STATEMENT ON WESTERN SAHARA

before the
Subcommittee on Africa
of the
Committee on Foreign Affairs
U.S. House of Representatives

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I want to thank the Subcommittee on Africa for the opportunity to express our views on the question of Western Sahara. The American Committee on Africa was founded in 1953 to support independence and majority rule on the continent. We have thus had a unique opportunity to observe events in Africa for more than a quarter of a century. The testimony I would like to present to you today is based upon my own personal experience with the Polisario and that of my colleague Richard Knight. He visited the Western Sahara in March of this year and more recently I spent two weeks in May studying the situation in the country first hand. We both visited the refugee camps in Algeria where a large number of Saharawi are exiled and also traveled with the Polisario inside Western Sahara. We witnessed actual combat and were able to observe the ravages of previous battles. As far as I know, I was the first American to travel with Polisario forces all the way to the Atlantic by Land Rover.

The Western Sahara

Located in northwest Africa, Western Sahara is about 110,000 square miles in area, or somewhat larger than the state of Colorado. In the north it is bordered by Morocco and Algeria and in the south by Mauritania.

The population of Western Sahara has been displaced by the war now in progress for control of the territory and many now live as refugees in neighboring Algeria. The actual size of the population is the subject of some dispute. Spanish officials in 1974 estimated the country's total population to be about 75,000, a figure that is certainly too low. From my past experience I know that the colonial powers have often under-estimated African populations. For example, after independence Portuguese estimates of the population of Mozambique proved to be about 2,000,000 low following a vaccination campaign by WHO which brought the estimate to over 11,000,000. The Spanish, of course, also excluded from their figure those who were already refugees from the Western Sahara. Polisario estimates the total population to be approximately 750,000.

Rich phosphate deposits exist in the Bu Craa region of Western Sahara, just 58 miles from the coast. Because of repeated Polisario attacks production has been virtually nil, although sophisticated mining equipment and a conveyor belt to the coast are already in place. These deposits alone could provide the basis for a national economy and the foreign exchange so necessary to bring development to this desert region. Moreover, in addition to phosphates, there are thought to be exploitable deposits of oil and several minerals including iron.

The Essential Issues

As regards Polisario and Western Sahara, three essential points must be made:
Sixteen African countries recognize the Polisario-formed government of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic and more than ten others recognize Polisario as the legitimate representative of the Saharawi people. Neither the United Nations nor the Organization of African Unity recognizes the annexation of Western Sahara by Morocco and Mauritania.

Polisario is a popularly supported, democratic movement which has clearly proved its capacity to organize the people of Western Sahara and to provide them with all the services expected of a national government.

Polisario is on the offensive in the war in Western Sahara and operates in virtually the entire territory.

The International Aspect

The issue of Western Sahara is clearly one of decolonization and the right of the Saharawi people to self-determination.

Morocco justifies its occupation of Western Sahara with claims that ties existed between the sultans of Morocco and certain Saharan tribes prior to Spanish colonization. However, the International Court of Justice found in an advisory opinion in 1975 "that the materials and information presented to it do not establish any tie of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco."

Further, it should be noted that a basic principle of decolonization in Africa is respect for colonial borders, irrespective of pre-colonial divisions. Indeed, were this not the case, most African countries could claim parts of other African countries on the basis of pre-colonial ties. Spain colonized Western Sahara in 1884 and its mandate was recognized by the Congress of Berlin (1884-1885). Thus there is no reason why this principle should not be applied in the case of Western Sahara as well.

There is no justification for the annexation of Western Sahara by Morocco and Mauritania without the consent of the Saharawi people. One possible way for Spain to have dealt with the territorial claims of the two countries would have been to sponsor a plebiscite. Instead, it signed the tripartite Madrid Agreement that divided the country between Morocco and Mauritania without even consulting the people of Western Sahara. By mid-1975, it was clear to observers that Morocco would have lost such a plebiscite. A United Nations Mission to the area in May 1975 dramatized this fact. I quote: "At every place
visited, the Mission was met by mass political demonstrations and had numerous private meetings with representatives of every section of the Saharan community. From all of these, it became evident to the Mission that there was an overwhelming consensus among the Saharans within the territory in favor of independence and opposing integration with any neighboring country. "The Mission, which consisted of Iran, Ivory Coast and Cuba, unanimously concluded that within the territory the population was "categorically for independence and against the territorial claims of Morocco and Mauritania." The Mission also found that Polisario was the dominant political force.

