

Saharawi refugees in Algeria

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My research investigates the situation in the Saharawis refugee camps in Algeria, after fleeing the UN's second longest unresolved conflict and Africa's last colonial war.

There's no running water in this desolate part of the stony Hamada desert, sudden rainfall turns the area into a flood bowl sweeping everything in its path. Stinging sandstorms scour the desert floor and even livestock have a hard time finding sustenance among the few plants hardy enough to grow in the bleak, flat landscape.

As soon as the Moroccan occupation of the Western Sahara started and the vicious and bloody war diffused, more than 100,000 Saharawis made their way across the desert, under aerial bombardment, to refugee camps in Algeria. Five camps were created under the control of the Polisario Front - the Saharawis' national liberation movement, which had been created two years earlier to overthrow Spanish colonial rule. Algeria effectively ceded control of the region to Polisario, allowing it to be run as a semi-autonomous province near the military town of Tindouf.

35 years passed, and they still living in this refugee camps with no real perspectives to return to their homeland any time soon due to the passivity of the international community. Depending uniquely on International aid (rarely enough to guarantee the basic human condition) the isolation and lack of property created a special life in the camps, which I'd like to introduce in this article.

About Western Sahara

In Hungary we don't know too much about Western Sahara, for this reason I'd like to share some basic information about it. There is evidence of trade between the Western Sahara and Europe by the 4th cent. B.C. Portuguese navigators reached Cape Bojador on the northern coast of present-day Western Sahara in 1434.¹ However, there was little European contact with the region until the 19th cent. In 1884, Spain claimed a protectorate over the coast from Cape Bojador to Cap Blanc (at the present border with Mauritania). The boundaries of the protectorate were extended by Franco-Spanish agreements in 1900, 1904, and 1920. Essemara was not captured until 1934, and the Spanish had only slight contact with the interior until the 1950s. In 1957, a rebel

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movement ousted the Spanish, who regained control of the region with French help in February of 1958.²

In April 1958, Spain joined the previously separate districts of Saguia el Hamra (in the north) and Río de Oro (in the south) to form the province of Spanish Sahara. In the early 1970s, dissidents formed organizations seeking independence for the province. At the same time, neighboring nations (notably Mauritania, Morocco, and Algeria) pressured Spain to call a referendum on the area's future in accordance with UN resolutions. Continuing guerrilla warfare in the 1970s, and a march of over 300,000 Moroccans into the territory in 1975, led to Spain's withdrawal from the province in 1976, when it was renamed Western Sahara.³

Upon Spain's withdrawal, Morocco and Mauritania subdivided the region, with Morocco controlling the northern two thirds and Mauritania the southern third.⁴ A nationalist group, the Polisario Front, waged guerrilla warfare against the two nations with support from Algeria, calling the territory the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. In 1979, Mauritania withdrew from its portion, which was absorbed by Morocco. Polisario continued its attacks on Moroccan strongholds; the protracted warfare caused thousands of refugees to flee into neighboring Algeria, and eventually Morocco built a defensive wall around the area.

A UN-monitored cease-fire was implemented in 1991, and a referendum was to decide the territory's future. In this mission serving a small Hungarian contingent with 7 people and a Hungarian general (Major General György Száraz) led the mission from 2002–2005.

Disputes regarding who would be permitted to vote delayed the referendum in the following years, during which time the region was integrated administratively into Morocco. UN attempts to broker a peace agreement have been unsuccessful, with Morocco generally rejecting any plan that might end its sovereignty over the area.

Beginning in 2009 both sides participated in UN-sponsored talks, but the intermittent negotiations produced no breakthrough.



Figure 1.
Sources: UNITED NATIONS, Cartographic Section

The Camps

In the end of 1975 and the beginning of 1976 the first refugees arrived near the town of Tindouf which is in 30 kilometres from the Algerian-Moroccan border. Since then four large refugee camps had been established where there are 140,000 persons living now.⁵

The camps were named after the towns located in the territory occupied by the Moroccan army to express that the refugees do not lose the hope of their return. The camps were given the following names: El-Aaiun (centre of the Saharan territories), Smara (the second biggest city, a sort of a religious and spiritual centre), Dakhla (formerly Villa Crisneros, which functioned as an administrative centre during the Spanish period) and Asward (a town located in the interior of the country).⁶

The natural environment on this landscape is rather hostile; in summer the daily average temperature exceeds 50° in shadows while the winter period is extremely windy and cold.

