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SPOTLIGHT ON WESTERN SAHARA IN FOURTH COMMITTEE AS MORE THAN 30 PETITIONERS

EXPRESS MOUNTING FRUSTRATION OVER STILL OUTSTANDING RESOLUTION

Despite the dire need for humanitarian assistance in the Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria, much of that aid was misappropriated and wound up in the markets of Algiers and Timbuktu, one of 33 petitioners on the question of Western Sahara told the Fourth Committee today as it continued its debate on decolonization.

Humanitarian aid rarely reached the camps, as most of it was sold in North African markets to buy weapons, stressed one petitioner who spoke today. When it did reach Tindouf, it was often used as a means of coercion.

That and other problems facing the Sahel made the region very attractive to terrorist groups and organized crime, turning the traditional caravan routes into transit corridors for terrorism and trafficking, according to another speaker. The host of aggravating factors at play could turn the Sahel into a new Afghanistan-type tribal region, affecting the peace and security of Southern Europe, the Middle East, and the rest of the world, the speaker said.

Populations in the camps were frustrated, another petitioner said, and were thus subjected to recruitment by radical movements. Every year, many people disappeared into the desert, going off to Morocco, or joining groups like Al-Qaida. That speaker argued that the actions of Morocco against terrorism had been decisive on such matters, and that the country had served as a pillar for peace and security in the region.

Several speakers praised Morocco's new Constitution, saying that it showed great foresight from King Mohammed VI and his people that they had not waited for the Arab Spring before beginning their own reforms. Rather, popular demand for more participative democracy had led to a referendum and had provided for increased accountability, comprehensive human rights protections, and the introduction of full parliamentary democracy. That lent credibility to Morocco's proposed Plan for Western Sahara, speakers said.

Others argued that it was Morocco that was contributing to the perpetuation of the impasse, as current Moroccan policies had led to a media blackout, the absence of freedom of movement to enter or leave the camps, arrests and reprisals for escaping, and the separation of families.

Still, while tumultuous transformation had swept through the Middle East and North Africa, embodying the kind of change that the peoples of Western Sahara craved, such change remained elusive, said a speaker.

One petitioner stressed that the United Nations was at a crossroads, as it could either adopt the necessary political and economic measures to persuade the Moroccan Government to comply with the

peace plan as set forth by the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy for Western Sahara, Christopher Ross, or it could "accept its failure in this process and withdraw". If the Security Council was unable to offer any other alternatives, he suggested the Council move on from Chapter VI to Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter.

The Fourth Committee will meet again at 3 p.m. Thursday, 6 October, to continue its debate on decolonization.

Background

The Fourth Committee (Special Political and Decolonization) met today to continue its consideration of all decolonization issues. It was expected to hear the remaining petitioners on the question of Western Sahara, as well as additional petitioners on other questions taken up yesterday in Committee. For background on those topics, please see Press Release [GA/SPD/478](#) of 3 October.

Question of Western Sahara

BABA AHL MAYARA, Ligue des Défenseurs des Droits de l'Homme au Sahara, said it was inarguable that human rights in Morocco had achieved much progress in the 10 years since King Mohammed VI took over. One of the most important measures had been the creation of a Commission of Reconciliation to listen to victims and provide compensation. It was important to create a culture of human rights. The Commission of Reconciliation had been able to bring progress in the matter of women's empowerment, improving the civil code, amendment of the penal code and bringing the principle of human rights into the school curriculum.

He also stated that Morocco could not have achieved all that without the understanding of all sectors of society. The national reconciliation initiative had been facilitated by the creation of three organizations — the National Council for Human Rights, which consisted of representatives from civil society and political parties; the Mediator's Office, which could open investigations into human rights problems and make proposals to the judiciary; and the ministerial representative for human rights. Further, the new Constitution of Morocco had many measures that reinforced the rights of the Moroccan people.

SIDI AHMED AKMACH, Cheikh de Tribu, stated that he lived in Morocco and had all his civil rights for movement, expression and political alliance intact. Everyone in Morocco could easily get a passport and travel whenever he or she wanted to. Even those who had separatist ideas could visit the countries they wanted to, in order to spread their separatist ideas, and then return home without facing consequences.

He asked how the separatist leaders could claim that the Polisario were the sole representatives of the Western Sahara and how they could continue to raise slogans when they knew that the majority of founders of the Polisario had joined Morocco. The Polisario was allied to the Algerian intelligence. The question of Western Sahara might seem complex to the international community but "it was easy for us". Western Sahara had never had any nationality other than Morocco. The inhabitants of Western Sahara had always respected their adherence to Morocco and it would be impossible to relinquish their historic tradition. Algeria had the freedom to raise any slogans it wanted to. If Algeria would like to be an example of self-determination, it had to give self-determination rights to those in the Kabyle region and Tuareg area.

