



Bridge over troubled desert:

A review of the UNHCR
confidence building
measures programme in the
Western Sahara Territory
and in the refugee camps
near Tindouf

Policy Development and Evaluation Service

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Introduction to the review

1. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) continues to ensure its protection mandated responsibilities and to provide basic material/life-sustaining assistance to the 90,000 refugees out of a total camp population of 165,000 Sahrawi refugees, as estimated by the host country (Algeria), since the mid-1970s. UNHCR did not pursue a search for durable solutions under its 1951 mandate when it has well noted in the UN Security Council Resolution 650 of 29 April 1991 that there can only be a political solution to this refugee situation under the UN auspices. The current stalemate persists however, given that the political track remains under an impasse. As a result, refugees continue to live in difficult conditions in the harsh environment of the Algerian desert, where the camps hosting the refugees are located, and to depend on international aid.
2. Pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution 1282 of 1999 and subsequent resolutions, UNHCR has been promoting the Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) programme in cooperation with the Kingdom of Morocco, the *Frente* POLISARIO, Algeria as the host country for Sahrawi refugees, and Mauritania.
3. The programme, under UNHCR's humanitarian track, is non-political and is designed, in line with UNHCR's mandate, to address the protracted situation of Sahrawi families separated by the conflict for nearly 40 years, that is between the family members who reside in the remote camps near Tindouf, South West Algeria, and those in the Western Sahara Territory. The programme offers an opportunity for these Sahrawi families to re-unite temporarily.
4. The CBM activities' immediate aim is to address the humanitarian needs of separated families allowing them to meet and communicate. These activities could also help to bring about a solution for these families and to establish a certain level of confidence among the concerned parties.
5. In February 2011 and January 2012 at the high-level meetings in Geneva on Confidence Building Measures, the parties (*i.e.* the Kingdom of Morocco and the *Frente* POLISARIO) and the two neighbouring countries, Algeria and Mauritania, reiterated their support for UNHCR to organize an evaluation mission of the CBM programme to assess the humanitarian impact of this programme and its relevance in complementing the efforts of the UN in finding a political solution that would allow the refugees to return to their places of origin.
6. As a result, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Bureau and the Executive Office of the High Commissioner tasked the UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service to carry out an evaluation mission to review UNHCR's Confidence Building Measures with special emphasis on the following aspects:
 - *Management and operational issues:* are the CBM activities implemented by UNHCR cost-effective and have other alternatives been considered? Is there adequate fund-raising for this operation? Is the UNHCR configuration in the field, including staffing, suited to the needs? Is the MINURSO and CIVPOL support achieving synergies with the CBM activities implemented by UNHCR?

- *Humanitarian impact on beneficiaries:* what is the impact, if any, on the lives on Saharawi families who have been separated for decades and on their prospects of finding durable solutions?
- *Impact on the confidence among the parties:* to what extent did the CBM activities implemented by UNHCR contribute to improve the confidence among the concerned parties? Do they complement UNHCR's core mandate and the efforts of the Secretary General to seek reconciliation and to find a political solution?

7. After the evaluation mission, a high-level delegation from UNHCR's Executive Office and the MENA Bureau undertook a regional mission to Algeria, including the refugee camps near Tindouf, Morocco, the Western Sahara Territory and Mauritania.

Methodology

8. The review was undertaken by a staff member from the UNHCR Policy Development and Evaluation Service and by a staff member from the UNHCR MENA Bureau. It consisted of the following activities:

- Prior to the field trip the team carried out a document review and interviews with key UNHCR staff in Geneva and phone interviews with academics (elsewhere).
- Subsequently the team undertook a field trip (16-26 June 2013) including interviews with the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation (MFA) in Rabat; the Moroccan Coordination in Laayoune, Western Sahara Territory; UNHCR staff in Laayoune; beneficiaries of family visits in Laayoune; UNHCR staff in Tindouf; the Algerian Protocol in Tindouf; the *Frente* POLISARIO Coordination in Rabouni; beneficiaries of family visits in the refugee camps near Tindouf ; beneficiaries of the cultural seminars in the refugee camps near Tindouf; the Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG) in Laayoune; the Deputy SRSG in Tindouf. However the team did not manage to attend cultural seminars.
- After the field trip the team undertook phone interviews with representatives of four donors embassies based in Rabat and reviewed further documentation.
- A review of budgetary data in the UNHCR planning and financial softwares (Focus and MSRP) was also carried out.

The operational context

9. The following is a quote from the official UN website of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) to give a brief historical introduction without which it is impossible to understand the current situation.

“Western Sahara, a Territory on the north-west coast of Africa bordered by Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria, was administered by Spain until 1976. Both Morocco and Mauritania affirmed their claim to the territory, a claim opposed by the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y de Río de Oro (Frente POLISARIO). The United Nations has been seeking a settlement in Western Sahara since the withdrawal of Spain in 1976 and the ensuing fighting between Morocco, which had "reintegrated" the Territory, and the Frente POLISARIO, supported by Algeria (Mauritania renounced all claims to Western Sahara in 1979).¹”

10. A UN Settlement Plan approved by the Security Council in 1991, involving a referendum in which the people of the Western Sahara Territory would choose between independence and integration with Morocco, went through many hurdles and stages and eventually stalled in the year 2000 over disagreement between the Kingdom of Morocco and the *Frente* POLISARIO (hereafter referred to as “POLISARIO”) on who would be eligible to vote in the referendum. The 1991 Plan also included the creation of a UN integrated mission involving civilian, military and police personnel known as the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). Further to subsequent UN Security Council Resolutions, the civilian component of MINURSO (involved in the voters’ identification for the referendum) was withdrawn while the military component remained to monitor the ceasefire between Morocco and POLISARIO (hereafter referred to as “the parties”).

11. In 2004 James Baker III, previously appointed as Personal Envoy of the UN Secretary General for Western Sahara, resigned from his post as a result of the non-agreement by the parties to accept his proposed peace plans, even if they were endorsed by the Security Council². As a result of these historical developments, Sahrawi refugees fled to Algeria in the mid ‘70s where they were hosted in four refugee camps in the scorching heat of the western part of the Algerian desert close to the border with the Western Sahara Territory and have been residing in these camps ever since, without any substantial prospects of durable solutions. The four camps are largely self-managed by the POLISARIO, including

¹ <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minurso/background.shtml>

² See further Annex I for a chronology of events drawn from the MINURSO website. There were actually two Baker plans. The first one (“Framework Agreement” / Baker’s Plan I of June 2001, in which the referendum would be replaced by a vote on limited autonomy) was accepted by Morocco but rejected by the Polisario. The second one (Baker Plan II of May 2003, which provided for a referendum and offered the inhabitants a choice between independence, autonomy or complete integration with Morocco) was accepted by Polisario, Algeria and the Security Council but was rejected by Morocco. In July 2003 James Baker returned with a revised version of his plan, including safeguards that won Algerian and Polisario support. Moroccan settlers were able to vote, but Morocco rejected the plan. (“Security Council Report” <http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/chronology/western-sahara.php?page=4>)

security arrangements. The POLISARIO has its Headquarters in Rabouni, the administrative centre of the camps that are named from the main cities in the Western Sahara Territory (Laayoune, Awserd, Smara and Dakhla).