The camps were built near wells, despite this there is no established water supply and potable water is transported by tanker trucks. Apart from this there are catchments built to safely contain and preserve water.

The camps are called *wilaya* in Arabic which means province or region. These are divided into districts (*daira*) – there are usually 6–7 districts in one camp – and these districts are divided further into neighbourhoods (*hay*).⁸

The camps were established far from each other taking into consideration the possibility of a successful Moroccan air strike which would destroy the main leadership and other targets, had the camps been built close to each other.⁹

In the camps every unit has an elected leader (or chosen by the Polisario) who is responsible for the organization of the everyday life. Many of the important positions are taken by women since most men are serving in the so called “liberated territory”.¹⁰ Thus women are fulfilling key roles which supported the development of a system different from the traditional Arab “family model”.¹¹

In every camp gardens are created where the refugees try to establish and promote fruit and vegetable production with more or less success. A “national garden” – independent from the camps – was also created.¹² Despite the salty and sandy soil they managed to cultivate several vegetables successfully. However the inhabitants of the camps are not capable of self-sufficiency and significantly depend on the donations of the UN and other organizations.¹³ Nevertheless, the garden project fulfilled the aim set by the Sahrawi leadership, to acquaint the population leading a nomadic lifestyle with gardening which supports their permanent settlement. There was also a chicken farm

created next to the national garden though it does not have a significant role in feeding the camps.

In the camps every family has its own tent though as time has passed many built houses of sand bricks, which include kitchen, storage room and sometimes bathroom too. There are little gardens created around the houses and many are pondering on settling down permanently.¹⁴ However, there are certain obstacles namely that there are no available jobs in the camps or even in the neighbouring territories thus that there is no hope for the population and they are condemned to poverty. The other problem is that even though Algeria uses the refugee issue as a weapon against Morocco it does not support the settlement of the refugees in Algeria and does not allow the refugees to leave their camps.¹⁵ That is why the majority of the refugees feels the situation hopeless and would like to emigrate abroad, away from poverty to find work and live there.

The following figure illustrates the location of the camps:

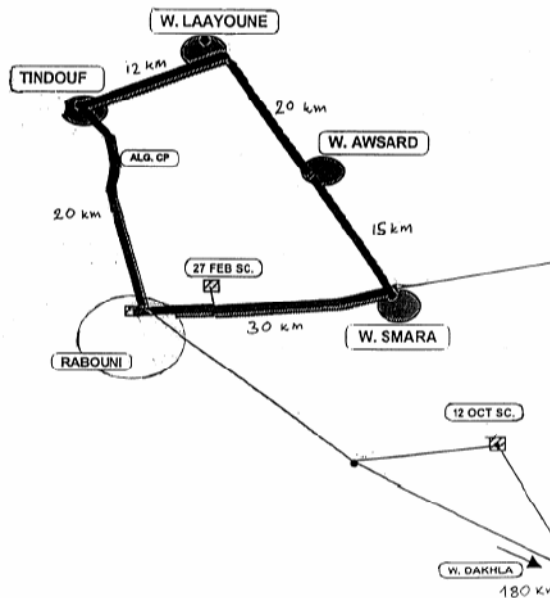


Figure 2.

Sources: MINURSO Office, Tindouf

Naturally, the Saharan government tries to keep the hope for their return home alive in the people with all possible means which is complicated by the fact that most of the youth living in the camps has never been on the territories occupied by Morocco, thus they try to thrive in other countries.

