



REPORT ON A VISIT TO THE DEMOCRATIC ARAB SAHARAWI REPUBLIC AND ALGERIA

BY RICHARD KNIGHT

Between February 24 and March 17, 1979, I visited Algeria and the Democratic Arab Saharawi Republic (Western Sahara). The purpose of my trip was to study the military, political and refugee situation of the Western Sahara, where a political movement, the POLISARIO, is engaged in an armed struggle to ensure self-determination for its country. I also represented the American Committee on Africa at the Third Anniversary Celebrations of the proclamation of the Democratic Arab Saharawi Republic. I was particularly concerned to examine refugee conditions and needs with a view to developing possible projects for The Africa Fund.

Located in northwestern Africa, Western Sahara is about 284,000 square kilometers (110,000 square miles) and has 1,062 kilometers of shoreline along the Atlantic. This makes it somewhat larger than the State of Colorado. In the north it is bordered by Morocco and Algeria and in the south by Mauritania.

There is considerable dispute about the size of the Saharawi population. Traditionally the majority of the population were nomads. According to a Spanish estimate, the total population of Sahara was 95,000, of whom 73,500 were indigenous Saharawi. POLISARIO, however, estimates the total population at about 750,000.

A History of Struggle

Western Sahara was colonized by Spain late in the nineteenth century, but widespread resistance prevented full control from being established until 1934. In the 1950's renewed opposition to colonialism, both French and Spanish, swept through all of north Africa, and the Franco government was seriously challenged in Western Sahara. When Morocco achieved independence from France in 1956 however, its new government did not support the movement for independence in Western Sahara, but instead laid claim to much of the area as Moroccan. The Moroccan government assisted a joint French/Spanish action which crushed Saharawi resistance and was then ceded the large province of Tarfaya by Spain.

During most of its rule Spain had shown little interest in exploiting Western Saharan economic resources. But in 1969, after rich phosphate deposits had been discovered in the Bu Craa region, just 97 kilometers from the coast, the Spanish, in association with a French financial group formed the Fosfatos de Bu Craa company to mine the mineral. Sophisticated automated equipment was bought from the US and a conveyor belt to the coast was installed and mining began.

Organized opposition to Spanish rule began again in the late 1960's and on May 10, 1973 POLISARIO (Frente pro la Liberacion de Segiut El Hamra y de Rio de Oro) was formed. Ten days later, on May 20th, 1973, armed struggle began.

By 1975 Spain was ready to end its formal colonial rule, but both Morocco and Mauritania were now laying claim to the area. The United Nations sent an investigative mission to Western Sahara which reported strong popular support for POLISARIO and its policy of independence. Late in 1975 an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice (World Court) found that Mauritania and Morocco's claims were completely without legal justification. Ignoring international opinion the Moroccans then invaded Western Sahara and on November 14, 1975 Spain, Mauritania and Morocco signed an agreement dividing Western Sahara between the two African countries. The Moroccan area included the phosphate operation, and Spain retained a 35% interest in the mines. The mines have been a target for POLISARIO attack and the Moroccans have been forced to close down the conveyor belt.

The POLISARIO rejected the Spanish agreement with Morocco and Mauritania, declaring it illegal. On February 27, 1976, one day after the Spanish withdrew their colonial administration, POLISARIO issued a proclamation from Bir Lehlu, inside Western Sahara, establishing the Democratic Arab Saharawi Republic, and it has continued to lead an armed struggle for the independence and self-determination of the Saharawi people.

In July 1978 a coup in Mauritania led to the installation of a new government which appears potentially willing to withdraw from the war. Two days after the coup POLISARIO unilaterally declared a ceasefire in relation to Mauritania, and talks were later initiated between POLISARIO and the new government. However Mauritania is restrained from making a formal peace by the fact that Morocco maintains a large number of soldiers on Mauritanian soil.

Although Morocco continues to prosecute the war with large numbers of troops, there are signs that this is causing some strains, and there have been increasing desertions and military defeats in the last year.

Third Anniversary Celebrations

On February 27, 1979, I attended the Third Anniversary Celebrations of the Proclamation of the Democratic Arab Saharawi Republic. Several different countries were officially represented including Guinea-Bissau, which sent Paulo Carreira, Ethiopia, which had just recognized the Democratic Arab Saharawi Republic, and Algeria, represented by Redha Malek, a member of the central committee of the FLN. Both SWAPO and the Patriotic Front were present as were many political parties from Europe, including the British Labor Party, and about 150 members of the press. Tanzanian President, Julius Nyerere sent a special message, as did Paulo Jorge, Foreign Minister of Angola.

