

## Deserted in Western Sahara

**Saeed Taji Farouky**

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*Thirty years since the declaration of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic the people of this "non-country" are still waiting for peaceful independence and expecting war. Saeed Taji Farouky joins a grim anniversary celebration.*

"From children to adults," says Mohammad Ali, "everyone will tell you they want war."

We are in Tifariti, a collection of municipal buildings in the western extreme of the Sahara desert, hundreds of kilometres from the nearest city. We are supposed to be celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the declaration of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), for which the Polisario Front, which runs the SADR, has brought more than five hundred foreign journalists, aid workers, artists and others here to mark the occasion. But the mood is not festive.

Three decades on, SADR is still a non-country in most senses. The guerrilla war against Morocco may have ended in ceasefire in 1991, but the diplomatic effort to settle its status is stalled. Morocco has made little progress towards the referendum demanded by the United Nations and now the frustration is palpable.

Mohammad Ali is a Sahrawi serving in the Polisario's armed forces. He was careful to say that his quarrel was not with the people of Morocco but their government, but he was clear that he would rather die than live under Moroccan rule.

The same note of gloomy resolution could be heard in the background through all the celebrations and the solidarity speeches here around the key date of 27

February. The Sahrawi people are dismayed by what they see as the international community's flagging efforts to address their claims, and they feel time is running out.

The state they live in is a curious entity. Along its eastern borders lie Algeria and Mauritania, while to the west is an immense 2,500 km wall of sand built by the Moroccans during the war. Not acknowledged as a country by the United Nations, it is nevertheless recognised by more than seventy countries worldwide, and by the African Union.

It has an elected president, prime minister and local representatives, but their legitimacy extends only as far as the Security Council allows it. On the ground, it is still little more than a collection of refugee camps, reliant on UN food aid and at the mercy of the harsh Saharan climate.

In his address at the anniversary celebrations, President Mohammad Abdelaziz expressed the mood of the camps. "Following fifteen years of peace efforts, it has become evident that Morocco's refusal to fulfil its own commitment ... is the main cause for the current stalemate facing the settlement process," he said. "We would like to warn that the situation is becoming more difficult and dangerous."

There is no doubt that Morocco has continually stalled on the question of a referendum, but there is more to this than tensions between the Polisario and Morocco.

Mohammad Uthman is married to an Algerian national and so is entitled to live in Algeria, but instead he and his wife live here as refugees and are determined to continue doing so until they have an independent Sahrawi state. To Uthman the idea of autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty is unacceptable.

This is not, however, the official line of the Polisario, which three years ago accepted the so-called Baker Plan, envisaging autonomy under Morocco, albeit with a referendum on full independence after five years. Uthman has no truck with that. "Either full independence, or martyrdom for our people," he says.

The official line of the Polisario – accustomed to being branded terrorists by Moroccan authorities – stresses the commitment, thus far, to the diplomatic path. "The choice of the Sahrawi to follow the path of peace stems from their peaceful nature and their political conviction that underpins their state," the president declared in his address.

Polisario representatives have even gone so far as to accept the idea that Moroccan settlers could vote in an independence referendum. "We are sure the Moroccan settlers are going to support an independent Sahrawi state," explains Mohammad Liman, a Polisario representative in the UK. "These Moroccans can compare the difference between a democratic state and a dictatorial state."

This is not as unlikely as it seems. Toby Shelley, author of *End Game in the Western Sahara*, believes there is considerable frustration even amongst Moroccan settlers in the Western Sahara. Moroccan fishermen, initially invited by their government to settle with the offer of lucrative fishing rights, have since been abandoned by that very same government.

"Having completely over-fished their own waters," he explained, "the Moroccans are now proceeding to do so in Sahrawi waters, to the extent that they are actually chucking out tens of thousands of their own settlers who were brought in to fish Sahrawi reserves."

Then there is the possibility of offshore oil, in waters claimed by Morocco but recognised as a non-self-governing territory by the UN. In the past, a number of European and American companies signed oil

exploration licences with Morocco, but following international pressure only one remains.

Kerr-McGee, a company based in Oklahoma City, and its partners Pioneer and Kosmos, cite in their defence the findings of UN Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs Hans Corell, that "the specific contracts are not, in themselves, illegal". Corell went on to say, however, that any further exploration or exploitation "would be in violation of the principles of international law".

It is a fine line, and one that Kerr-McGee continues to tread despite mounting pressure from Sahrawi advocacy groups. A company spokesman said they were continuing to evaluate data and could not speculate on future activity. ONHYM, Morocco's state oil and gas company, continues to allow exploration in what they refer to as their Southern Provinces, saying the SADR representatives "have no legal authority as far as the political solution is still pending".

The Polisario's view, in contrast, is that both exploration and drilling are violations of international law, and they have begun issuing licences of their own, the validity of which depends on settling the political conflict.

On the question of active drilling under Moroccan licences, the Polisario can only hint at the possible consequences. "We are not terrorists, but we prefer to advise them that we cannot guarantee their safety," explains Mohammad Liman.

Lately the Polisario has implied a willingness to resume hostilities if a diplomatic solution is not reached soon. It is clear that both the government and people are prepared for this, but what is not so clear is whether Algeria would tolerate a return to violence, and there is doubt as to whether the Polisario has the capacity to sustain another full-scale war.

Their demands, consequently, have shifted ever so slightly from Morocco to the United Nations, and more recently to an international network of activists and NGOs. Citing "renewed Moroccan intransigence which, unfortunately, remains unpunished by the international community", the Polisario continues to push the moral case for independence, hoping that international pressure will eventually break the deadlock.

In 2004 they received an unexpected boost when the United States broke its silence on the issue when drafting a free trade agreement with Morocco. In the

*Would Algeria tolerate a return to violence, and has Polisario the capacity to sustain another full-scale war?*

agreement, US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick stated, "the United States and many other countries do not recognise Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara and have consistently urged the parties to work with the United Nations to resolve the conflict by peaceful means. The Free Trade Agreement will not include Western Sahara."

Even if the Polisario continues to adhere to this glacial-paced diplomacy and to the principles of the Baker Plan, there is no guarantee that the Sahrawi people will

follow suit. The fear is that a radical section of the Polisario will emerge to challenge the diplomatic efforts, and this will be enough to tip the region once again into war.

The longer the stalemate continues, the more volatile the situation becomes. As Liman puts it: "The youngest Sahrawi people are frustrated. Enough is enough. From 1991 until now, from the cease-fire until now, we respect it and we cooperate with the United Nations ... day after day after day. What are we waiting for?"

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