

Western Sahara

The UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was established in 1991 to verify the cease-fire between the government of Morocco and the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y de Río de Oro (POLISARIO), and to organize and conduct a referendum that would allow the people of Western Sahara to decide upon the future status of the territory. Western Sahara was claimed by Morocco in 1975 after attaining independence from Spain. POLISARIO, however, contends that Western Sahara has the right to self-determination and supports independence for the territory. It had originally been envisaged that a referendum would take place in January 1992. However, despite a series of efforts to promote an agreement on the terms of the referendum and reach a political settlement, the status quo has been preserved since 1991, as has MINURSO's deployment.

In 2003, then–Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General, former US secretary of state James Baker, presented a peace plan that would allow for some elements of governance sharing, while providing for a referendum that would include the option of independence. POLISARIO accepted the plan in 2003. Morocco rejected it on the grounds that it could not agree to any plan that might lead to independence. Baker resigned shortly afterward and was succeeded by Dutch diplomat Peter van Walsum, who in an effort to overcome the political deadlock pursued direct and unconditional negotiations.

Four rounds of talks, convened by van Walsum, took place in Manhasset, New York, in 2007 and 2008, during which the parties considered a number of proposals to expand confidence-building measures, mainly through expanding the MINURSO-supported family visits program. However, little progress was made in narrowing the gulf between an autonomy proposal put forward by Morocco and POLISARIO's adherence to a referendum including the option for independence.

In April 2008, van Walsum was deemed pro-Moroccan by POLISARIO after telling the Security Council that an independent Western Sahara was not a realistic proposition. In January 2009, US diplomat Christopher Ross was appointed as the new Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General to Western Sahara. Upon taking office, Ross immediately began consulting broadly with the conflict protagonists and regional stakeholders Algeria and Mauritania on bringing some resolution to the dispute, but also reasserted Western Sahara's right to self-determination.

MINURSO continued to perform its duties in regard to its mandate. The mission conducted regular ground and air reconnaissance

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• Authorization and Start Date	29 April 1991 (UNSC Res. 690)
• SRSG	Hany Abdel-Aziz (Egypt)
• Force Commander	Major-General Zhao Jingmin (China)
• Budget	\$56.6 million (1 July 2009–30 June 2010)
• Strength as of 31 October 2009	Troops: 27 Military Observers: 209 Police: 6 International Civilian Staff: 97 Local Civilian Staff: 157 UN Volunteers: 20

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patrols, visiting units of the Royal Moroccan Army and the forces of POLISARIO in order to monitor their adherence to the military agreements. The mission enjoyed enhanced freedom of movement, with fewer restrictions imposed by the two parties on MINURSO. An increased use of air assets allowed MINURSO to expand its patrols and monitoring functions; it completed 609 air patrols between April 2008 and March 2009. The overall situation in MINURSO's area of responsibility remained generally calm during the year, and MINURSO continued to support the confidence-building activities of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. In October 2009, the Secretary-General appointed Hany Abdel-Aziz of Egypt as his Special Representative to head MINURSO.

In May 2009, the Security Council extended the mandate of MINURSO for the thirty-seventh

time, calling on the parties to enter into a more substantial and intense phase of negotiations. During August and under the coordination of Special Envoy Ross, the parties met privately in Austria to elaborate on their positions and pledged to reconvene in a fifth round of formal negotiations, but by the end of the year no such negotiations had materialized. Meanwhile, tensions on both sides increased as several Western Saharan activists were detained for an extended period in the final months of 2009. Despite the continued engagement of MINURSO and the international community, political progress on both sides of the cease-fire line will be the determining factor for resolving one of Africa's longest-standing territorial feuds.