The American Committee on Africa was the only U.S. organization represented, and no members of the U.S. press were present. The U.S. press has largely ignored the invasion of Western Sahara, despite the fact that the U.S. government is an important prop to the Moroccan regime, providing it with military and other assistance.

The celebrations were held out in the desert. To get to the site of the celebrations we were first flown to Tindouf, an Algerian town near the border with Western Sahara. It is a long distance from Algiers to Tindouf and the flight is quite dramatic, especially flying over the Atlas Mountains. From Tindouf airport we were driven to a base camp where we spent the night before being driven to the site of the celebrations.

The celebrations themselves were quite spectacular, including long parades of captured trucks, land-rovers, tanks, etc. There were also processions representing different schools and organizations, including children, the youth organization, and the Saharan Red Crescent. The clothes worn by the women for the occasion were especially colorful.

Celebration events took place in a large outside parade ground. There was a wall along two sides with a small roof which provided the guests with some shade. The Saharawi who were not participating in any given parade formed part of the very enthusiastic audience.

The gathering was addressed by Mohamed Abdelaziz, Secretary General of POLISARIO and President of the Council of the Revolution. "We commemorate today the 3rd anniversary of the accession to national sovereignty, and the proclamation of the Democratic Arab Saharawi Republic, which was realized historically through immense sacrifices. It is this that all Saharawi cherish wherever they are, to know their sovereignty, dignity, liberty and national identity." He went on to praise the late President of Algeria, Houari Boumediene, "whose name is eternally in the hearts of all Saharawi."

And surprisingly, out in the middle of the desert suddenly a Saharan music group called Shahid El Ouali, with electric guitars, appeared to entertain us. As one amazed journalist commented "Woodstock in the Sahara!"

While at the celebrations we were shown arms which had been captured by POLISARIO. There were pieces of an American made plane that had been shot down. Also cases of arms with the U.S. friendship handshake on them.

We were allowed to talk to a number of captured Moroccans, including a pilot who had received training in both the U.S. and France. I have a long recorded interview with him, partly in English and partly in French.

"We do not have information coming from outside," he explained. "As you know the papers that try and inform people do not get in Morocco...When I got shot down and got in touch with the combatants of POLISARIO, and I realized more and more when I came to the camps, and I have seen for myself and then I realized that it was a mistake... In our schools our charts do not include Sahara." He added that POLISARIO were very good fighters.

Much of this is something one might expect a captured pilot to say, but it does reflect the fact that in Morocco people have limited access to the news of the war. In fact, I was told that Moroccan soldiers were not allowed radios because they listen to POLISARIO broadcasts for information.

The Refugee Situation

The invasion by Morocco and Mauritania has resulted in the creation of a large number of refugees, which POLISARIO has had to take care of for several years. POLISARIO estimates that there are about 110,000 refugees in the camps it runs in Algeria.

When the refugees first began to come, there was no structure for ministering to the needs of the people. POLISARIO has now created that structure, but the basic necessities are far from ample and life in the camps is hard. Everything has to be provided, food, clothes, medical care, education, etc.

While I was there I had a chance to observe the refugee situation. The basic structure of the camps reflects the basic structure of POLISARIO. There are 23 different camps, called Daira, divided into three provinces called Wilaya. The Daira and Wilaya represent geographic areas inside Western Sahara. For example, one camp is called Dakhla and another Bir Lehlu, both towns in Western Sahara.

All the work of the camps is carried out by committee and everyone is expected to participate. There are five basic committees: health, distribution (Sahara Red Crescent), social/justice, education and artisan. There is an administrative committee made up of representatives of the five basic committees. And it is through this committee structure that representatives to the high political bodies of POLISARIO are chosen.

The Social/justice committee has a number of functions. There is virtually no crime as we know it. Most of the problems revolve around people not doing their work properly, or something similar. The punishment is usually more work, either having to re-do one's job or some additional work. Some political education would also be

included, stressing the importance of work in the struggle. The social/justice committee also plays a role in mediating social relations, might talk with a young couple preparing to be married, or seek to sort out any serious arguments in a camp.

The artisan committee is involved in certain kinds of simple industry. This includes the making of tents, clothing and other such items.

One can only be amazed at the organization which is required to maintain even the simplest of lives in the camps. Even simple matters (to us) such as water are a great problem. All food must be provided. Protein is a special problem, and a protein substitute is provided for children. I am told the cost of this program alone is about \$13,000 per month. A few goats are communally owned, and have to be fed a kind of grain, because there is no grass for them to graze on.