ERIC JENSEN, Former Head of Mission, Acting Special Representative of the Secretary-General in Western Sahara (1993-1998), said speakers found themselves repeating the same argument over and over, and not surprisingly, the impact was marginal. But now, new elements might help move the process towards a solution. Morocco had presented a regional autonomy proposal, but despite the Security Council urging that talks take place on a basis of realism and of compromise, real progress had not been made. Tumultuous change had swept through the Middle East and North Africa, embodying the kind of change that the peoples of Western Sahara craved. In March, King Mohammed VI of Morocco had announced a plan for constitutional change, and the country would now see a general election in the near future. Those new reforms would aim at promoting human rights and introduce full parliamentary democracy. International reaction had been most positive, and the Security Council had noted the specific provisions relating to human rights.

He said that those and other measures, once implemented, should help the climate for negotiations. Respect for human rights enabled regional autonomy to carry conviction. The changed world order provided the incentive to discuss a meaningful degree of regional autonomy that recognized the Saharan particularity and rights as the most realistic solution. Failure to resolve the conflict not only failed to give hope to the region, but invited disruption and exploitation by Al-Qaida and other such groups.

ROMAN LOPEZ VILLICANA, Professor, said the problem of Western Sahara was an old one, and a solution must be found. If a State was dismembered because of colonialism, it had the right to recover its territorial integrity following decolonization. Morocco had respected the freedom of self-determination of peoples, and had decided to give substance to the autonomy project for the southern provinces by the institutionalization of an advanced regionalization system. The Kingdom of Morocco was offering all sons and daughters of the Saharan region the opportunity to conduct affairs locally and democratically within a unified Moroccan State. The provinces of the south would entail three administrative regions — with the first having a population of 428,857, the second a population of 364,000, the third, 152,000 persons. Together, the latter two populations totalled 516,000 persons, which left no doubt that the majority of Saharans were Moroccan. He asked the Committee to allow for the immediate organization of a census among the population sequestered in the Tindouf camps. And, he asked delegates to support Morocco's "serious" solution, so as to be able to put an end to Western Sahara's "artificial problem".

JANET LENZ, Christ Rock Community Church, said that last October, a group of Western Saharans had been given permission by Morocco to set up a temporary camp about 12 kilometres outside of Laayoune. Soon, that camp, named Freedom Camp, had begun to swell, eventually reaching 20,000 people. Moroccan military forces had been called to surround the camp, creating a wall of trucks and armed soldiers all around the perimeter. On the fourth day of that stand-off, the tension had turned to violence when Moroccan troops moved into the camp, setting tents on fire, spraying people with hot liquid and shooting a substance into the air which burned people's eyes. The refugees scattered, families were separated and the elderly struggled to escape the scene. Gut-wrenching images were sent as pictures on mobile phones to family members, who stood helpless. Many questioned whether the world would even learn of the events, due to the recent expulsion of journalists and foreign observers from the region. She asked the United Nations, at the very least, to no longer look the other way when it came to such ongoing violations, and for the Fourth Committee to lead the way in allowing the world to also "see and know" and take action to put an end to that human tragedy.

SIDI BRAHIM EL JOUMANI, Association Sahara pour la Promotion des Droits Humains, said that the resources of Western Sahara were being exploited by "suspicious" parties. The Saharan territory of Morocco was rich with natural resources, but those territories had become marginalized and their socio-economic infrastructure had been destroyed. During colonial rule, their production had been directed to the colonial Powers and not to the native population, resulting in a serious lack of infrastructure. Upon restoration of those territories, Morocco had integrated them into the national territory using accelerated development projects, transforming them from marginal territories to model areas with massive infrastructure, such as seaports, airports, hospitals, schools and sports facilities.

He said that the region's natural resources, such as phosphate, livestock and marine resources, were now being used locally and sustainably. For instance, in the sea-fishing sector, there were limits to the number of fishing vessels that used territorial waters. The livestock breeding sector had benefited from modern technology and health care provided by the Government. Morocco did not rely heavily on phosphate from that area because it had huge resources in its northern parts. Morocco had also invested heavily in renewable energy sources.

The resources of Western Sahara were a small portion of the national resources of Morocco, he said. "The enemies of Morocco" had forgotten the living conditions of Western Sahara during the colonial system. Indeed, all the natural resources of Western Sahara could not equal one drop of blood of a martyr who had died in defence of Morocco.