12. Up to 2012, the humanitarian assistance to the refugees provided by UNHCR and WFP was complemented by substantial bilateral donations (including Spain, Algeria as the host country, and the EU) through NGOs and the Sahrawi Red Crescent. Since 2012, owing to the financial crisis, bilateral assistance decreased substantially, a development that caused the emergence of a significant gap in the coverage of the basic humanitarian needs of this population.

13. One of the most striking humanitarian wounds of this situation is the separation of many Sahrawi families who have some members who reside in the Western Sahara Territory and others in the refugee camps near Tindouf since the mid '70s. The border between the Western Sahara Territory and Algeria is closed and furthermore the vast majority of the Western Sahara Territory is isolated by a sand wall otherwise known as the "berm" but which could also be referred to as the "Sand Curtain".

14. According to Wikipedia:

The Moroccan Wall of Western Sahara is an approximately 2,700 km-long structure, mostly a sand wall (or "berm"), running through Western Sahara and the south-eastern portion of Morocco. It acts as a separation barrier between the Moroccan-controlled areas (Southern Provinces) and the POLISARIO-controlled section of the territory (Free Zone) that lies along its eastern and southern border... The fortifications lie in uninhabited or very sparsely inhabited territory. They consist of sand and stone walls ... about three meters in height, with bunkers, fences and landmines throughout. The barrier mine-belt that runs along the structure is thought to be the longest continuous minefield in the world. Military bases, artillery posts and airfields dot the interior behind the wall at regular intervals, and radar masts and other electronic surveillance equipment scan the areas in front of it.³

15. In parallel with its regular mandated protection and assistance activities in the refugee camps near Tindouf, in 1998 UNHCR established an office in Laayoune, in the Western Sahara Territory, on the basis of an exchange of letters with the Government of Morocco within the framework of the UN Settlement Plan. Its original role was to promote and facilitate the voluntary repatriation of the refugees from the Tindouf camps after the outcome of the referendum.

16. In 1999, while the implementation of the UN Settlement Plan was put on hold over the issues related to the voters' identification, and voluntary repatriation prospects were fading, UNHCR submitted to the parties a proposal to implement a set of "Confidence Building Measures" (CBM) in accordance with its role as foreseen in UN Security Council Resolution 1282. The proposal included the following activities: 1) exchange of personal mail, 2) establishment of telephone communications, 3) seminars on Western Sahara, 4) mass information and 5) exchange of visitors (between the Western Sahara Territory and the refugee camps near Tindouf) with an aim to establish the family links and to sensitize the

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moroccan_Wall

refugees in the camps and their family members in the Western Sahara Territory on the situation on the ground.

17. The CBM Plan of Action had the immediate goals “to improve communications between Sahrawi refugees in the camps near Tindouf and their community of origin in the Western Sahara Territory” and to “respond to the humanitarian needs of families separated by the conflict for a long period of time”. It added that “these activities may also eventually lead to create a certain degree of confidence between the two parties involved in the conflict over the Western Sahara Territory thus facilitating a negotiated solution to the problem.”

18. The Plan of Action was endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 1282 in 1999 (and subsequent Resolutions) which stated:

The Security Council ... Welcomes the reiteration by the parties of their agreement in principle to the draft plan of action for cross-border confidence-building measures, including person-to-person contacts, submitted pursuant to resolution 1238 (1999) of 14 May 1999, and calls on them to cooperate with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and MINURSO for the initiation of these measures without further delay;...

19. The operational environment remains very challenging in view of high political sensitivities from all concerned parties. All exchanges and interactions with the parties need to be transparent and impartial. There is a very heavy and visible presence of security personnel both in Laayoune and in Tindouf (which also hosts an Algerian military base). UNHCR’s presence in Laayoune is “informal” owing to the particular nature of its operation, not directly related to refugees, but rather to the facilitation of contacts between separated family members residing in the Western Sahara Territory and the refugee camps near Tindouf.

20. A factor further affecting this already complex geopolitical environment is the security situation following the kidnapping of three NGO workers in Rabouni in October 2011 (who were eventually released in July 2012). As a result of this incident security measures were introduced such as armed escorts (by the Algerian police and POLISARIO security personnel) slowing down the movement of staff and of beneficiaries from camps to airport and Tindouf town and vice versa. The NGOs, which had temporarily withdrawn from the refugee camps near Tindouf, returned to continue providing their services to the refugees.

Management findings

21. Because of political sensitivities, the CBM operation is run separately from the regular, mandate-related “care and maintenance” operation in Tindouf which is supervised by the UNHCR Representation in Algiers and from the regular Morocco operation which is run from Rabat. The CBM operation is managed by a P5 Head of Operation based in Laayoune, who supervises 15 UNHCR staff members in Laayoune and 14 in Tindouf, in addition to the affiliate workforce, mainly composed of International United Nations Volunteers (IUNVs).

22. In Tindouf there are also 34 UNHCR staff members supervised by a P5 Head of Sub-Office (SO) who reports to UNHCR Algiers for the regular operation. For the CBM programme the highest ranking official in Tindouf is only a P2 Associate Field Officer who reports to the P5 Head in Laayoune for all substantive matters. This is not a very effective arrangement considering the constant negotiations that are required with POLISARIO and Algerian officials, even if the Head of the CBM operation shuttles frequently between Laayoune and Tindouf. Hence there is a need to upgrade the representational level of the UNHCR CBM operation in Tindouf to the P3 or P4 level, ensuring that selected staff has the necessary profile and language skills.

23. The evaluation mission was informed that there is an absence of any type of structured coordination between the two operations, apart from some *ad hoc* contacts between the Head of the CBM operation in Laayoune and the Representative in Algiers, and some *ad hoc* logistical and administrative support provided by the Sub-Office (SO) Tindouf to the CBM operation. It was revealed that no briefings have taken place between CBM office and SO Tindouf on the procedures of the family visits between the camps and the Territory.

24. While the political rationale to keep the two operations distinct in terms of decision-making and relations with the authorities (which includes the Moroccan government for the CBM operation) is well understood, there is no reason why there should not be regular coordination meetings.

25. Personality issues, which were quoted as the main reason for this lack of coordination, could and should be managed. Regular coordination meetings should be held at least on a monthly basis and should cover issues such as information exchange, joint analysis of the impact of the CBM programme on the refugees, administrative support and perhaps the possibility of pooling drivers (in Tindouf there are 8 drivers for the CBM programme – who are however solicited mainly during the family visit flights – and 10 for the regular SO operation).

Operational findings

26. The new January 2012 Plan of Action (agreed to in a meeting held in September 2011 among UNHCR and the parties with Algeria and Mauritania acting as observers) which replaced the 2004 one, introduced some streamlined procedures which facilitated the most time-consuming operation, namely the CBM flights / family-visits. Eligibility to participate in these family visits was, as in the previous Plan of Action, still based on first degree family ties, namely parents/children, spouses and siblings but the main innovation, which necessitated painstaking negotiations with the concerned parties, was the introduction of a long list of pre-cleared candidates before the formation of flight manifests. While this has sped up the process it has not completely avoided last minute objections by the parties on the entitlement of specific individuals to travel on family visits and small-scale incidents (involving the possession and distribution of political material) which will be analysed later. Another issue delaying the process is the quality of the information contained in the CBM database.

