

## Western Sahara

The situation in Western Sahara, the longest-running territorial dispute in Africa, showed little sign of improvement during 2008. Although representatives of the parties met in March for a fourth round of talks, no progress was made in addressing the substantive differences that divide them. In August 2008, the contract of the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy for Western Sahara was not renewed, a replacement was not named until early 2009, leaving a five month gap and raising questions regarding the future direction of the political process. Meanwhile, the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) remained deployed in the field, monitoring and observing the cease-fire, defusing tensions as they arose and encouraging confidence-building measures between the parties.

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 the future status of the territory. This had been "reintegrated" by Morocco in 1976, but was claimed by POLISARIO on the basis of the right to self-determination of the people of Western Sahara. It had originally been envisaged that the referendum would take place in January 1992. However, despite a series of efforts first to promote agreement on the terms of the referendum and then to seek a political settlement, the UN's primary achievement in the intervening period since 1991 has been to preserve the status quo.

In 2003, the Secretary-General Personal Envoy at the time, former US secretary of state James Baker, presented a peace plan that allowed

### UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)

• Authorization and Start Date	29 April 1991 (UNSC Res. 690)
• SRSRG	Julian Harston (United Kingdom)
• Force Commander	Major-General Zhao Jingmin (China)
• Budget	\$48.4 million (1 July 2008–30 June 2009)
• Strength as of 31 October 2008	Troops: 28 Military Observers: 194 Police: 6 International Civilian Staff: 99 Local Civilian Staff: 153 UN Volunteers: 19

*For detailed mission information see p. 214*

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, however, rejected it the following year on the grounds that it could not agree to any plan that might lead to an independent Western Sahara. Baker resigned shortly afterward. In recognition of this political deadlock, which was accentuated by the Security Council's insistence on a consensual solution, Baker's successor as Personal Envoy, Dutch diplomat Peter van Walsum, pursued direct and unconditional negotiations.

Four rounds of talks were held in 2007 and 2008 with the encouragement of Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. The talks were attended by representatives of both parties, as well as van Walsum, and representatives of neighboring countries Algeria and Mauritania were present at the opening and closing sessions. During the March 2008 talks—held, as previously, in Manhasset, New York—the parties considered a

number of proposals to expand confidence-building measures and agreed to explore the establishment of family visits by land, in addition to the existing program by air. 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. That van Walsum told the Security Council that an independent Western Sahara was not a realistic proposition in a situation in which Morocco had control of the territory and the Security Council was unwilling to put pressure upon it, led to his criticism by POLISARIO and its followers. In late August 2008, van Walsum's contract expired, and in early January 2009, the Secretary-General appointed Christopher Ross as his new Personal Envoy for Western Sahara.

In April 2008, the Security Council renewed MINURSO's mandate for the thirty-sixth time.

In contrast to the difficulties encountered at the political level, the overall situation in MINURSO's area of responsibility remained generally calm during the year. Violations of military movements along the cease-fire decreased, and both parties continued to cooperate with MINURSO in the marking and disposal of mines, unexploded ordinance, and expired ammunition. Meanwhile, confidence-building measure led by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), including family visits and free telephone service between the refugee camps in Tindouf and the territory, also continued without interruption. The establishment of family visits by land, as discussed during the March talks, offered the possibility to significantly increase the number of beneficiaries. These positive developments, however, cannot counter discontent at the lack of progress at the political level on both sides of the cease-fire line.