Compared with the state of health care in the Arab states the camps have developed and well-functioning medical organization even in these conditions. Before the 1980s child death and chronic diseases were frequent and in many cases there were epidemics in the overcrowded camps, taking many lives.¹⁶ Diseases are eliminated now and prevention is more emphasized. Although the rate of child death has been reduced, still 134 babies die out of 1000 newborns. Life expectancy still does not exceed 50 years. There are small hospitals operating in every district – run by local doctors and nurses – where emergency cases are taken care of. There are central hospitals built in the camps where the more serious cases are taken care of. The National Hospital created in Camp Dakhla possesses the most advanced equipment and staff of experts, mainly foreign doctors (most of them Spanish and Cuban).¹⁷ From our perspective these institutes are poor and they are equipped deficiently.

The HQ of the camps and the Sahrawi Government are located in nearby town of Rabouni. Parliament, the Government, the Office of the MINURSO, the “Saharawi Red Crescent”, the National Women’s Society and other organizations dealing with donations and coordinating the society’s life moved there, in that town.

The first school (it is called “The 27th of February”) where emphasis is placed on the education of women was founded there. The name of the school is a memorial of the declaration of the nation state on 27th of February in 1976.

The development of the school system has not been over yet but there are kindergartens, elementary schools in every camp and two boarding high schools. The two schools are named after 9th June and 12th of October as a memento of the Martyr’s Day and the Day of National Unity. The schools are great help in the elimination of illiteracy which reached 95% in the 1970s but by now almost 90% of the camp dwellers have acquired the skill of reading and writing.¹⁸

Women have a prominent role in the field of education since they form the bigger part of the adult population.¹⁹ Women’s education is managed and controlled by the National Union of Saharawi Women (NUSW).²⁰ This organization was founded in 1979 and it has more than 10,000 members among Saharawi women living in refugee camps and foreign countries. There are schools founded just for women where they can master useful expertise like household skills and carpet making.

Every year 300 women take medical, household and other courses organized for them. The organization places emphasis on the mental care of those women who were in Moroccan prisons or victims of sexual harassment and violence during the battles. The Union of Women is led by a council of 57 persons who are elected every five years by the Congress. The leader of the Council is also member of the Polisario leadership. The Union established good relation with other international organizations defending

the rights of women. In many cases members of the Union are invited to give lectures abroad on the situation in Western-Sahara and on the life in the refugee camps.

Apart from the education of women, medical programs also have a great importance, for that reason some talented students can have a chance to study abroad (Cuba, Spain, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya) every year to become doctors or nurses. Naturally, they get opportunities to study in other universities too though in very limited numbers. Education is important in the camps too because the aim of the SADR – as they are preparing for their return – is to raise a leading, technical, and intellectual middle-class which will be capable of organizing and managing the life of a future state.²¹

The Ministry of Culture of the SADR started collecting folk tales, folk songs and other pieces of art (pipes, wood-sculptures, carpets etc.) partly to prove that the Sahrawian people are not Moroccan and partly to preserve their national culture. There are some talented artists living in the camps who can present their works on exhibitions mostly organized with the help of foreigners.²²

The Polisario realized the importance of press in an early stage. Not only did they take journalists to the occupied territories but also created their own news agency called Sahara Press Service.²³ Parallel to this operates the El Karama – which deals with the Sahrawian rights of freedom on the territories occupied by Morocco.²⁴

The capabilities of the internet are also exploited, many home pages are in operation like the Arso,²⁵ the SADR's official page or the Tirinet, presenting the life of refugee camps and there is information in other pages of foreign organizations dealing with Western Sahara issues (Norwegian Support Committee for Western Sahara, Western Sahara Campaign UK, Western Sahara by Khatry Beirou, etc).

A significant part of the information posted on these pages is false, especially the one concerning the size of the population living in the refugee camps. Even the most optimistic guesses estimate this number at most to 140,000 persons.²⁶ However the International Red Cross and other non-governmental organizations supply food provisions for 155,000 persons. There have not been any complaints from the camps about the amount of the aid so far.