27. It should be noted that the only registration that has been undertaken so far is of the CBM beneficiaries, in addition to a “pre-registration” of all refugees carried out in 1999 in preparation for repatriation in the context of the UN Settlement Plan (which was soon to stall). The pre-registration exercise yielded the result of 129,863 refugees⁴. Since then the actual number of refugees has never been agreed upon, with the Algerian authorities and POLISARIO estimating 165,000 refugees, and UNHCR and WFP working with a planning figure of 90,000 with an additional 35,000 to whom WFP distributes food rations. Subsequent UNHCR demarches made at the highest level to allow and agree on the modalities of a full registration of the Sahrawi refugee population have not yet yielded positive results⁵.

28. With respect to the registration of refugees participating in the family visits from the camps and concerned individuals in the Western Sahara Territory, three registration exercises were carried out in 2004, 2008, and 2012, the first one using the Access database software and the others the ProGres software which became the standard UNHCR software for refugee registration. However, according to all interviewees, the quality and reliability of the data collected is very poor requiring constant physical verifications under time pressure before the family visits⁶.

29. While a complete analysis of the causes of this problem was beyond the scope of this evaluation, some of the reasons included poor management of the transfer of information from Access to ProGres, insufficient training, low expertise of the two dedicated Data Management Assistants in Tindouf, lack of integration between the Tindouf and Laayoune data-bases, and the fact that some fields in ProGres are not compatible with the requirements of the CBM family visits. Reportedly, the short missions from the Regional Data-Base Management officer did not help to improve the situation.

⁴ UNHCR Global Report 2000

⁵ During a mission in September 2013 the Algerian authorities have signaled to the UNHCR Chef de Cabinet their consent in principle to discuss the modalities for a refugee registration.

⁶ Some of these shortcomings were already identified in the 2009 report from the UNHCR Inspector General's Office (“Standard Inspection of the Confidence Building Measures Programme”)

30. Financially, the total cost per beneficiary (including staff and administrative costs for both the family visits and the cultural seminars) decreased from an exorbitant \$ 5,048 in 2010 (however in a year in which family visit flights were partially halted for political reasons) to a more reasonable \$ 1,885 in 2011 and an even better \$ 1,253 in 2012 for a direct, moving and tangible humanitarian impact that will be analysed below. Total expenditures (including staff and administrative costs) varied from \$ 2,696,000 in 2010 (of which only 34% for operations because family visit flights were partially stopped) to \$ 4,037,000 in 2011 (of which 51% in operations) and \$ 5,873,000 in 2012 (of which 66% in operations). The following table summarizes the CBM programme financial evolution between 2010 and 2012.

Table 1: Financial evolution of the CBM programme

Year	Operational Expendit. (US\$)	Admin. Expendit. (US\$)	Staff Expendit. (US\$)	Total Expendit. (US\$)	Number of benefic. (family visits+ cultural seminars)	Total Expendit. X benefic. (US\$)	Operat. Expendit. X benefic. (US\$)
2010	925,108	342,013	1,428,958	2,696,079	534 *	5,048	1,732
2011	2,063,224	562,647	1,411,863	4,037,734	2,107 + 34	1,885	963
2012	3,882,534	522,051	1,468,650	5,873,235	4,651 + 34	1,253	828

*In 2010 no cultural seminars were held

31. The improvement in cost-effectiveness of the CBM programme was to a large extent caused by one positive development that facilitated the management of the CBM flights in addition to the more lenient approach by the parties to the family visits further to UNHCR's constant negotiations since 2011. This was the decision to charter a larger aircraft through the UNHCR logistics provider, Kuehne & Nagel, carrying 150 passengers, instead of the 30 seater planes chartered (at full cost) through MINURSO. This development not only allowed for an increase in the numbers of family visits and hence of humanitarian impact (which will be discussed below) but also helped to reduce the costs per passenger from an average of \$575 per person to an average of \$ 370.

32. On the other hand the cultural seminars, whose impact will be analysed in the section below, have a much higher cost per individual. Considering that each seminar (so far held in Portugal where visa requirements for this group were waived) costs on average \$ 150,000 (including air travel, food and accommodation for 34 beneficiaries and the facilitator) the unit cost is approximately \$ 4,400, something that will be hard for UNHCR to sustain in the long run. Furthermore, the Government of Morocco also provides direct assistance to beneficiaries from the Western Sahara Territory, who participate in the family visits and the cultural seminars.

33. One expenditure that could be removed from the UNHCR budget is the Daily Subsistence Allowance (DSA) for MINURSO police (CIVPOL) who accompany the beneficiaries of family visits to from the Western Sahara Territory to the Tindouf camps and vice versa. While the CIVPOL escorts are included in the Plan of Action, we may remark that apart from monitoring the ceasefire, the CBM family visit programme is the only activity for a UN mission that was supposed to facilitate a political process that came to a

halt. Yet, even with a yearly budget of \$ 61 million, ten times higher than UNHCR's CBM budget, MINURSO charges UNHCR an average of \$ 90,000 per year in DSA for its police escorts (while it also provides a medical doctor to escort the beneficiaries free of charge). This expenditure not only puts an albeit limited pressure on UNHCR's tight budgets, but gives the impression that the UN as a whole does not share "ownership" of this programme, even if it is "the only show in town" after the stalled peace process.

34. The CBM programme met with a varied response from donors who earmarked \$1,845,000 in 2010, \$ 1,318,000 million in 2011 and only 588,000 in 2012, but the year 2013 saw a major increase with \$ 1,614,000 already pledged and with indications of new contributions in the pipeline. While generally UNHCR prefers un-earmarked or broadly earmarked contributions for most of its operations and programmes, the particular nature of this operation would require a more constant and higher level of earmarking as a tangible sign of donors' support.

Humanitarian activities and impact

35. It will be recalled that the original CBM Plan of Action involved five activities, namely 1) exchange of personal mail, 2) establishment of telephone communications, 3) seminars on Western Sahara, 4) mass information and 5) exchange of visitors. The records shows that the exchange of personal mail was not implemented as no agreement was reached on the modalities of the use of the stamps and the distribution of the mail to the addressees. As for the mass information, this activity was planned in the context of the referendum and hence it was shelved when it became apparent that the referendum would not take place.

36. However the evaluation mission concluded that on a whole the broad objectives of these activities were achieved through those which were eventually carried out. It should be noted that it took three years (between 2000 and 2003) to agree with the parties the practical modalities of the exchange of visitors or “family visits” (as they were subsequently termed) and the telephone connections which were the first CBM activities to be implemented in 2004. Hence the old adage “the devil is in the details” summarizes part of the difficulties of this operation. The following is an analysis of the three activities that were eventually implemented, *i.e.* the telephone centres, the cultural seminars and finally the exchange of visitors / “family visits”.