TEGUH SANTOSA, lecturer at Indonesia Islam University, stated that the dispute about Western Sahara was quite similar to what Indonesia had experienced in the last decade. During visits to Morocco and Western Sahara, he said, he had met youths, representatives of non-governmental organizations, activists, parliament members and refugees from the Tindouf camp. He had found Morocco to be a

steady, secure democracy. Democracy was not just about the number of political parties and frequency of general elections, but also about whether all members of the society had equal opportunity. During his visit to Laayoune, he had observed a desalination installation that produced an abundant supply of water, a modern fish market and beaches full of families. In Boujdour, he had compared two pictures of the city's seaside. The picture taken in 1975 showed an empty fishing port while the more recent one showed a newly built amusement park and people enjoying the night. In Dakhla, he had visited Government-built greenhouses. A big seaport was also being constructed.

He said that he had witnessed the referendum in July and the eagerness of the voters, as a result of which the new Constitution had been approved. It was committed to strengthening democracy and human rights. Berber was acknowledged as an official language alongside Arabic. People coming back from Tindouf camps had told him about the absence of rights and denial of access to food and medical care. It had been reported that Polisario's elites were selling food and medicines donated by international organizations. He added that Mustapha Salma Ould Sidi Mouloud, former Polisario Chief of Police, had told him of visiting Western Sahara, finding that it was very different from what he had imagined, and arguing with his fellow Polisario chiefs to change their perspective. Mr. Mouloud's statement that special autonomy offered by Morocco was the best solution to end the conflict had angered the Polisario leadership, and he had been detained and forced into exile in Mauritania.

He added that Indonesia had experienced a similar situation and had solved the problem peacefully through democratic circumstances. As a result, Aceh and Papua enjoyed special autonomy status. Only genuine democracy could solve the Western Sahara dispute, and the special autonomy plan was an outcome of the high degree of democracy in Morocco.

EVA BREMS, member of [Belgian Parliament](#) and professor of human rights law at Ghent University, said that the highest guardian of international law, the International Court of Justice, had ruled in 1975 that the people of Western Sahara should enjoy their right to self-determination. However, the Saharan people had still not received the referendum promised to them 20 years ago. Instead — according to reports from Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Federation Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme — the Saharans had received torture, ill treatment, and a lack of political freedoms. The numerous human rights abuses they suffered were related to and the result of persistent violations of the collective right of self-determination of the Saharan people.

She said that members of the European Union had shown regret for that bloc's past practice of support for authoritarian regimes, and they were now promising a new approach centred on the people of the area and on the rule of law. She asked whether it was conceivable that the new approach seen in North Africa would not lead to a new approach in Western Sahara. At a time when democratic change had come faster than anyone had expected in Tunisia and Egypt, and when the world had taken decisive action in Libya, she asked whether the European Union was going to stay mute about Western Sahara. She further asked how it could be that there could be a referendum in South Sudan but not in Western Sahara. The "new reality" had not yet sunk in, as was shown by the European Union's efforts to renew the EU-Morocco Fisheries Agreement, which illegally applied also to Western Saharan waters in which Morocco was not allowed to trade under international law.

CHARLES WILSON, Coordinating Director of the [International Saharawi Friendship Association](#), said that those who had spent time in the Tindouf camps no longer referred to them as refugee camps, but "outposts in hell". Borrowing from Homer, he said "man lives but a little season. He that is just and deals justly, the people will wish him well so long as he liveth and sing his praise once he is gone. But he that is unjust and deals unjustly, the people will wish him ill so long as he liveth and speak contemptuously of him once he is gone." Relating that passage to those Saharans who continued to live in the "outposts of hell", he asked delegates if, by their actions or lack of actions regarding the Saharan refugees, they would be wished well and have their praises sung, or wished ill and be spoken of contemptuously.

ALVARO LONGORIA, film director, said that the Committee was one of the few official institutions where the people of Western Sahara still had a voice. He had received messages earlier today from both the camps and the occupied territory about the importance of focusing the world's attention on them. The Security Council, and especially the five permanent members, should remember that the success of their nations came from the struggles of its citizens who had fought and died for democracy and human rights.

It was wrong to support foreign policies that did not support those basic elements. That applied in particular to the Western Sahara where families had been separated for over 35 years and where citizens were subjected to human rights abuses without any real protection, and refugees lay in horrible conditions awaiting a solution that the United Nations had promised 20 years ago.

He called upon representatives of the United States and the European Union, specifically the United Kingdom, France and Spain, to remember that if their citizens would not allow them to support such policies within their borders, they would not allow them to support such policies outside their borders either. The United Nations peace mission must immediately begin monitoring human rights in the territory. The Moroccan authorities should not oppose that since it was in their interest to prove to the world that they respected the rights of the Saharans. It was the obligation of the French, Spanish and United States Governments to encourage their ally, Morocco, to stop abusing the rights of the Saharans. Morocco had no legal authority over the territory. He also called on the leaders of Algeria, the Polisario and Morocco to forget the past and think of what was best for the people. Only shared responsibility would help solve the problem.