Yet it was after the release of the UN Mission's report and after the findings of the International Court were made public that Morocco entered into its military occupation of the Western Sahara.

The "Green March" of November 1975, which Morocco describes as "peaceful" was little more than an international political propaganda ploy that was backed by thousands of Moroccan troops. With Franco on his deathbed, a politically divided Spain signed the Madrid Agreement that divided Western Sahara between Morocco and Mauritania.

Following the entrance of the Moroccan and Mauritanian armies into Western Sahara in late 1975 and early 1976, thousands of Saharawi fled to refugee camps in Algeria. Perhaps there are as many as 100,000 Saharawi refugees, or maybe only half that number. It is difficult to get an accurate count. But in a sense it doesn't matter. There are tens of thousands of Saharawi people who have been forced out of their homes in Western Sahara by bombing attacks and the occupation forces of Morocco and Mauritania.

Polisario, which began its military resistance to Spanish colonialism in 1973, declared the Madrid Agreement void. Polisario has continued the fight for independence for its country.

The issue of Western Sahara is a sensitive one for the Organization of African Unity because it involves several member-states and the crucial issue of self-determination. However, the OAU position has been that the right of self-determination has not been exercised. Even Mauritania takes this view. Only Morocco claims that self-determination has been exercised.

The OAU set up a committee to study the question of Western Sahara and to report its findings at the OAU meeting in Liberia. However at the time of preparing this testimony no details were available.

There has been some suggestion of an internationally sponsored referendum. I do not know if at this late date this is a workable solution.
The Mauritanian position was stated in a letter dated May 23, 1979 to the Secretary General of the United Nations. The letter says that "Mauritania is prepared to study ways and means of achieving self-determination in Sahara" and that "Mauritania remains in favor of the dialogue with Polisario with a view to achieving the practical implementation of the principle of self-determination."

Following the coup in July 1978 in Mauritania, Polisario unilaterally declared a cease-fire with regards to that country. Since that time there have been numerous meetings between Polisario and Mauritania. However, Mauritania has not yet ended its military occupation of Western Sahara. As a result, Polisario has recently announced that it considers the cease-fire void, but reaffirmed its desire for a negotiated settlement.

Polisario has specifically laid out a four point platform which it sees as the basis for a settlement. They are: 1) The withdrawal of all foreign troops 2) Formal recognition by Morocco and Mauritania of the national sovereignty of the Saharawi people in the frontiers of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic 3) Formal and sincere adhesion of Morocco and Mauritania to the principles of non-recourse to violence in the settlement of differences over frontiers with the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, and the principle of friendship and good neighborliness 4) To begin immediate negotiations for normalization of relations in which the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania will take part.

The Polisario

Essentially, Polisario is a nationalist movement with a socialist orientation. Also, as almost the entire population of Western Sahara is Muslim, the Polisario government, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, describes itself as an "Islamic Republic."

The National Program, issued by the Third General Congress of Polisario in August 1976, states their basic principles as follows: "The specific characteristics of the Saharawi people are that they are Arab, African and Islamic, that they belong to the Third World, that they are opposed to imperialism, colonialism and exploitation." Under "Internal Policy" the National Program of 1976 states "Our decisions are: a) to maintain the republican, democratic system with a unified program; b) to mobilize the masses, giving free rein to their spirit of initiative so that they may fully play their part."

The economic plan of Polisario consists of five parts: 1) A planned national economy 2) control of the natural resources 3) agricultural development 4) industrialization and 5) protection of the maritime resources. It is a program which calls for the sharing of the profits from the exploitation of the nation's natural resources and their use to promote long term economic development. It is a program
which might be recommended to any independent government.

In this regard it is important to note that Polisario is above all pragmatic in their approach and they have clearly expressed to me the desire for good relations with the United States. I might point out that the U.S. has very extensive trade with Algeria, and a similar situation could well develop with an independent Western Sahara.

Polisario has received military aid from a number of countries including Algeria and Libya. Much of the material they receive from these countries originates in the Soviet Union, Algeria's major arms supplier. Polisario also captures a large amount of its military equipment from Morocco.

It would be a great mistake to view Polisario as a puppet of Algeria. It is true that without Algerian support Polisario would not be in such a strong military position today. Polisario is a movement indigenous to Western Sahara. It was not until late 1975 that Algeria started to give Polisario significant support. By this time Polisario's political position and uncompromising stance of independence had long been established among the people of Western Sahara, as was documented by the U.N. Mission in May of 1975.