Telephone centres

37. In 2004, four telephone centres were opened in four camps (Laayoune, Smara, ‘27 February’⁷ and Awserd camps). Efforts to open a fifth telephone centre in the most remote camp (Dakhla) in 2007 did not yield any results. Since 2004 a total of 138,882 calls have been made. This programme has been discontinued since September 2010 in the context of a general halt of the CBM activities and has not resumed because the POLISARIO expected reciprocity with the establishment of similar telephone centres in the Territory but this was reportedly rejected by the Moroccan government which did not see why the UN should open up telephone centres in the Territory. At any rate, during the mission the evaluation team heard mixed views from beneficiaries in the camps on the usefulness of these centres particularly since the spread of mobile phones has made them to some extent redundant.

38. On the other hand the demand from beneficiaries for internet connections was greater. The possibility of internet connections between the Tindouf camps and the Western Sahara Territory was alluded to in the 2012 Plan of Action, “in consultation with the parties” and was in principle agreed to in a meeting held in September 2011. UNHCR technicians have already undertaken assessment missions in the camps but, due to the availability of internet cafes in the Western Sahara Territory, this activity could go ahead in the camps under the CBM umbrella or as part of the regular UNHCR assistance programme for the Tindouf camps, subject to the agreement of the concerned authorities.

⁷ This is a small satellite camp

Cultural Seminars

39. The objective of this activity was to offer opportunities for dialogue, interaction and information exchange on topics of a non-political nature between persons from civil society of Sahrawi communities living in the Western Sahara Territory and in the Tindouf camps in an open and inclusive atmosphere, bringing them closer and helping them to understand each other better on sensitive topics. Even if this activity was part of the original 1999 Plan of Action which was agreed in principle by the parties and in spite of the non-political nature of the topics, the sensitivities were so high that the details of this activity were agreed only in 2010.

40. Hence the first seminar was eventually held only in September 2011 in Madeira, Portugal, on the subject "Hassania⁸ [i.e. Sahrawi] Traditional Heritage and Practices". Since then, two further seminars were held in the Azores islands in Portugal, one in July 2012 on "The Role of Women in Sahrawi Community", and the other in February 2013 on "The Concept of Kheima (Tent) in Sahrawi Culture". A fourth seminar is planned for October 2014, also in the Azores islands, on "The Role of the Camel in Sahrawi Society". Each seminar brought a total of 34 participants equally divided between the Western Sahara Territory and the camps plus the CBM coordinators from the Moroccan government and the POLISARIO. The seminars were facilitated by academics from Mauritania familiar with Sahrawi culture.

41. Interviews held with beneficiaries of the seminars both in Laayoune and Tindouf showed that there was broad appreciation for these activities. They were considered well organized with good facilitators and were particularly appreciated by beneficiaries who were not eligible to participate in the family visits as they did not meet the criteria (for example because they did not have first degree relatives on the other side) as "these seminars bring people together from both sides". They also helped to break the ice and improve the atmosphere between the parties. Suggestions for improvements included keeping a record of the proceedings of these seminars, more recreational activities and more consultation with the beneficiaries on the topics. Participants in Tindouf considered that it was a good opportunity to show "authentic Sahrawi culture" to beneficiaries from the Western Sahara Territory.

42. Yet there was a significant minority of interviewees who, even if they considered this initiative well-intentioned, with positive exchanges from both sides, thought that the subjects were shallow and yielded no conclusions. They considered the seminars useless palliatives as it is very difficult to separate cultural from political issues. However there was unanimous consensus that there would be a lot of added value if these seminars could be held alternatively in the Western Sahara Territory and in the Tindouf camps, instead of a European country as they would also help participants to familiarize themselves with conditions on both sides. Needless to say, this option would also substantially reduce the costs for UNHCR.

⁸ "Hassāniya (Arabic: حسانية Ḥassāniya ... is the variety of Arabic originally spoken by the Beni Hassān Bedouin tribes, who extended their authority over most of Mauritania and the Western Sahara between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. It has almost completely replaced the Berber languages spoken in this region. ... Today Hassaniya is spoken in Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Senegal and the Western Sahara." (from Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hassaniya_Arabic)

43. The evaluation team is therefore of the opinion that while the organization of the early seminars was totally legitimate to reinvigorate the CBM programme, in the near future this activity should be redesigned to see if there is consensus among the parties to hold the seminars in the sub-region, otherwise its continuation is not cost-effective and does not have a humanitarian impact as strong as the family visits.

Family visits

44. This activity can be considered as the “flagship” of the CBM programme. It is the one that has the greatest direct and tangible humanitarian impact and brings visibility to UNHCR’s operation. The aim of the family visits is to re-unite for a limited period Saharawi members of separated Saharawi families, i.e. the refugees living in the Tindouf camps and their relatives living in the Western Sahara Territory and vice versa.

45. These visits, which take place with a chartered plane, last a total of five days and, as stated, are available for separated first degree relatives, *i.e.* parents and children, spouses and siblings. In addition to the air transport to and from the main cities in the Territory (Laayoune, Boujdour, Dahakla and Samar) and Tindouf airport, UNHCR also provides ground transport between the homes of the beneficiaries and the airport and a grant of \$ 50 per individual up to a maximum of \$ 250 per family (increased in 2012 from \$ 30 per individual up to maximum of \$ 150 per family) but only for the refugees and not for the Territory residents. In total UNHCR has registered 48,251 individuals (9,420 families) comprising of 31,365 individuals (5,658 families) in the camps and 16,886 individuals (3,762 families) in the major cities of the Western Sahara Territory who meet the above criteria.

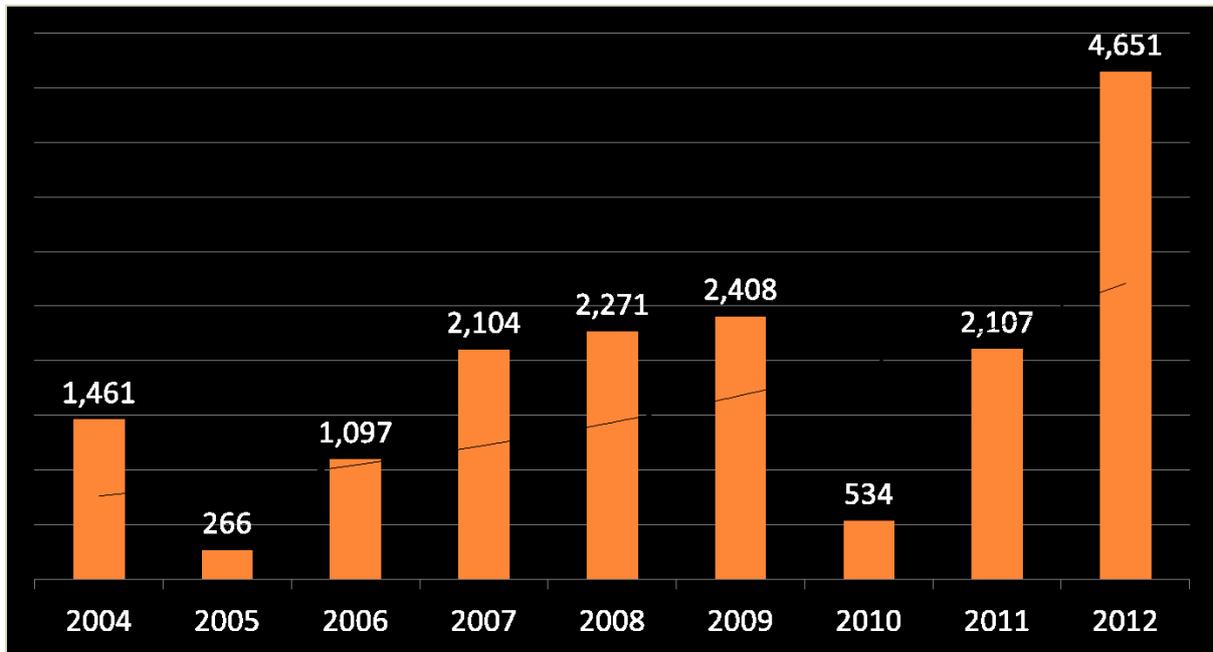
46. The main difficulties concerning the family visits have been the denial of clearance from either party for beneficiaries selected by UNHCR, generally on security grounds, and the confiscation of “political material” (such as documents, CD-ROMs, flags, etc.), or the staging of demonstrations, mainly affecting visitors from the camps to the Western Sahara Territory. Disagreement between the parties on the selection of beneficiaries from Dakhla city brought the family visits to a halt between March 2010 and January 2011 which resulted in a drastic reduction of such visits, as can be seen in the table below. This also affected the free telephone services that have not resumed ever since, although, as we have seen above, the demand for this activity is lower than for the family visits.