JOSEPH DUBIE, Comite belge de soutien au peuple Sahraoui, stated that he spoke, not as a former senator, but as a foreign correspondent who had witnessed several bloody conflicts. In the beginning of the 1980s, he had been with the Polisario forces, and had witnessed the terrible defeat of Morocco. Ten years later, during the ceasefire, the parties had decided to conduct a referendum on self-determination for the Western Saharans. But that solution had been sabotaged by the Moroccans who had refused to allow the Saharan people the right to choose, and had tortured and imprisoned anyone in the territory who even mentioned the solution. He expressed the fear that war might begin again.

He urged the international community to not let the matter degenerate further. The Saharans must be allowed to decide their future. It was completely paradoxical that Morocco would support the right of the people of Palestine to live in an independent State, but deny that right to the Saharans. If Morocco was so sure that the Saharans would stay with them, why sabotage the referendum? If the people of the Sahara decided to join Morocco, "I would be the first to welcome that", he declared.

FERNANDO OLIVAN LOPEZ, lawyer and university professor, stated that he taught constitutional law in a Spanish university and was the general secretary of the Ibero-American Union of Andalusia. He had seen profound transformations in Morocco, especially in the field of law. The new Constitution had been approved this year and multiple reforms were in place. A plan for advanced regionalization had also been approved this year. That was a legal reform of great importance because it marked a new relationship between State and citizens. The model aimed to create 12 regions, including some southern ones. From the point of view of constitutional law, there were similarities to the Spanish system.

He said that that was not just a domestic matter. Modern law was going through an immense change. The old concept of sovereignty was now obsolete. To talk about independence in the twenty-first century was to be blind to new political realities. Europe was starting to understand that new reality. Autonomy for the Sahara, together with the regionalization process, was the new way forward. There was "life beyond the concept of independence". Concluding, the speaker quoted the Italian jurist Einaudi, according to whom the model of the future State should include the plurality of decision-making at different levels such as the city, region, and international community. Einaudi was thinking of the European Union, but that was applicable to other realities, he said.

ANNA MARIA STAME CERVONE, International des Femmes Démocrates Chrétiennes, said she would never stop protecting the people of the Sahel and Sahara region. The persistence of the conflict, with armed militias and weapons circulating freely without any controls, was bolstering the growth of armed groups. Women and children were living in dreadful refugee camps, while there were no lasting solutions in site. The Committee must find one, she said.

The autonomy project proposed by Morocco was the ideal solution, she said, adding that it would give the people the ability to administer themselves. She hoped the improvements seen, particularly the links between Morocco and Algeria, would continue. Given that a solution to the conflict must begin with a frank and sincere dialogue, both the Governments of Morocco and Algeria should make that commitment. The first major action should be an opening of the borders. Morocco and Algeria were two great countries

and the rupture that existed went against their history. Common sense should triumph to bring those countries together. Hope had spread from the “Arab Spring”. With a small dose of good will, the world was capable of producing miracles. The problem of the Western Sahara was a problem like any other in that it must be solved by all parties involved.

DAVID ERIKSSON, Chair of Security and Human Development, said the financial resources that Morocco had allocated to the region were in the millions of dollars and included housing and water-service development. The phosphate resources were reported to be plentiful. The illiteracy rate was 10 points less than the national average and health and education statistics were also comparable.

On the subject of natural resources, he failed to see any alternatives to a responsible and sustainable development of the region’s rich natural phosphate resources as a way of securing the funds necessary for investment in infrastructure, education and health care in the region in which Spain had failed to invest anything during the region’s colonial past.

Alternatives, such as shutting down the industries, would not be a solution, he said, as that would only make the area vulnerable to fundamentalists and drug dealers. Instead, the region should be included in the free trade agreements with Europe. It was only through more trade and not less that the whole Maghreb region would flourish and become less open for fundamentalist or totalitarian influences.

MAIMOUNA ESSAYED, Commune Rurale de Tichla, said the conditions in the camps were deplorable and extremism was rampant. She appealed to save the families in those camps. The United Nations was the right venue for addressing that, and she called upon delegates to adopt a fair and just stance. The Saharan people were tired and weary of asking for assistance. Yet, the situation had remained unchanged.

Instead, she said, there had been massacres and injustices. She drew attention to a prisoner from the camps who had tried to convey what life was like there, only to be exiled. The situation in the Tindouf camp was dire. The Polisario should open the prison doors so international observers could see what was happening. The solution could only be found through the creation of a State. Algeria should let the people decide their future.

