervention, respond with violence, assault with stones, propane tanks, knives and swords. This harassment of the government by the paramilitary force results in the death of 11 and injury of 70 people.

2012

Morocco accuses UN Envoy Christopher Ross of displaying bias towards the Polisario Front and Algerian forces in the mediation of the conflict. The US ambassador to the United Nations calls for the expansion of the MINURSO to monitor human rights. The White House declares the Moroccan autonomy plan "serious, realistic and credible."

2016

Death of resistance leader, Mohamed Abdelaziz Ezzedine, while France re-establishes their support for Morocco's Autonomy Plan.

2017

Resolution 2351 adopted by the United Nations Security Council reiterates the need for international cooperation towards achieving a mutual political solution to the conflict. The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres appoints a new Personal Envoy to Western Sahara.

UN INVOLVEMENT: RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS

UN Personal Envoy for Western Sahara

In August 2017, the United Nations Secretary General appointed a Personal Envoy for Western Sahara, Mr. Horst Koehler, in order to remain engaged in the quest for a peaceful end to the conflict as well as the continued search for settlement negotiations under the banner of the United Nations.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 2414

In April 2018, the United Nations Security Council reaffirmed the United Nations' intention to relaunch peaceful negotiation processes in Western Sahara, led and overseen by the Secretary-General and the Personal Envoy, in order to find a mutually beneficial and acceptable political solution. The main mission of the United Nations is to discover a means of providing the Western Saharan people a means of self-determination while remaining in line with the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

MINURSO

MINURSO, or the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, is a continued diplomatic effort of the United Nations to attempt to resolve the conflict through a peacekeeping mission. Since deployment in 1991, MINURSO troops have remained on the ground, monitoring the ceasefire and acting as a stabilizing third party presence. Though it was part of MINURSO's original mission objectives to facilitate a settlement plan, disagreements have prevented a referendum from taking place.

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1084

UN Resolution 1084 was adopted in the 3718th meeting of the Security Council in November, 1996. In this resolution, the United Nations reaffirms its resolutions on the question of Western Sahara and its commitment to achieve a fair but lasting solution. They also call upon the Kingdom of Morocco and the people of Western Sahara to take comprehensive measures towards reaching a referendum and completing the Settlement Plan.

PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

Ceasefire

A ceasefire was signed in 1991 that was brokered by the United Nations. However, Morocco has failed to uphold the agreed independence referendum. Numerous attempts have since been made to resolve the conflict, however, all involved parties have failed to achieve a lasting resolution to permanently curb the conflict.

Referendum and Houston Agreement

A referendum was scheduled for 1992 to give Western Sahara's local population the choice between seeking independence or affirming their integration with Morocco. Proceedings for this referendum were soon stalled and have since failed to regain vigor. The Houston Agreement was a movement that attempted to revive proceedings for a referendum but failed to meet with success. Any negotiations since the early 2000s have resulted in minimally substantive action. The heart of the issue remains to be the question of who bears the right to vote on the referendum - ranging from individuals listed on the 1974 Spanish Census lists, to members of the Sahrawi tribes who had escaped Spanish invasion. Shortly after the Houston Agreement, Morocco declared the unnecessary of offering independence on the voting ballots, and instead offering autonomy.

Efforts by United Nations Special Envoys

These initiatives have not succeeded in finding the common ground between all the involved parties. In 1999, the United Nations compiled a list of 85,000 voters, half of which were in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara, and the others scattered in refugee camps. Though the Polisario Front accepted this voter list, rejected candidates began mass appeals, which the Moroccan government insisted on vetting individually. By 2001, the process had again reached a stalemate. Many voters were not inclined to engage in proceedings that were destined to secure them losses with either outcome.

Baker Plan (Peace Plan for Self-Determination of the People of Western Sahara)

The Baker Plan, led by James Baker, was an initiative of the United Nations to grant Western Sahara self-determination. Beginning in 2000, it aimed to replace the Houston Agreement and Settlement Plan, both of which failed to create lasting change. However, the Baker Plan has not been referred to in

the UN Secretary-General's reports since 2005 and seems to be void. Since no replacement plan exists, the highly valid fear and threat of continuing violence and dispute remain at large.

The Moroccan Initiative and Manhasset Negotiations

The Moroccan Royal Advisory Council for Saharan Affairs, in 2006, proposed a plan seeking autonomy for Western Sahara that is drafted on the principals of previous Spanish approaches to regional autonomy. Since then, it has been presented to the United Nations and received the backing of both the United States and France. In April 2007, the United Nations urged both involved parties to enter negotiations in good faith through Resolution 1754, also extending the MINURSO mission by 6 months. The subsequent talks in Manhasset, New York were seen as the first direct negotiations between the parties in 7 long years. Representatives from both Mauritania and Algeria were present at these negotiations. However, the negotiations have failed to resolve disputes and were ultimately deemed highly inconclusive.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The conflict in Western Sahara sees no feasible end unless drastic measures are taken by the international body to ensure that world leaders come together on this issue. One of the largest obstacles faced is the lack of international consensus as well as motivation to move towards a referendum. It is necessary to force the implementation of proper voting procedures and facilities, as well as bring world leaders together in a facilitated discussion to decide the future fate of the disputed region. Additionally, in order to minimize or recover from the suffering endured by victims of the conflict, international human rights organizations should come together to provide people with the means to reclaim their homes and rights.

Human Rights Observation

Human rights infringements mentioned above, as well as aerial bombardments of napalm and white phosphorus of Sahrawi refugee camps has led to severe human rights breaches as per the Geneva convention. It is imperative that these be curbed before the conflict sees a decline in tensions. Non-governmental organizations, impartial parties to the conflict, should provide their services in assisting refugees and displaced persons who are in need of food, shelter and rehabilitation. Furthermore, a

comprehensive assessment of the Human Rights Watch can bring to light the human rights abuses across the Western Saharan region that Moroccan forces have kept from the light.

Foreign Aid to Sahrawi Refugees

Displacement of people remains to be one of the biggest consequences of the Western Saharan situation to date. More foreign aid should be dispatched by the United Nations and other related organizations in order to support the displaced populations currently seeking refuge in Algeria.

Reevaluation of Voting Rights

To prevent civil unrest, a more comprehensive list of voters should be drafted by the United Nations, Polisario Front and the Kingdom of Morocco by vetting all applicants fairly and justly. This will ensure that the largest possible percentage of the populations of these regions are represented in voting procedures on the referendum.

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