47. While the issue of the selection of beneficiaries has been to some extent addressed by the pre-clearance introduced in the 2012 Plan of Action, problems persist and the issue of “political material” and the possibility of pro-independence demonstrations, with close security surveillance, continue to this day and require constant interventions and negotiations by the UNHCR field staff with the Moroccan and POLISARIO CBM coordinators. At times these incidents are even referred to UNHCR Geneva Headquarters that has to mediate between the parties.

48. Since the introduction of the 2012 Plan of Action, allowing for streamlined procedures and a bigger airplane, these incidents have continued to occur but tensions were diffused more quickly partially thanks to the negotiating skills of UNHCR staff but also partially because the parties support the CBM’s humanitarian aims and do not want to blow these issues out of proportion and politicize every incident.

49. As a result, the family visits have gained a new momentum with a doubling of the number of visitors between 2011 and 2012. In absolute numbers, if we add to the 16,899 individuals who benefited from this activity between 2004 and 2012 the 2,803 who benefited in 2013 as at the end of June, we reach a grand total of 19,702 beneficiaries. The table below shows the historical evolution of the number of family visits.

Table 2: Number of family visits (individuals) between 2004 and 2012



50. The beneficiaries who were interviewed both in Laayoune and in the Tindouf camps were unanimous in praising the CBM family visits. “Before 2004 we had no contacts with the other side”, said one. “It is a dream come true”, said another. The evaluation team was fortunate enough to meet and talk with the beneficiaries during the flight preparation in the Laayoune airport and to fly with a CBM flight Laayoune - Tindouf - Laayoune. The most moving story was of one of the beneficiaries who re-united with his mother after almost 40 years in a refugee camp. The evaluation team met the beneficiary two days after his temporary reunification with his mother, yet emotions were still running very high, with tears in the eyes of the reunited family members.

51. Only one of the dozen beneficiaries interviewed on both sides reported some problem in connection with the confiscation of prohibited “political material” and close surveillance by the Moroccan authorities. Most lamented that five days were not enough to heal the wounds caused by decades of separation and recommended that the duration be increased to one week. Many also remarked that the grant of \$ 50 per person with a maximum of \$ 250 per family was not sufficient for the occasion since tradition requires that the receiver of the visit will have to invite all family members and distant relatives to meet the guest something that constitutes a heavy financial burden for such a historic family occasions, the cost of which can be more than \$ 1,000.

52. External interlocutors from the UN (MINURSO) and from four donor embassies who were interviewed were also unanimous in their praise and appreciation of the CBM family visits. “It is the only constructive UN activity in this geopolitical context since the rest is prevention and monitoring”, said one official. This was echoed by another official who said,

“The programme is very beneficial; it is the only active and effective initiative, making a positive impact on the beneficiaries”. Also the government officials who were interviewed (Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Development, Moroccan Governor /CBM coordinator, Algerian Protocol, and POLISARIO leadership) acknowledged the positive humanitarian impact of the CBM family visits.

53. All interlocutors, including the parties, were also in favour, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, of a new round of registration after all the beneficiaries on the current list will have a chance to undertake the family visits. If the positive trend in the number of visits in 2012 and the first half of 2013 continues, it is expected that the approximately 6,000 beneficiaries in the camps and 1,200 in the Territory who are cleared for family visits and awaiting travel will be able to do so in approximately one year. It should be noted that by that time the first family visits would have taken place already 10 years earlier.

54. Furthermore, as many beneficiaries pointed out, so far eligibility to participate in the family visits was on the basis of a western nuclear family model, which did not include uncles and cousins who are very important in Sahrawi culture. Hence there was an overwhelming desire to have more flexible criteria for a new round of registration.

55. A final aspect of the humanitarian impact of the family visits is the issue of its impact on “return” for the so-called “permanent stayers”⁹ as a result of the family visits. Although detailed statistics on this type of spontaneous returns, which are not organized by UNHCR, are not available, it was reported that around 280 beneficiaries opted to stay in the Western Sahara Territory after the family visit through the CBM flight. A much smaller number of “permanent stayers” was also reported the other way round, i.e. from the Western Sahara Territory to the Tindouf camps. Moreover some observers mentioned that an unknown percentage of these “permanent stayers” find their way back to their original locations by their own means. However this kind of “revolving door” phenomenon is impossible to quantify statistically in the absence of a registration of the camp refugee population. A refugee registration would also help to better target the humanitarian assistance.

⁹ Since the Western Sahara Territory is not officially recognized by the UN, the term “repatriation” is not used and returnees are called “permanent stayers”.

Impact on confidence among the parties

56. A number of documents released by UNHCR such as the 2005 Supplementary Appeal while stressing that the main objective of the CBM programme was a humanitarian one, added that CBM activities “are also likely to contribute to the establishment of a certain level of confidence between the parties concerned by the conflict over Western Sahara, thus facilitating a negotiated political solution to the problem”. The preceding section of this paper has shown that the humanitarian objective has been met, mainly through the family visits, but most beneficiaries pointed out that they do not need to build confidence among families separated by the conflict. Hence the programme could be called “humanitarian bridges among separated families”. It has also increased the confidence of the refugees in UNHCR since it is more visible in their eyes than the traditional humanitarian assistance that they consider mainly provided by bilateral donors, NGOs, the host country and the POLISARIO, in addition to UNHCR and other UN partners. But what about the impact on the confidence between the parties?

57. In modern history the concept of CBMs have been developed mainly in a Cold War military context and can be traced to the early work of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and the 1975 Helsinki Final Act, but they have also been applied in non-military contexts. A 2012 OSCE paper¹⁰ defines non-military CBMs as “actions or processes undertaken in all phases of the conflict cycle ... in political, economic or social or cultural fields with the aim of increasing transparency and the level of trust and confidence between two or more conflicting parties to prevent inter-State and/or intra-State conflicts from emerging, or (re) escalating and to pave the way for a lasting conflict settlement”.