Unfortunately the aids do not necessarily reach the indigent but the black market. Food packages with the symbols of the donating country can be found at local dealers even though these must not be sold since they are donations. In this perspective it seems strange that Polisario and other web pages related to it report 180,000–200,000 refugees. The notion of using propaganda to get more aid is not unknown among Polisario.²⁷ When a commander of the MINURSO visited a refugee camp he was presented a garage and its workers. However, the shop was cleaner than a chemist's and there was no sign of oil spots typical to these places or any other sign of car repairing. A

similar thing happened in a lab of computer education where the computers in their factory wrapping were presented as devices of education used regularly. But tricks like these are used by the Moroccans too, in order to manipulate the UN and other international organizations.

A separate and independent organization was founded in Tinduf by the relatives of the people who went missing in the war or during the Moroccan occupation.

The organization of the AFAPREDESA (Association of Families of Prisoners and Disappeared Saharawi People Refugee Camps) was founded in the refugee camps on the 20th of August in 1989.²⁸ The organization opened and managed offices in Paris and later in Madrid as early as 1996. Their main profile is gaining intelligence on perished Sahrawians and providing mental and financial support to the people who were held captive in Moroccan prisons since the majority of them are victims of mental and physical diseases because of the maltreatment suffered in the prisons.²⁹ There are still over 500 Saharawis registered as lost since their families have no information about their relatives.³⁰ The AFAPREDESA has good relations with the Amnesty International organization which called off its conference scheduled to be held in Morocco alluding to the constant violation of human rights which was partly based on the information received from AFAPREDESA.³¹

It has to be made public that even now there are 613 Moroccan prisoners of war in refugee camps supervised by Polisario, most of them captured in the 1970s.³² Most of the prisoners are sick and old now and though the Moroccan Government demands their release on various forums it rejects the possibility of prisoner exchange or ransom.³³ Back in 1991 when the cease-fire agreement was signed it was included in the settlement plan that after the referendum – that is the voting about the national borders – all the prisoners will be released.³⁴ The referendum has not been realized in the past 12 years therefore the POWs have not returned home yet. The Moroccan soldiers held captive can be visited by the representatives of the Red Cross who inspect the prisoners' living conditions twice a year.

According to their report most of the prisoners are weak, ill and do not receive proper care. Moreover, it was validated by a reliable source that contrary to the international regulations the prisoners are forced to labour (11th–25th of May, 2001).³⁵ Polisario releases a few of them from time to time as a sign of benevolence but mainly old and ill prisoners.³⁶

Last time 300 POWs were released with the mediation of the Red Cross (in the end of October in 2003). The Red Cross transported the prisoners by air to the Moroccan Chaid El Hafed base. The release was welcomed by many countries and by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

Although civil rights organizations and the UN regarded this release as a good sign Polisario is still criticized for not releasing the remaining prisoners. *Libertes*, an organization founded by Danielle Mitterand, the wife of the previous French President, heavily criticized Polisario for holding old and ill people under inhuman conditions. In its announcement the instant and unconditional release of all the POWs was demanded.³⁷ Finally, due to the intensified pressure coming from the international community, on 18 August 2006 the Polisario released the last group of 404 Moroccan prisoners.³⁸

Unfortunately, similarly to the Moroccan POWs, the Saharawian prisoners' case remains unsolved too, since there are still 150 POWs and 526 civilian prisoners in Moroccan prisons without any hope for gaining freedom.³⁹ The Moroccan Government does not wish to enter into negotiations about this issue though they closed some of the most infamous prisons (Qualatt Mgouna) and started supporting the enforcement of human rights.⁴⁰ At the same time they divert the international forums from the violation of basic human rights (for example if Saharawi children do not wish to study Moroccan history they are "regulated" using police force) by stressing the ill fate of the Moroccan prisoners. Anyhow, maybe there is a chance of mutual prisoner exchange with the supervision of the UN or the Red Cross.

Various relief organizations operate in the camps collecting and distributing food, cloth, money, and other donations.

The English War on Want was the first organization that appeared in 1984 and has been operating in the refugee camps ever since.⁴¹

First it helped with stabilizing the health care and restraining the diseases then the organisation took part in the development of the gardening program and in the creation of the National Garden. Later stores were built with the help of fire departments from Lancashire for the safe storage of aids. Its "Toys Make Children Happy" program is also successful in collecting and providing toys for the children living in the camps.