SYDNEY ASSOR, Surrey Three Faiths Forum, said that he had come again to plead for the release of the Tindouf refugees. He hoped that there would be no more misappropriation of aid, as that assistance had reached not the camps, but the markets of Algiers and Timbuktu. Yesterday and today, some petitioners had tried to divert attention from the rights of Morocco by making comparisons to the conflict in the Middle East. That comparison was inaccurate. Morocco was “a fully reliable country”. The dynamism of the new Constitution inaugurated by King Mohammed VI, with its focus on women’s rights, human rights, and law and justice, should get unanimous support from all populations. It showed great foresight from the King and the people that they had not waited for the Arab Spring before beginning reforms. Those dignities should be extended to the refugees in Tindouf. Concluding, he declared, “let the detainees vote with their feet”.

JANE BAHAIJOUR, Family Protection, said that 90,000 refugees had been detained for more than 35 years in Tindouf, according to satellite estimates by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Despite pleas from the UNHCR and the Red Cross, no census or registration had been carried out. The census would clarify, not only the numbers of refugees, but also their identities. But various human rights agencies had been denied access to Tindouf. Based on first-hand accounts by former prisoners of war, former refugees and ex-Polisario, it was clear that fundamental human rights were routinely abused. Families were divided and children were sent abroad for education without parental contact. There was no free movement between camps. No one was allowed to leave Tindouf or to acquire travel documents. Prisoners of war were held for several years, even after the conclusion of the United Nations mediated ceasefire.

If the Polisario was so sure that a referendum was the solution, why did it not hold a census in the camp? she asked. The new Moroccan Constitution would enable protection of human rights, both at home and abroad. Morocco was moving into the twenty-first century with a new Constitution and the forthcoming elections. The only solution for refugees was the Moroccan autonomy.

PEDRO BRIEGER, Argentine journalist and sociologist, said he was Jewish, the son of German parents who had escaped Nazi Germany. His mother had experienced persecution at the hands of the Nazis. He knew what suffering meant. As a sociologist, he had dedicated his professional life to issues of self-determination. He had been with the displaced people in Colombia and had visited Palestinian refugee camps. He had also visited the camps in Dakhla and Tindouf, and throughout the desert. Families had been torn apart, without the possibility of choosing. His knowledge of the Saharan people had led him to appeal to the United Nations to make a contribution to assist them.

CYNTHIA BASINET, actress and singer, said that long before there was an Arab Spring, there had been a "Saharan Fall", where Saharans "lived bravely and were attacked and died in violence at the hands of the Moroccan policies and perpetrated by their army". That had occurred despite warnings, including a 2008 Human Rights Watch report. The Saharans were a people that had steadfastly proven themselves to be on the forefront of many frontiers. A people whose examples were desperately needed by all should be protected by all.

FALA BOUSSOLA, Member of Parliament from the Socialist Party of Morocco, said the Polisario had been among the armed groups in the 1970s when the north was living in peace. News was spreading of confrontations as recently as 7-11 September. Morocco had already drawn attention to the movement of these Polisario gangs.

Today, the situation was even worse, she said, it was explosive. Because of the change of power among the different armed groups, there was now a possibility of sectarian strife. The only solution to the situation would be that Algeria should respect the sovereignty of countries and, as it had been asked in the past, to stop its support of the Polisario.

RAFAEL ESPARZA MACHIN, lecturer, Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, said that Algeria had been slow to pick up the process of political progress as a result of its need to solve the semi-observed problems of civil war. Somewhat perplexed, that nation was now observing the changes occurring around its territory, and it could be supposed that an institutional change would soon be in the cards. That change would allow Algeria to be on par with its Moroccan and Tunisian peers. Further, Mauritania continued its economic and political advances and had managed to avoid the challenges presented by Al-Qaida and the terrorism that was attempting to take over the area of the Sahara that bordered its territory. For its part, Libya seemed to be seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, with the civil society taking political control of the territory, and timely aid from the international community.

He said that those five States of the North-West of Africa had been part of a geographical area since the time of the Almohad Empire, with the overruling principle of inclusion and integration of the great Maghreb. When working towards Maghreb unity, the most important problem to overcome was the unity of Western Sahara, which could only be solved through the constructive dialogue between Algeria and Morocco and that would allow for a framework of activities to be set up towards the ultimate end of the construct of the great Maghreb, together with ample autonomy for the Western Sahara territory. That would mark the beginning of a process of decentralization to be exported to the rest of the Maghreb, similar to what had occurred in the case of most of the countries of the European Union.

ZARAH CHAGAF, Congresswoman and member of Saharan for Peace, said Morocco had removed all restrictions on Saharan women, who belonged to a cultural and social environment where no confrontation existed between the two sexes. Saharan women had great social leadership skills and would gain eminent power. However, poverty levels from 75 to 80 per cent persisted. Saharan women went to universities and got diplomas, acquiring great skills in leadership and charity work. At the same time, women tried to develop their skills in line with their role in the world. In the southern provinces, Saharan women had received political training to help them to integrate into the political field, take part in all elections, and be elected to various positions, garnering votes in different parts of the country. Such participation had had a positive effect on the role of Morocco at the international level.

