

Western Sahara

The decades-long dispute over the African territory of Western Sahara remained in deadlock through 2011, as meetings between the government of Morocco and the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y de Río de Oro (POLISARIO) yielded no progress on the fundamental points of contention. Since the departure of its Spanish colonial rulers thirty-five years ago, conflict and uncertainty have plagued the territory and defied determination of its final status.

The UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (known by its French acronym MINURSO) was formed to conduct a self-determination vote after a 1991 cease-fire agreement. September 2011 marked the twentieth anniversary of the mission's establishment, but MINURSO finds itself continuing to monitor a cease-fire line and support confidence-building measures, while the two sides appear no closer to an agreement on the future of Western Sahara. POLISARIO, the dominant political power among the area's Sahrawi people, long ago claimed an independent Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, while since 2004, the government of Morocco has categorically rejected the possibility of independence or the option in a referendum. The gulf between the two sides suggests that the mission will continue to act as an observer in the absence of progress on the political track.

Background

Western Sahara, a Spanish colony for nearly a century, was annexed by Morocco and Mauritania upon Spain's exit in 1976. Mauritania abandoned its claim in 1979, and Morocco has considered the entire region part of its

UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)

• Authorization and Start Date	29 April 1991 (UNSC Res. 690)
• SRSG	Hany Abdel-Aziz (Egypt)
• Force Commander	Major-General Abdul Hafiz (Bangladesh)
• Budget	\$63.2 million (1 July 2011–30 June 2012)
• Strength as of 31 October 2011	Troops: 27 Military Observers: 201 Police: 6 International Civilian Staff: 102 National Civilian Staff: 165 UN Volunteers: 18

For detailed mission information see p. 198

territory ever since. POLISARIO was founded in 1973 to fight Spanish control, and refocused its attention on Morocco after Spain's departure. It operates in exile from the Algerian city of Tindouf, and has gained recognition from a number of countries in addition to African Union membership.

Approximately 500,000 people live in Western Sahara, while more than 100,000 Sahrawi refugees reside in Algerian refugee camps. Morocco has invested heavily in Laayoune, Western Sahara's largest city, which is now home to approximately 200,000 people, fewer than 40 percent of whom are Sahrawi. Socioeconomic grievances have heightened tensions between the Sahrawi population and Moroccan settlers. In addition, some Sahrawis in the Tindouf refugee camps are growing increasingly frustrated by the lack of political progress achieved by the POLISARIO leadership.

MINURSO was founded in 1991 with a mandate that includes monitoring the cease-fire, verifying Moroccan troop reductions, implementing a repatriation program, identifying and registering qualified voters, and organizing and proclaiming the results of a self-determination referendum. The referendum was originally scheduled for January 1992, but no real progress has been made toward its execution in over a decade. The mission identified voters in the 1990s, resulting in a final list published in 1999, but disagreements between the two sides on the eligibility of three groups of applicants derailed the process.

Due to the absence of staff tasked with organizing a referendum, MINURSO's staff numbers are much smaller than originally planned, with an authorized strength of 237 military and 6 police personnel, in addition to a civilian component, which includes a political affairs unit and public information office. It currently monitors the cease-fire and supports assistance programs for displaced and separated Sahrawi families. The mission tracks troop movements and military activity around the "berm," an extensive system of sand walls constructed by Morocco as a buffer strip between the territory it administers and that controlled by POLISARIO. MINURSO receives complaints from both sides, reports on violations, and acts as the means of contact between the Moroccan military and POLISARIO's armed forces, as the two parties do not communicate with each other directly. The mission also visits units on both sides to monitor their adherence to military agreements. In July 2011, Major-General Abdul Hafiz of Bangladesh was appointed head of MINURSO, replacing Major-General Zhao Jingmin of China.

Both Morocco and POLISARIO maintain restrictions on MINURSO operations, including limitations on its access to military positions and units. This has been detrimental to the mission's ability to achieve its mandated tasks, but the cease-fire has generally held.

MINURSO is the only UN peacekeeping mission established since 1978 without a human rights role in its mandate, and there

are currently no UN staff in the territory to address human rights issues. In April 2011 the Security Council decided against the establishment of a full-time human rights monitoring mechanism in Western Sahara. POLISARIO and states including South Africa have called for augmenting the mission's mandate to encompass these issues, while a group of Western powers has presented a compromise initiative calling for more periodic visits by independent UN rights investigators. With long-standing allegations of human rights violations by both sides, this has been a prominent recurring issue in annual Security Council discussions on the renewal of MINURSO's mandate.

Key Developments

In 2011 MINURSO continued to actively assist the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in conducting confidence-building measures. The mission provides logistical support, including aircraft transportation and police escorts, for a family visitation program that reunites refugees in Algeria with their families in Western Sahara. Since the beginning of the program in 2004, over 14,000 Sahrawis have participated, with 27,000 individuals currently registered on waiting lists. Disagreements between Morocco and POLISARIO have led to periodic interruptions in the visitations, but both sides agreed in 2011 on plans to enhance the program. To support this, MINURSO participated in a technical assessment mission to examine a potential ground route to allow more families, some separated for over thirty years, to be transported by road. The mission also provides humanitarian medical support for UNHCR-led family visits.