In the camps in Algeria, Polisario functions for all intents and purposes like a national government. Polisario is organized along democratic lines. Every Saharawi belongs to a cell of eleven. This is the basic unit of the movement from which representatives are elected to the popular committees in each of the daira, or districts, and from there to the wilaya or provincial councils. Representatives from the various wilaya councils constitute the General Congress, the top policy-making body of Polisario. The National Council of Polisario, the Political Bureau and the Executive Committee are chosen by the Congress.

An administrative structure for the running of the communities or refugee camps parallels the political structure. In each camp virtually everyone is a member of one of the five functional committees - health, education, handicrafts, distribution and justice - around which the community's life is organized. Representatives from these committees form an administrative committee responsible for each camp. From among the members of these five committees representatives are chosen to the district and provincial committees. The political and administrative structures form the Polisario government -- that of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic.

Conditions have greatly improved in the refugee camps in the last couple of years. As was explained to Richard Knight in a meeting with Salek Babeith, the Minister of Health, when the refugee situation was created by Morocco's invasion in late 1975, there was not any
structure to provide for the people. This problem was immediately attacked by Polisario, and was a major emphasis of the third Polisario congress in 1976. Now that structure exists. One can only be amazed at the efforts Polisario is making to improve the conditions of the Saharawi people, in education, health and social development.

In visiting these refugee camps, I found it almost impossible to think of these people as refugees. I have visited many refugee camps in Africa over many years but I have never seen a group of people who are more self-reliant or better organized than are these people. They are dependent on friendly countries and international organizations for food and clothing to be sure. But they are independent of outside control and they have organized themselves according to their own way of life. The camps are not administered by Algerians, or United Nations personnel, or by technicians from any other country in the world. I had the feeling I was visiting a nation in exile. This I think is the importance of the camps politically.

Many of the health problems can be handled in the camps. For example, if children show signs of malnutrition they are assigned to tents somewhat segregated from the other tents, and are given a special diet. Usually in less than three months these children are able to go back to the regular camp.

In addition to a clinic in each of the dairas, there is a National Hospital and a smaller regional hospital. Two hospitals are necessary because of the large area over which the refugee camps are spread. The National Hospital will eventually have 400 beds, and is divided in sections such as maternity, general and intensive care. The smaller regional hospital has about 60 beds. A nurse remains in every room in which there is a patient. Some of the staff has been trained in the hospitals, others have had many years of experience.

Education is another area in which Polisario has been improving the lives of the Saharawi people. One example is the recently opened National School, for children 7-13. This is a boarding school and when completed will accommodate about 3,000 children. Education takes place in Arabic and Spanish. The school is about half finished.

Adult literacy has also been a concern of Polisario. There is a special school for adult women, for example. And with almost all the men away at the war, women run the refugee camps. The program of the third congress of Polisario said "the woman's education should be emphasized" and that "it should be stressed that there is no incompatibility if a woman takes up a profession."

I would like to emphasize the amount of organization needed to run the camps. Almost everything needs to be provided including clothes and food. Protein has been a special problem. However, conditions
are much better now than two years ago. Also, the main obstacle to improving the condition of the Saharawi people is the continued occupation of Western Sahara by Morocco and Mauritania. The U.S. should provide aid to these refugees, preferably through international organizations.

The Military Situation

During my travels inside Western Sahara I was able to see for myself the extent to which Polisario forces freely operate. I spent a week in the Sahara traveling by Land Rover with Polisario guerillas, from Algeria to the Atlantic. I suppose the round trip, taking into account our zigzagging course, covered 1200 to 1300 miles. There are no roads. There are only tracks in the desert. But Polisario knows the desert. They had no compass and no radio but they could find their way with ease to a well, or to a small town from which the Moroccans had recently been driven, or to a wreckage of an F-5 U.S. jet plane that had been downed in the desert by Polisario.

Traveling with Polisario I went right up to the ocean, stopping by an abandoned lighthouse near Cabo Bojador. Returning, we passed not far from the capital of El Aaiun and fairly close to the phosphate center at Bu Craa.

One of the towns from which the Moroccans had recently been driven that I visited was called Tifariti. Its population may have been 15,000 at one time, I was told. Polisario recaptured (or liberated) it in March, 1979, a month and a half before I was there. In fact, when Richard Knight was in Western Sahara in March he had seen some of the battle for Tifariti. All the people were gone because, like most of the Saharawi people, they were in the refugee camps in Algeria. Only a few Polisario guerillas guarded the place. There was a large graveyard close by with mounds marking graves. Some were those of Saharawi civilians, many of them killed by napalm attacks in the initial Moroccan occupation. Others were those of Moroccan and Polisario combatants.