58. The paper lists five types of non-military CBMs, namely political, economic, environmental, societal and cultural. Surprisingly it does not include humanitarian CBMs as a distinct category. Yet it should be noted that the CBMs implemented for the Western Sahara refugee situation were not the first ones to be carried out by UNHCR. For example UNHCR implemented activities such as bus services connecting separated communities and inter-ethnic dialogue that were part of a “confidence-building” package in Kosovo (then part of the “Federal Republic of Yugoslavia”) in 2000 and in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia in 2001, which were then affected by conflict.

59. In a recent book on managing peace processes written for AU practitioners, CBMs have been defined as a “series of actions that are negotiated, agreed and implemented by the conflict parties in order to build confidence, without specifically focusing on the root causes of the conflict”. They “humanize the conflict partners” and “help building a working trust by addressing easier issues which will then allow parties to address the root causes of a conflict through substantial negotiations”¹¹. The authors categorize CBMs as political, security, economic/environmental and social/humanitarian/cultural, quoting the Western Sahara as an example of the latter category.

¹⁰ “OSCE Guide on Non-Military Confidence Building Measures”, OSCE 2012, available at <http://www.osce.org/cpc/91082>

¹¹ “Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) in Peace Processes” by Simon J. A. Mason / Matthias Siegfried, in *Managing Peace Processes, a Handbook for AU Practitioners*, African Union and Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, 2013.

60. All the interlocutors who were interviewed, and notably officials from the two parties (the government of Morocco and the POLISARIO) made a clear distinction between the humanitarian impact of the CBM programme on the separated families – which they all acknowledged – and the impact on the confidence between the opposed parties to pave the way for a political settlement, which they denied.

61. One of the parties termed the CBM a “palliative” and another a “lubricant”. These metaphors are similar to the ones used by the High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr António Guterres during his visit of the Tindouf camps in September 2009 in which he said: “Exile is like pneumonia, you need antibiotics to treat it. In this case, the antibiotics are the political solution. I cannot offer them. I only have aspirin to relieve some of the pain”.

62. Yet officials who were interviewed also conceded that currently the CBM programme provides the only forum under the humanitarian track in which the two parties meet face-to-face, including in a yearly coordination meeting in Geneva to discuss the modalities and the implementation of the CBM Plan of Action¹². In this connection it has been remarked by several observers that in the last two years the atmosphere between the parties at this meeting and lately also in the cultural seminars is noticeably more relaxed. One POLISARIO official in Algeria was also reportedly allowed to visit his sick mother in the Territory, something unthinkable a few years earlier.

63. While these are clear examples of the CBM’s success in reciprocally “humanizing” the parties, it is certainly difficult to argue that these small signs will help paving the way for a lasting political settlement. As the authors of the AU book conclude in their analysis of the Western Sahara refugee situation CBMs¹³, “the humanitarian impact of these CBMs is hard to underestimate ...however it is much harder to assess whether such CBMs also have a broader impact on the political negotiations process facilitated by the UN”.

64. Even if it is difficult to establish a direct causation between humanitarian CBMs and peace settlements (for example between the UNHCR CBMs in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and the Ohrid Peace Agreement that ended civil unrest in the country in 2001) it is likely that their absence would exacerbate tensions and make a peace settlement more difficult, at least as long as CBMs complement, rather than substitute, peace negotiations.

65. As a result of the above analysis and considering the overwhelming desire from beneficiaries from both sides to continue with the family visits, the CBM programme should continue for another 3 to 5 years, depending on the results of the new registration for family visits, subject to the consent of the parties. As mentioned above, if the parties agree, the cultural seminars should take place in the sub-region, or be phased out with the resources re-directed towards the grants for the family visit beneficiaries. Perhaps joint sport events could be envisaged instead, as suggested by a number of beneficiaries.

66. In a longer-term perspective (beyond the 3 to 5 years horizon, after the next round of family visits if accepted) it is evident that UNHCR cannot run the air flight family visits indefinitely. Hence the possibility of visits by road may be explored. Currently this is not a feasible option for several reasons. Politically, this is still problematic. Logistically and operationally a technical assessment conducted by UNHCR in April 2011 concluded that it is not cost-effective because it would be too risky without substantial demining and would require medium to high investments in road repairs (between 300 and 400 km, depending

¹² The parties also meet regularly under the auspices of the UN political track.

¹³ “Confidence Building Measures (CBM) in Peace Processes”, *op. cit.*, page 63.

on the selected route) equipment (buses, etc.) and infrastructure (transit centre) and substantial running costs (food, water, security and health escorts and vehicles maintenance).

67. However, even if this enterprise would be beyond UNHCR's mandate and financial and operational capacity, the UN as a whole, including MINURSO and development actors could perhaps explore further this possibility in consultation with the parties providing also a tangible proof that the CBM programme is a shared UN endeavour and not just a UNHCR programme. The UN, including MINURSO, could take care of the "hardware" (demining, road repairs, transit centres), IOM could be involved for the bus transports while UNHCR could take care of the "software" (clearance of beneficiaries with the parties, protection escorts). The implementation of the road option in the future, ideally in connection with repatriation, should the situation on the ground allow it, would also provide UNHCR with an exit strategy while keeping the humanitarian bridge open and help move the confidence building further.

68. But CBMs cannot be seen as a *de facto* solution: it is imperative that the UN continues to work towards an acceptable political solution between the parties (and the two neighbouring countries as observers) that will allow the refugees to return to their places of origin in safety and dignity.

Key findings and recommendations

Overall assessment

- The CBM programme has a very positive humanitarian impact on the beneficiaries and brings excellent visibility for UNHCR. However the political impact on the confidence among the parties to move the peace process along is very hard to measure. In this sense the operation should be more aptly termed “humanitarian bridges among separated families” rather than “confidence building among the parties”. There is an overwhelming desire for the operation to continue, despite a few adjustments which are required.
- The political and visibility cost for UNHCR to discontinue this operation at this stage would be higher than the (economic) benefits without even mentioning the negative humanitarian impact on the beneficiaries. However in the long term there is a need for UNHCR to devise an exit strategy, if the political situation remains under an impasse.

Management

- The evaluation team observed great dedication from all concerned staff in very harsh environmental conditions (particularly in Tindouf) with many on call late at night to intervene when there are issues with the family visits. UNHCR staff is praised by all stakeholders.
- The evaluation team acknowledges the political and operational rationale to keep the CBM operation separate from the SO Tindouf operation in terms of representation and decision-making, but also highlights the need for coordination and information sharing between the two operations currently almost non-existent (even if SO Tindouf provides support to the CBM operation on an ad hoc basis, mainly on logistical and administrative issues). Some synergies (and perhaps cost-savings) could be achieved in terms of logistic and administration through closer cooperation.
 - ***Recommendation:*** *Establish regular coordination meetings (at least on a monthly basis) between the CBM and the SO Tindouf operations.*
- The poor quality of the CBM registration data (including because of migration from Access to ProGres) requires time-consuming and time-bound verifications which can be stressful also in view of the lack of training in ProGres and low expertise by concerned staff.
 - ***Recommendation:*** *Provide more training on ProGres for existing database staff and deploy an experienced, qualified Database Manager (in Laayoune or Tindouf) for one year or at least until the end of the new round of registration (see below).*
- The current CBM operation is headed by a P5 Head of Operation in Laayoune, considering the very complex political environment requiring seniority, profile, and

diplomatic skills to deal with frequent high-level interactions with UN, Governmental and parties' senior officials. Furthermore, the UNHCR CBM Head must be perceived by the parties to be completely neutral and impartial. Additional language skills (French and Arabic) are a further asset.