ANTONIO LOPEZ ORTIZ, Secretary of the National Federation of Institutions Working in Solidarity with the Sahawari People (FEDISSAH) said the United Nations could and should do much more to prevent the injustice and violence used by the Moroccan police and military against the Saharan people. The lack of a firm stand on the issue by the Security Council was alarming.

He said that the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy on Western Sahara, Christopher Ross, who had been appointed in 2009, would need all the support the United Nations could provide in his efforts to steer the dialogue and negotiation to a successful conclusion. The Organization had sufficient resources to enforce compliance with its resolutions and agreements and to ensure international law was respected. He added that the United Nations was at a crossroads, as it could either adopt the necessary political and economic measures to persuade the Moroccan Government to comply with the peace plan or it could "accept its failure in this process and withdraw".

The only stable and lasting solution that would strengthen peace in the area and wider region would be to allow the Saharan people to exercise their rights to self-determination through the holding of a referendum with full democratic guarantees and in the presence of observers to ensure the fairness of the process. The time had come to impose a solution, he said. If the Security Council was unable to offer any other alternatives, he would ask it to move on from Chapter VI to Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter. That had been possible in Namibia and Timor-Leste, so it was incomprehensible why the same could not be possible in the Western Sahara.

DONOVAN WILLIAMS, *Families in Union*, said the consequences of the current dispute on family life included parents estranged from their children and displaced relatives. Morocco had invested 20 billion dirham in infrastructure from 1975 to 2006, which had propelled growth in Western Sahara. That development had occurred within a liberal economic framework, and the necessary conditions for entrepreneurial spirits to thrive and deliver prosperity for all. Private capital and local entrepreneurs, in a free enterprise and open economy, had taken up the challenge to create their own business ventures, offer employment and make regional and international business contacts, adding vibrancy to the region.

ROBERT GRIFFIN, independent photographer, said he had first travelled to the refugee camps in 2010. Since then, he had visited all five camps in the Algerian Sahara desert and interviewed Government officials and the people who lived there. The people felt forgotten and frustrated. More than 35 years of denial of over 100,000 people was an obvious injustice. The area was not the Middle East, Northern Ireland or Afghanistan. It was not a humanitarian problem. No compromise needed to be sought nor was required to resolve the problem.

He said the Saharans lived with few personal possessions and little personal space — everything they had was shared, as was their way. Their lives were based on a culture of respect, and all they asked for was the right to self-determination that had been promised to them 20 years before. The Saharans deserved "better than platitudes". Like the assurances from a child who put off cleaning her room, such promises meant nothing until it was actually done.

TANYA WARBURG, *Freedom for All*, said that this year's uprisings for democracy in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya contrasted with the repressive Polisario regime in Tindouf. Saharan escapees from the Tindouf had testified as to the human rights violations there. Refugees in Tindouf, unlike elsewhere, had not been registered by the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees, which contradicted the United Nations Security Council resolution 1979 (2011) calling for its access to the camps and the registration of the population. Freedom for All welcomed the Secretary-General's call for interviews with Tindouf residents.

She added that in Tindouf, United Nations conventions signed and ratified by Algeria were ignored. Families were divided and sent to different camps. There was no freely-approved right of return for refugees. Humanitarian aid rarely reached Tindouf, as most of it was sold in North African markets to buy weapons, and when it did reach Tindouf, it was often used as a means of coercion. The functioning prisons of Tindouf were unique, even among refugee camps.

In Morocco, she noted, popular demand for more participative democracy had led to a referendum on a new Constitution, which provided for increased accountability and comprehensive human rights protections. Further, the creation of the Independent National Council on Human Rights confirmed Morocco's commitment to its citizen's human rights. Those initiatives were part of a nationwide programme of reforms that had begun in 1998 and also included the Plan for Autonomy. Resolution 1979 stated that there was no alternative to negotiations to resolve the conflict between Algerian and Morocco, she said. Welcoming the work of

Ambassador Christopher Ross and the resumption of United Nations-sponsored family exchange visits, Freedom for All hoped that the plight of the Tindouf refugees would inspire the negotiating parties with a sense of compromise and pragmatism. In closing, she said that it was time for the Polisario to embrace the popular movement for freedom and allow those who wished to rejoin their families in Morocco to do so.

JUAN JOSÉ IBARRETXE MARKUARTU, speaking as the former President of the Basque Country, said he had the political experience of having seen how the Spanish State, demonstrating a totally anti-democratic attitude, prohibited the Basque institutions from consulting its own citizens in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, he said he was speaking with the hope that one day in the not too distant future, a Lehendakari of the Basque people would intervene here, before the Fourth Committee, to formally request the inclusion of his country in the United Nations. He was therefore asking for respect — for human rights, for the peoples of the world, for the Saharan people and for the resolutions of the United Nations.