The program of the Norwegian People's Aid organization is slightly different from the usual charity work.⁴² They organized training courses on recognizing landmines and other unexploded shells and avoiding accidents.⁴³ Many people who were wounded or lost a limb by stepping on a landmine were involved in the programs. The number of the accidents has been significantly reduced since the organization started its preventive work in 1998 but there are still many victims mainly because of the landmines deployed by the Moroccan army and the unexploded shells fired during the battles.⁴⁴ Just when I was writing the present sentences an accident happened in a few kilometres from the UN compound (Mehaires) where I was serving as a military observant. The result of the accident was that a Bedouin boy was seriously wounded on his leg and he lost one of his hands because of touching a unexploded shell unwarily. Unfortunately there are

many landmines which can be triggered by the vibration of a car passing nearby or just by the heat in a 10 km radius around the Berm and in those parts of the desert where battles had been fought (almost everywhere).

There are Hungarian relief organizations working in Western Sahara and the most significant among them is the Hungarian Baptist Church Charity Service. Minister Sándor Szenci and his wife are dealing with mentally and physically disabled children in the camps and many of them make spectacular progress after the training courses. The Szenci couple also started an adoption program which allows the financial help of a child's medical treatment or education for one year through a certain monthly sum.⁴⁵

Another organization operating here is the Sahara Foundation which organizes educational opportunities for talented Sahrawi children and took up the responsibility of cultural good will mission.⁴⁶

Unfortunately there are fewer and fewer relief organizations trying to help the refugees, consequently the situation in the camps is catastrophic again. The reason can be that the food sent by the International Red Cross and other organizations (World Food Programme, etc) is not enough anymore to feed refugees. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) submitted its report (Anthropometric and Micronutrient Nutrition Survey-Sahrawi Refugee Camps, Tindouf, Algeria, 2004) to several countries and international organizations and requested immediate help.⁴⁷

When I visited the UN's base in Tindouf (23rd–26th of July, 2004) I met the representatives of organizations which tried to find a solution to the food problems in the camps. The activists of various organizations arriving in Tindouf were invited by the UNHCR and apart from taking part in a conference they also visited the refugee camps. On one of these occasions I had the opportunity of escorting them to the refugee camp of Asward.

It is hard to describe the life of these people but I think that even Gypsy people living in Hungary's slums have better living conditions than these people. In my opinion the best solution would be to abolish these camps and to guarantee the inhabitants their resettlement to the territories of Western Sahara possibly with some financial support.

Morocco established a program for this and houses were built for the repatriated refugees in the cities of the occupied territories. However most of the houses are empty since Polisario does not let the inhabitants of the refugee camps to resettle in territories governed by Moroccan authorities and many of them are forced to stay in the camps.⁴⁸ In this manner Polisario continues using the camp-dwellers living in poverty as a weapon against Morocco.

Conclusion

In my publication I have tried to introduce the life of Saharawi refugees in Algeria. The refugees of the Western Sahara have had 35 years to adopt life in inhospitable wastes of the southern Algerian desert. Forgotten by the rest of the world, they have given up hope of returning to their homeland. There are 140,000 Saharawi refugees who claim they were forced to flee their homes and leave their families in the Western Sahara for what has amounted to 35 years of hard labour in the inhospitable wastes of the barren southwest Algerian desert. Driven by Moroccan planes, napalm, phosphorus and cluster bombing, they say that they became the political casualties of King Hassan II's desire to reach out for empire. Three decades on, the Saharawi's are still pushing from the desert – where the Algerian government has given them a kind of autonomy – for an independent state. But they are the victims of international amnesia; their isolation means that no-one take care about them. Western-Sahara is the last country on the decolonisation list of UN, because East-Timor gained its freedom previously.

Nobody knows when the refugees can turn back to their country, but till this time the international community has to deal with their problems, that is why I am sharing this information about Sahrawian refugees.

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