Another problem is a shortage of tents. This problem is aggravated by the fact that the strong winds of the desert sometimes destroy large numbers of tents. One of the particular needs is for tent cloth. Tents are made in the camps.

Another particular need is for sandals. The need becomes exceptionally acute during the summer months, when the sand gets very hot, and will literally burn the feet. Thousands of pairs are needed, especially for children.

Health

Health in the camps is run by local health committees. I was fortunate to be able to visit the national hospital run by POLISARIO. The hospital is for civilians, and wounded soldiers are treated elsewhere. The hospital seemed well organized and was divided into sections, including maternity, general and intensive care, with about 400 beds. Staff includes both nurses and para-medics. Some of the staff have many years of experience and some have been trained at the hospital. A nurse remains in all occupied rooms at all times.

Mothers will often stay in the hospital with their children. In this way the mothers learn something about their child's illness, the medication given, and preventative techniques. Proven traditional methods are also used.

Many of the illnesses treated are those associated with refugee situations. However, things have greatly improved in the past

couple of years, Salek Babeih, the Minister of Health explained when we met him at the hospital.

Each refugee camp has a clinic run by the local health committee. There are three regional hospitals and the national hospital.

Much of the equipment in the national hospital has been donated, including an x-ray machine by Oxfam-Belgium. Among current needs, besides medicines, are more beds, stethoscopes, and more ambulances. The need for ambulances was stressed, as transport of people who are ill to the national hospital from the refugee camps is a serious problem.

Education

During my trip I also visited a new boarding school. The school is about half completed and is for children ages 7-13. When completed it will accommodate about 2,000 children. But the school still lacks basic equipment, from chalk and blackboards, to books in Arabic. There is also a problem of teachers, since few Saharawi had any education before independence. There will be about 50 teachers. There are no foreign teachers. Education takes place in Arabic and Spanish.

One comes to two basic conclusions. First, that POLISARIO is determined to improve the life of the Saharawi people. They have made important gains, including the institution of an education and health system. But a major obstacle is the continued aggression against their country. Second, that much work must yet be done. In some of this, international organizations can be of assistance by helping to provide the needs of refugees.

Inside Western Sahara

I was fortunate to be able to travel inside Western Sahara with the military for a number of days. Our first evening provided a sample of what was to come. We stopped sometime after dark and made a fire. I was treated to a dinner of camel meat and a kind of bread baked in the coals of the fire.

Another strong tradition is tea, which we had at every meal and often between meals. The tea comes from China, and has for over 100 years. It is made very strong and very sweet. Saharawi always seem to have a loaf of sugar handy. Tea drinking is quite a ritual, at which time people exchange views, and to make the tea is considered an honor.

We slept that first night under the stars, wrapped in blankets. It actually gets quite cold on the desert at night, once the sun is gone. The temperature changes from day to the night are very great.

Not much of Western Sahara looks like the standard American image of the desert as miles of flat beachsand. Instead much of the area is flat but rather gravelly, and there are also hills that provide excellent cover for the POLISARIO. There are some small trees, and our guide would point out flowers whenever we passed any. I understand that in areas along the coast the country is even green enough for limited grazing of animals.

During my stay I visited a number of sites of battles, and we often passed quite close to the Moroccan troop camps. We visited the sites of some major 1977 and 1978 battles, and saw the remnants of burned out Panhard tanks (French) and empty munitions cases with U.S. markings.

At one stage in the war the Moroccans had tried to set up a line between Bir Lehlu and Ain ben Tili. But they could not maintain control, and I visited both towns. All that was left at Bir Lehlu was a well; the Moroccans had knocked down all the buildings before leaving. Ain ben Tili is also deserted. While some structures remain, the town will need to be totally rebuilt. We had lunch in the ruins.

I actually saw part of a battle near Tifariti. It was getting dark, but we could see the mortar explosions. In fact our guides pulled us back when a mortar exploded 90 feet away. I later learned from POLISARIO that by March 12 the 6000 Moroccans who had occupied Tifariti had retreated and been sent to reinforce Semara, a town closer to the coast which is also under attack by POLISARIO.

During my stay I saw the edge of a number of POLISARIO military bases, all of them well hidden from view. We slept one night inside an underground room in one of the bases.