He further said he wished to raise his voice to denounce the “intellectually corrupt” debates which were taking place in the world. Firstly, he rejected the false democratic debate which weighed the individual rights of people against the collective rights of nations, when they were, in fact, inseparable and indivisible rights. Both were interrelated and interdependent according to United Nations-backed texts.

Secondly, he rejected the false cultural debate that pitted the universal against the local, when universal culture was no less than the sum of local cultures. Thus, to defend identity, culture and language, and the right of a society to decide was not only related to the defence of a legitimate project of a nation in a globalized world. “To defend our identity as a people is to defend our economy, our welfare, and it is indeed essential for the goal of achieving sustainable human development,” he said.

Regarding the unresolved conflict of the Saharan people, he said that in 1975, the International Court of Justice had declared that Morocco did not have sovereignty over the Western Sahara, and that it was nothing more than an occupying force. In 1976, the Saharan people had decided freely and independently to proclaim and set up the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic as a free State — independent, sovereign, ruled by a national democratic system and abiding by the Islamic religion. Since then, it had signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and had joined UNO, OAU and the League of Arab States.

Continuing, he said that in 1988, following a 13 year-long war, the possibility of a lasting peace had arisen under the auspices of the United Nations based on the principle of holding a referendum on self-determination and on the future of the Sahara. That principle had been accepted by the Polisario and by the Kingdom of Morocco. In November of 1988, Assembly resolution 43/33 reaffirmed the right of the Saharan people to self-determination and to independence, setting up the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) in 1991, in order for the referendum to take place no later than February 1992.

He went on to say that there had been declarations and clear resolutions which had attempted to resolve the situation of the Saharan people, but the truth of the matter was that 20 years had passed and United Nations resolutions had not been upheld. It seemed that the will of Morocco had prevailed over that of any agreements and international laws. Today, the proposal was for the autonomy of the Saharan territory, a proposal which Morocco recognized as the starting point of an agreement. But the truth was that neither Morocco nor the United Nations knew what the Saharan people wanted — whether they wanted autonomy or independence — “simply because we have not asked them”.

Meanwhile, he said, the cause of the Saharan people had disappeared from the world political agenda. It would seem that the issue had failed to arouse any particular interest in the international context, despite the fact that the situation had so far led to nothing other than human and material losses, to the prolonging of terrible suffering for the Saharan people, and to weakening the economic and social development of Morocco. All that had made the resolution of that bloody conflict more difficult, had prevented a lasting peace and had contributed to making regional integration impossible, thereby impacting peace and safety in North Africa and profoundly affecting relations between the countries of the Maghreb and their European neighbours.

In addition, internally among the Saharan people, groups of young people were demanding democracy and freedom (the Kat al-Shahid faction) and were beginning to be very critical of the Polisario.

In fact, the so-called “Arab Spring” had first begun in a Saharan village in November and December of 2010, during a peaceful demonstration near Laayoune, which had been violently crushed by the occupying Moroccan army.

He called on delegates to take up their duty to ensure that the situation did not continue. Morocco aimed to perpetuate the situation, alleging that the Sahara was a historic province of its Kingdom, and nobody seemed to be doing anything to ensure an agreement was reached to bring about the referendum. Instead of favouring a just agreement, current policies were encouraging Morocco to establish its “autonomy” with its own laws. The consequences of those laws were a media blackout, absence of freedom of movement to enter or leave the camps, arrests and reprisals for escaping and the separation of families. They also resulted in the desperate daily plight of people who lived in the camps, the abduction of people even in Algeria and violence in the occupied city of Dajla — in short, violations of human rights.

He asked those present how long the Saharan people needed to wait before their legitimate right to freely decide their destiny was respected, as had been agreed 20 years ago. He called on delegates to insist that the right to self-determination of the Saharan people was scrupulously and honestly respected and to lend their support to the holding of a referendum which included the option of independence. It was ultimately not only the future of the Saharan people that was at stake, but also the very credibility of the “weakened” United Nations, an Organization which the world needed today more than ever. Indeed, he added, if history was written by the victors, then there must be an alternative history.

PANAGIOTIS THEODORAKIDIS, retired Brigadier General of the Hellenic Army, said the problems facing the Sahel made that region very attractive to terrorist groups and organized crime, turning the traditional caravan routes into transit corridors for terrorism and trafficking. The host of aggravating factors at play could turn the Sahel into a new Afghanistan-type tribal region, affecting global peace and security. The security of the Western Saharan region was linked to that of Southern Europe, the Middle East and the rest of the world.