MINURSO also plays a critical role in the removal of landmines and other explosive remnants of war (ERW), which have been prevalent in the territory. In March 2011, the mission reported that POLISARIO had destroyed 1,506 antipersonnel mines in its stockpiles, the fourth such operation carried out by the group

since 2005. MINURSO's Mine Action Coordination Centre conducts quality-control of stockpile destruction, while a UN implementing partner hires local Sahrawis to clear mines east of the berm, with the Moroccan military responsible for removing mines to the west. The program has resulted in the destruction of many thousands of mines and other explosive ordnance, but the death of a Sahrawi mine clearer in June 2011 was only the latest of over 500 mine- and ERW-related fatalities since the conflict began.

From April 2010 to March 2011, MINURSO performed 8,168 ground patrols and 710 aerial patrols. During these patrols, the mission observed and recorded 126 new violations by the Moroccan military, a considerable increase from the previous reporting period, and 12 new violations by POLISARIO. Morocco argues that some acts reported by MINURSO as violations were in fact justified by security enhancements to combat terrorism and smuggling activities, though under the military agreement with MINURSO, any such construction altering the military status quo is prohibited. Both parties would like revisions to the agreement codifying these rules, but for different reasons, and thus are unlikely to agree to each other's proposals.

MINURSO also received a number of allegations by each party concerning violations of the cease-fire agreement during the most recent reporting period. Morocco submitted twenty-one allegations and POLISARIO eight. One POLISARIO allegation, concerning unauthorized Moroccan defense infrastructure work, was confirmed, but none of the other allegations, from either side, could be confirmed. MINURSO lacks the technical capability for ground-to-air surveillance, making it difficult to confirm allegations of Moroccan overflights.

The parties have still not addressed their long-standing infringement on MINURSO operations, and restrictions by both parties increased significantly in the mission's most recent reporting period. POLISARIO committed eighty-one freedom-of-movement violations

against MINURSO, which it claimed were due to its frustration with the UN's lack of progress in resolving the conflict. After the mission agreed to provide POLISARIO with information on mission flights and ground patrols, the number of violations decreased. Morocco committed four such violations, preventing the mission from visiting facilities and military units in certain areas.

Since the 1999 voter list was published, negotiations between Morocco and MINURSO have not seen any progress on the core issues of the conflict, despite the considerable efforts of the UN Secretary-General to promote dialogue. Since 2003, a series of Personal Envoys to the Secretary-General have presented proposals and organized meetings between the sides. Ambassador Christopher Ross was named to this position in 2009 and initiated the current series of informal discussions. Ross has sought to involve regional stakeholders Algeria and Mauritania in the discussions, and has reasserted Western Sahara's right to self-determination. Despite a crisis in November 2010 involving the dismantling of a Sahrawi camp by Moroccan authorities and consequent rioting in Laayoune, talks remained on schedule through 2011, with four rounds of discussion occurring during the year. However, the talks have failed to generate meaningful progress to date.

Since the November 2010 violence, the general situation in the territory has remained tense, particularly between the Sahrawi population and Moroccan authorities. Several demonstrations have occurred, with allegations of repression and detention by Moroccan forces. In February 2011, there were incidents of violence between groups of Moroccan and Sahrawi civilians in the city of Dakhla, leading to Sahrawi demonstrations. MINURSO took enhanced security measures in all its locations in response to the deteriorating regional situation and increased tension in the territory.

In January 2011, Morocco arrested twenty-seven people accused of operating an Al-Qaida-connected terrorist cell in Western Sahara. The government claimed this group

was planning suicide and car bomb attacks against Moroccan and foreign security forces, as well as bank robberies. MINURSO could not corroborate these claims. In October, three aid workers were kidnapped from a Sahrawi refugee camp near Tindouf—reportedly by Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, though the organization did not claim responsibility.

Security Council discussions in April regarding the renewal of MINURSO's mandate were contentious, with intense lobbying from both sides of the dispute. Criticisms were raised that the draft resolution had not taken a stronger stance on human rights. On 27 April, MINURSO's mandate was extended by one year, with the authorizing resolution taking a slightly stronger stance on human rights and, for the first time, specifically referencing the human rights situation in the Moroccan-administered territory. The resolution also

referenced the human rights situation in POLISARIO camps and supported registration of refugees in Tindouf, a position Morocco has supported.

Conclusion

While informal talks are expected to continue in 2012, a solution to the dispute over Western Sahara does not seem likely in the near future. The core issue of the right to self-determination remains at odds with Morocco's insistence that the territory cannot become independent. While MINURSO maintains the cease-fire with only isolated instances of violence, its ultimate role remains unclear. It appears that the stalemate will persist while the mission bides its time, unable to pursue its original goal of organizing a referendum.