- ***Recommendation:*** *Ensure that future Heads of the CBM operation continue to have the necessary seniority, profile, maturity and proven diplomatic skills. Additional language skills are a further asset. Geographical origin must also be taken into account.*
- The next in line of seniority is a P2 Field Officer in Tindouf supervising many IUNVs and local staff.
 - ***Recommendation:*** *increase the representational level for the Tindouf CBM operation to the P3 or P4 level.*

Operational

- The CBM is an expensive operation (compared with “classical care and maintenance”) but there was greater cost effectiveness since 2012 and the tears of joy in the eyes of the beneficiaries are invaluable compared with the costs incurred. Cultural seminars are the most expensive component per beneficiary.
- There was a downward trend in donor earmarking for the CBM programme from 2010 to 2012 but upwards in 2013 and four significant donors who were interviewed were very supportive of the programme.
 - ***Recommendation:*** *In view of the particular nature of the CBM programme, donors should maintain a high level of earmarking for the CBM even if UNHCR discourages tight earmarking for its regular operations.*
- There is limited added value in the MINURSO/CIVPOL escorts during the family visits, but since it is included in the Plan of Action it cannot be discontinued and UNHCR needs to pay 90,000 USD in DSA every year to MINURSO even if the latter gains a lot of legitimacy through the CBM operation (“the only show in town”).
 - ***Recommendation:*** *Reiterate request to DPKO to have at least the CIVPOL DSA covered by the MINURSO budget.*
- Concerning the option to have the family visits by road, many obstacles (political, security, logistical, humanitarian) were reported to the evaluation team which do not make it feasible under current circumstances. However, in the long term, subject to the consent of the parties and full involvement (including financial) by the UN development agencies and MINURSO it is an option that may be re-assessed in the longer term and may provide UNHCR with an exit strategy.
 - ***Recommendation:*** *At an opportune moment, preferably in connection with voluntary repatriation, should the situation on the ground permit it, UNHCR could consider putting on the agenda for consideration by the parties the possibility to further explore the road option for family visits with the full involvement of UN development agencies and MINURSO.*

Humanitarian impact

- Low demand for a continuation of the telephone services in the refugee camps but higher demand for internet centres.
 - ***Recommendation.*** *UNHCR should continue its efforts to establish internet centres in the Tindouf camps under the regular programme if it is not politically feasible to implement them under the CBM programme.*
- There was unanimous agreement by external stakeholders that the family visits are having an excellent and unique humanitarian impact among the beneficiaries.
- The beneficiaries were unanimously delighted with the family visits. There is a tangible, visible and moving impact when separated families meet after decades. The programme builds confidence in UNHCR for the refugees.
- The overwhelming majority of beneficiaries and other stakeholders requesting the programme to continue beyond the current list (based on 1st degree relatives, which will be exhausted in 1-2 years) and a substantial majority would wish the duration to be increased from 5 to 7 days. First beneficiaries travelled almost 10 years ago and are concerned about aging relatives.
 - ***Recommendation:*** *Subject to the consent of the parties UNHCR should start a new registration cycle based on more flexible criteria (i.e. not only on the European nuclear family model), also allowing a second chance for those who travelled 10 years earlier, giving due consideration to vulnerable/humanitarian cases.*
- In spite of the financial constraints incurred by families hosting the visiting relatives, the vast majority of interviewed beneficiaries mentioned that the 5 days duration (including travel) is too short to re-establish ties after decades of separation.
 - ***Recommendation:*** *Subject to the consent of the parties, UNHCR could propose to increase the duration of the family visits to 7 days (including travel time) and consider increasing the incentives given to refugees.*
- The cultural seminars were very useful in re-energizing the CBM operation, particularly among the parties, but do not have a direct humanitarian impact. From the side of the beneficiaries, the views are more nuanced than for the family visits. The vast majority of beneficiaries suggest that the seminars would have a greater impact if they were held alternatively in the Western Sahara Territory and in the Tindouf camps.
 - ***Recommendations:*** *UNHCR, in consultation with the parties, could propose to hold the seminars in the sub-region instead of a European location as a cost-effective measure, or in the near future consider replacing them with other activities such as vocational training and/or joint sport events.*
- UNHCR and the parties reported approximately 280 “permanent stayers” in the Territory after the CBM family visits (and a smaller number in the other direction), but there are some indications that some of these returns are not “permanent” and there might be a “revolving door” phenomenon. However it is impossible to substantiate this phenomenon in the absence of a proper, full registration (in

ProGres) of camp refugees. The lack of registration also affects the targeting of humanitarian assistance.

- ***Recommendation.** UNHCR should reiterate requests to the host country that a full refugee registration, according to internationally accepted standards and methodologies, be carried out as soon as feasible in the Tindouf camps¹⁴.*

Impact on confidence among the parties

- It is difficult to measure whether the CBM programme managed “to contribute to establish a certain level of confidence between the Parties affected by the conflict over the Western Sahara” Territory. The parties and the beneficiaries make a clear distinction between humanitarian impact (acknowledged) and political confidence (which is not achieved). In this sense the programme may be more aptly described as “humanitarian bridges among separated families” (who don’t need to build confidence among themselves) rather than “confidence building among opposed parties”.
- However many external stakeholders observe that even if there may not be a visible and direct impact in this sense, there may be an indirect impact (difficult to assess) as it is the only forum that keeps some sort of dialogue open (even if on humanitarian issues) and in its absence things may get worse. In this sense the CBM activities (family visits, cultural seminars and coordination meetings in Geneva) managed to reciprocally “humanize” the parties and to build at least a “working trust”.

¹⁴ See note 5. During a mission in September 2013 the Algerian authorities have signaled to the UNHCR Chef de Cabinet their consent in principle to discuss the modalities for a refugee registration.

ANNEX

Western Sahara conflict and confidence building measures chronology

Background¹⁵

- November 1884 – November 1885: At the Berlin Diplomatic Conference, Spain is recognised as the colonial power of present-day Western Sahara, considered as *res nullius*.
- December 1965: The UN General Assembly adopts its first resolution on Western Sahara, requesting Spain to decolonise the Territory (General Assembly resolution 2072 (XX) of 17 Dec. 1965).
- December 1966: The UN General Assembly requests Spain to organise, under UN supervision, a referendum on self-determination (General Assembly resolution 2229 (XXI) of 20 Dec. 1966). The demand is repeated each year from 1967 to 1973.
- 29 April 1973: The *Frente Para la Liberación de Saguia Al Hamra y Rio de Oro* (POLISARIO) is founded in Zouerate (Mauritania) with the purpose of obtaining independence for Western Sahara.
- December 1974: The Spanish census, a prerequisite for the self-determination referendum, registers 73, 497 inhabitants of Western Sahara.
- October 1975: The Decolonization Committee issues a report requesting the UN General Assembly to enable the local population to choose their future in free and fair circumstances.
- 16 October 1975: The International Courts of Justice publishes its advisory opinion on the status of the Territory before colonization by Spain. "... the Court has not found legal ties of such nature as might affect the application of resolution 1514 (XV) in the decolonization of Western Sahara and, in particular, of the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the Territory."
- 6 November 1975: Morocco launches the "Green March" (*Al Massira*); some 350,000 Moroccans march a few kilometres across the border into the Territory of Western Sahara.
- 14 November 1975: Spain, Mauritania and Morocco sign the Madrid Accords. Spain agrees to cede administrative control of the Territory to Morocco (northern two-thirds) and Mauritania (southern third), after a transitional tripartite administration period. The Saharan population begins to leave the cities to the open desert inland.