In the Tindouf camps, where many had been packed for more than a generation, people were frustrated by the lack of political prospects. Such people, he said, were subject to recruitment by radical movements. Every year, many people disappeared into the desert, going off to Morocco, or joining groups like Al-Qaida. On such matters, the actions of Morocco against terrorism had been decisive, and that country was a pillar for peace and security in the region. Indeed, Morocco’s significant efforts had been hailed in several reports of the United States Department of State. However, there could be no appropriate answer to terrorism without regional cooperation. The stabilizing role of Morocco should thus draw the attention of the international community and encourage it to act proactively.

SALEK RAHAL, journalist, said that the continued existence of the conflict in Western Sahara was unforgivable. The region had vast resources including oil and gas. The Algerian Government had been carried away by the dream of being the Maghreb region’s sole Power. The current leaders of Algeria had now been in power for almost half a century and they were trying to trample upon the thousand-year-old culture of Morocco. However, he said, the Algerian Government was making a huge mistake. Recent experience had shown that Algeria was lagging behind its neighbours in transparency. Instead of cooperating with other Maghreb countries, Algeria continued its policy of imposing its dictates on its neighbours. Even as the world economic crisis was still unfolding, Algeria was using large sums of money to buy weapons. Would it not be more reasonable, he asked, to devote that money to development? The Saharan people’s right to self-determination was just a “slogan” Algeria was using to hide its obsession with being a superpower.

SHOJI MATSUMOTO, Professor, Sapporo Gakuin University, said that he wanted to share his findings regarding the ability of some regimes to respond to national and international demands for democratic reforms. Morocco had emerged as a leading model by amending its constitution. The second was related to the Arab Spring, which had exposed regional instability. Armed groups had moved to assist falling regimes like Gaddafi’s in Libya, and to kill civilians. Their assistance involved arms trafficking, money laundering, mercenaries and other illicit acts. That situation was a result of the fact that those groups could survive only amid confusion, tension, and unstable environments. Unfortunately, the Polisario movement was prominent in that scene, at the “political and public opinion picture” in North Africa. The Polisario had increased its suspicious activities in the Libyan revolution, and other activities threatening the

security of Mauritania and Morocco.

JOSE REVERT CALABUIG, of the International Association of Jurists for Western Sahara, expressed concern over the increasing aggression by the Moroccan population against the Saharan population. That attitude had been encouraged by the occupying Power. Such actions had increased since the dismantling of the camp at Gdeim Izik, with the attack and burning of houses and shops of Saharan citizens in Laayoune. He said that Morocco was plundering the natural resources of the Autonomous Territory of Western Sahara, and through that, was earning benefits that should redound to the Saharan population's advantage. However those benefits did not redound to the Saharan people.

He said that Saharans had been protesting their plight under Moroccan occupation. In November 2010, Moroccan authorities had dismantled the camp by force, resulting in an unjustified use of violence and a series of mass arrests. Further, his organization had been able to establish the murders of at least four Saharans — by both Moroccan security forces and settlers — including the alleged killing by security forces of Babi Hamadi Buyema. In the days prior to the dismantling of the Gdeim Izik camp, 14-year-old Gargehi Najem had been killed when the Moroccan army fired on the vehicle in which he was travelling, he said, adding that in December 2010, Said Dambar was murdered with a shot to the head.

He said that the United Nations was created so that the force of arms could never again be imposed over the force of law, and the international community could not allow the Saharan people to be prevented from their legitimate right to self-determination, recognized by international law.

M. MOHAMED ZIYAD AL JABARI, Moroccan-Palestinian Friendship Association, stressed that the continuing impasse in the region could create new problems in the Arab world, after years of instability and negative economic consequences. The biggest losers of those trends were still the Saharans themselves. He argued that the autonomy proposed by Morocco could end a conflict that had lasted over 35 years, and that the Polisario was a totalitarian organization which did not defend the freedom of the Saharans.

UGO MAZZA, former regional Parliamentarian, spoke about his visit to the Sahrawi Dignity and Freedom Camp in Laayoune in 2010. He said that it was dangerous and forbidden to access the camp and he had dressed in the traditional attire of the Western Saharans to do so. After passing through three military checkpoints when he entered the camp, he had seen thousands of tents. People were happy to speak up without police brutality. Moroccan authorities provided social welfare programmes only to those Saharans who denounced their heritage. The Saharan people wanted the international community to request Morocco to let the referendum proceed. He added that he was struck by how calm the Saharans were even though soldiers were preparing for military actions nearby.

He said that many Saharans were accused of treason for having attacked the national unity of Morocco, but that was a non-existent crime because Western Sahara did not belong to Morocco. He called on the General Assembly to stop those crimes and called on Morocco to give the right to self-determination to Western Sahara.

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