The Moroccans seem to face real military problems. While POLISARIO can go virtually anywhere, even driving along major roadways, the Moroccans appear to be tied down to a few places. When we traveled at night, POLISARIO usually drove with their headlights on. Indeed, POLISARIO has started to implement a strategy of taking the war into Morocco and has instituted what is called the "Houari Boumediene" offensive. Major battles have taken place near Ta Ta, Tan Tan and Zag, all in Morocco. This is forcing Morocco to spread its forces even more thinly.

Most political groupings in Morocco apparently support the aggression in Sahara, although it is illegal to express an opinion against the war. The major political party in Morocco has passed resolutions to the effect that Morocco includes all of Western Sahara, Mauritania and half of Algeria. An interesting artifact I picked up was an empty box from the Morocco National Gas Company, which included a map as its logo. This map encompasses all of Western Sahara and shows no border between Morocco and Algeria.

But the first cracks in Morocco are beginning to show. While I was in the Sahara, a Moroccan deserter arrived. His rank was Lieutenant and he had been temporarily left in charge of his unit. He received a report that some Land-Rovers (presumably POLISARIO) had been sighted, and got in his Land-Rover and simply drove off. I have an extensive interview with him. He had apparently been thinking of deserting for some time.

Another important political event was the desertion of Abderrahmane Ould Laibak, a Moroccan MP for the Sahara. He recently left Morocco and came over to POLISARIO. And in Bamako, Mali, in September 1978, there was a meeting between several Moroccan military officers, a representative of King Hassan and POLISARIO. The meeting was held at King Hassan's request, and indicated recognition of the strength of POLISARIO.

Morale appears low in the Moroccan army, and presumably will get worse as the number of casualties increases. There are reports that several Moroccan officers were executed following the POLISARIO attack on Tan Tan. Most recently, King Hassan has made threats of hot pursuit raids into the refugee camps in Algeria. This will accomplish little militarily, since the POLISARIO army is firmly based inside Western Sahara.

In conclusion, it seems that the Moroccans have bitten off more than they can chew. King Hassan faces many problems. The war, along with other factors, has put a great strain on the economy. The price of phosphates, Morocco's major export, has decreased. The harboring of the Shah of Iran was not popular and recently the Shah left Morocco. And Hassan's opposition has attacked him for his inability to win the war.

Further, POLISARIO has been gaining increasing international support. Nineteen countries now recognize the Democratic Arab Saharawi Republic and other have good relations with POLISARIO. While I was there, Viet Nam and Ethiopia recognized the Democratic Arab Saharawi Republic. Mozambique, Angola, Algeria and Tanzania have already extended such recognition. Fifteen of the 19 countries that recognize the DASR are African and more than ten other African countries recognized POLISARIO. Although some African countries have friendly relations with Morocco, none have recognized Moroccan or Mauritanian sovereignty over Western Sahara.

It is important that at this time we put effort into supporting POLISARIO and opposing the U.S. sale of arms and spare parts to Morocco. In December, 1977, the American Committee on Africa Executive Board adopted the following position regarding Western Sahara:

- "1. Support POLISARIO as the only legitimate representative of the Saharan people.
2. Support U.S. recognition of the Democratic Arab Saharawi Republic.
3. An end to all U.S. military assistance to Morocco and Mauritania.
4. End U.S. involvement in the exploitation of Saharan natural resources until such time as the Saharawi people control those resources."

Perhaps the best contribution we can make to the Saharawi people is to stop the sale of U.S. arms.

Algeria

I spent a week in Algiers, the capital of Algeria, meeting with different people regarding the Saharan situation. These include Ouaddadi Ahmed Heiba of the Saharawi Red Crescent and Mokrane Boubrit of the Algerian Red Crescent, (the Red Crescent is a humanitarian organization similar to the Red Cross); Sidni Lamb of Rencontre & Developpement, (which has helped to coordinate the work of European support organizations); and with Lucia Echecopar of the Canadian University Service Overseas.

During that time President Chadli announced his new government. Perhaps the most visible change to those outside Algeria is that Abdelaziz Bouteflika is no longer the Algerian Foreign Minister but is now an adviser to the President. The new Foreign Minister is Mohamed Benyahia.

There has been some speculation in the western press since the death of President Houari Boumediene that Algeria may cease to back POLISARIO. In fact this is not the case. There is likely to be little change in Algeria's policy in the area. Efforts by Morocco to effect such a change have been strongly rebuffed.

POLISARIO has a hard struggle ahead. But its strengths politically among the people, militarily, and increasingly diplomatically are incontestable.

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