¹⁵ This section is a summary from the MINURSO website: "Chronology of Events/ Milestones in the Western Sahara Conflict". The full text is available at :
<http://minurso.unmissions.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=b67SKR4JLk%3d&tabid=9540&language=en-US>

- 26 February 1976: Spain officially withdraws from the Territory.
- 27 February 1976: POLISARIO proclaims the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in Bir Lahlou. In Morocco-controlled Laayoune, a newly constituted *djemaa* (an assembly of notables appointed by the Spanish Government representing the Saharan tribes) votes for the integration of the Territory into Morocco.
- August 1978: Military escalation between POLISARIO, Mauritanian and Moroccan forces.
- 1981: Morocco begin the construction of the first of a series of defensive sand walls, 'berms', stretching over 2,400 Km in order to protect the Western part of the Territory.
- 24-27 June 1981: At the 18th OAU Summit in Nairobi, King Hassan II expresses his willingness to hold a referendum, taking into account Morocco's historical claims to the Territory.
- February 1982: The SADR is admitted to membership in the OAU during the 69th Council of Ministers' Conference. Morocco suspends its participation in the OAU.
- 12 November 1984: Morocco officially withdraws from OAU.
- 1 July 1985 – 11 August 1988: A joint effort of good offices UN-OAU culminates in the presentation to Morocco and the POLISARIO of the 'Settlement Proposals' for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. These proposals are reiterated in the Secretary-General's report S/22464, of 9 April 1991, and adopted by Security Council resolution 690 of 19 April 1991. They became known as 'Settlement Plan'.
- 16 April 1987 – End of the construction of 6th line of berm by the Moroccan Armed Forces.
- 7 October 1989 – POLISARIO launches a massive attack against Moroccan troops in Guelta Zemmour (Centre of Western Sahara) and Amgala (II).
- 9 April 1991: MINURSO is established by Security Council resolution S/1991/690. The Mission is mandated to implement the 'Settlement Plan': monitor the cease-fire, identify eligible voters for participation in the referendum, and create the conditions and modalities for the supervision and conduct of the referendum. The OAU is associated to the peace process.
- Mid-August 1991 – Few days before the proclamation of the cease-fire, Morocco launches a heavy offensive against POLISARIO at Tifariti.
- 1 September 1991: The first contingent of 100 MINURSO military observers arrive in Laayoune.
- 6 September 1991: Following agreement with the parties, the UN Secretary-General announces the cease-fire. Both sides suspend the military operations.
- 28 August 1994: The IDC [Voters' Identification Commission] launches the identification process simultaneously in Laayoune and in the Tindouf area.
- 17 March 1997: The UN Secretary-General appoints James Baker III, former US Secretary of State, as his Personal Envoy for Western Sahara (S/1997/236).

- 14-16 September 1997: James Baker III mediates the Houston Accords, which define the compilation procedures for the electoral body, troop confinement, refugee repatriation and a code of conduct for the referendum.
- 15 July 1999: The IDC publishes the first Provisional Voters List (PVL). An appeals process begins.
- 15 January 2000: The IDC publishes the second PVL. A total of 250,000 Saharans are identified: 86,425 are deemed 'eligible voters'.
- 28 February 2000: 131,000 appeals are lodged against the results of the PVLs. Differences between the two parties on the appeal process suspends de facto further activities of the IDC.
- 20 June 2001: The Secretary-General report (S/2001/613) submits to the Security Council the Personal Envoy's Draft Framework Agreement (a.k.a. the Baker Peace Plan, and then known as Baker Plan I). The plan envisages the integration, with a degree of autonomy, of the Territory within Morocco. Morocco accepts it, but *Frente* POLISARIO rejects it and the Security Council proposes further negotiations between the parties.
- 19 February 2002: The UN Secretary-General's report (S/2002/178) put forward four options to the Security Council: (1) implementation of 'Settlement Plan' without concurrence of the parties; (2) revision of Framework Agreement; (3) explore possible division of the Territory between the two parties; (4) termination of MINURSO, acknowledging that the UN "cannot resolve the problem without requiring one of the parties to do something it does not want to do." The Security Council does not endorse any of the 4 options and asks the Personal Envoy to continue in the talks with parties.
- 30 July 2002: The UN Security Council Resolution S/RES/1429 (2002) states that is ready to consider 'any approach which provides for the self-determination' of the people of Western Sahara.
- 23 May 2003: The Secretary General presents a Peace Plan (a. k. a. the Baker Plan II) (S/2003/565). The Security Council supports the plan, which provides for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara after a three-year period of provisional administration by a governing body elected by the people listed in the PVLs. A referendum would allow to an electorate formed by the members of the PVLs and the residents in the Territory since 1999 to choose among independence, integration or autonomy within Morocco. POLISARIO, after some reservation, accepts it.
- 31 July 2003: UN Security Council S/RES/1495 (2003) reaffirms the Baker Plan (II) as the 'optimal political solution'.
- 16 October 2003: UN Secretary-General, in his report (S/2003/1016), urges Morocco to accept and implement the plan.
- 30 March 2004: The IDC formally concludes its activities. The files are currently safeguarded in the UN HQ in Geneva.
- 23 April 2004: Morocco rejects the Baker Plan II by placing various limitations on it such as rejecting the transition arrangements and the option of independence. These are considered 'red lines', which cannot be accepted by Rabat.

- 11 June 2004: James Baker III resigns as the UN Secretary-General's Personal Envoy for Western Sahara. The functions are assumed by MINURSO's SRSG, Alvaro de Soto until May 2005.
- 7 January 2009- Christopher Ross is appointed Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General for Western Sahara.

UNHCR Confidence Building Measures

- **1998:** UNHCR establishes an office in Laayoune on the basis of an exchange of letters with the Government of Morocco within the framework of the UN Settlement Plan.
- **1999:** UNHCR submits CBM proposal to the parties. UNSCR 1282 calls on parties to cooperate with UNHCR and MINURSO to initiate the cross-border CBM activities including person-to person contacts.
- **2000-2003:** Negotiations with the parties on CBM implementation criteria.
- **2004:** CBM Plan of Action agreed, beginning of the cross-border family visits / CBM flights.
- **2005:** UNHCR launches a Supplementary Appeal for US \$ 3 million.
- **2010:** Cross-border family visits / CBM flights on hold due to disagreement on modalities between the Parties. Termination of telephone centres programme in the camps.
- **Jan. 2011:** Resumption of CBM flights and beginning of cultural seminars.
- **Jan. 2012:** New CBM Plan of Action expanding the number of beneficiaries of family visits.