Just two weeks before I arrived, Polisario forces again proved their strength by capturing the fortified town of Amgala, not far from the phosphate mining center of Bu Craa. I was able to inspect the numerous underground defenses constructed by the Moroccans and over-run by Polisario. On the return trip from the Atlantic I witnessed the Polisario shelling the Moroccan defenses surrounding the major town of Semara.

Not far from the Atlantic coast I was taken to the site of a downed American F-5. The Moroccan pilot, who I was told was a high official, had parachuted to safety and was a prisoner of war of the Polisario. There were clear and unmistakable markings on the scattered parts of the plane identifying it as American. This is evidence bolstered by
other things I saw as well as by what was seen by Richard Knight that
American military equipment is being used by Morocco in the Western
Sahara, contravening what is supposed to be an understanding between
the U.S. and Morocco by a military agreement in 1960. Much of this
and other Moroccan equipment has been captured by Polisario.
Richard Knight and I saw considerable quantities of captured arms,
including such items as land rovers mounted with what I understand
are 106mm mortars. We have a number of photographs of these. The
mortars, we understand, are made under U.S. license in Spain.

Despite the fact that the Moroccans have committed a large number of
troops, they are clearly on the defensive and rarely go far from the
towns and only then in large numbers. Polisario keeps a close watch
on the towns and follows the Moroccan movements. They have perhaps
30,000 troops committed to the Western Sahara. Some estimates are
twice that number. Still, as I have reported, the Moroccans are
limited to a few towns which have in essence become garrisons for the
military.

Mauritania already has publicly stated that it would like to opt out
of the war. But Mauritanian troops continue to occupy a number of
towns in Western Sahara. Mauritania has internal political problems
and Morocco maintains a large number of troops on Mauritanian soil.
It still remains to be seen whether a separate peace can be made.

Morocco's recent complaint to the Security Council is further evidence
of Polisario's military strength and Morocco's weakness in Western
Sahara. As part of its response to Morocco's invasion of Western
Sahara, Polisario has taken to launching attacks inside Morocco. This
includes a number of attacks on Tan Tan, Assa and on military convoys.
Morocco brought a complaint to the Security Council as a result of
these attacks. It limited its complaint to "specific time and specific
place" and labeled the Polisario forces "armed brigands." However,
this was not accepted in the Security Council and Morocco dropped
its complaint.

Support in Morocco for the war has declined significantly. According
to an article in the May 10 Financial Times (London) "Most Moroccans
still pay lip service to the official line... But complaints about
the cost of living and deteriorating social conditions are growing.
'Life is exorbitant because of the Sahara' is a refrain heard everywhere."

The Financial Times article also reports a decline in army moral.
"Soldiers returning from the Sahara speak of a growing malaise about
appalling conditions... The men complain about the difficulty of fighting
fast moving Polisario columns from fixed positions, of not being given
leave (most have been there for four years) and the boredom they feel
in this inhospitable terrain where there is no entertainment and no
drink."
Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara, in violation of accepted international norms, has led to the destabilization of the region and some observers predict that Morocco may launch a hot pursuit raid into Algeria that will spark a war between the two countries. I do not want to make any predictions myself, but I would like to say that I would find such a turn of events tragic. Certainly it is in the best interest of the United States to do all in its power to prevent it from happening.

U.S. Policy

U.S. policy on the question of Western Sahara has officially been one of "neutrality". In fact, the U.S. has clearly "tilted" toward Morocco. It appears that the U.S. is moving closer to Morocco, as evidenced by the recent finalization of a number of military sales. At the same time, it is my understanding that U.S. government officials do not even meet with Polisario. The lack of information growing out of this no contact policy was reflected in a discussion I had with U.S. representatives in Algeria. The end result of U.S. policy has been to contribute to the destabilization of the region while opposing the legitimate struggle for self-determination.

The U.S. is a major arms supplier to Morocco. This includes a significant amount of military credits. The State Department has said that these military sales are not related to Western Sahara but for what they say are the "legitimate" defense needs of Morocco. However, Morocco takes a different view, as was expressed by Ahmed Reda Guedira, counselor to King Hassan II in the July 11 issue of Jeune Afrique. I quote:

"The position of the United States has evolved a great deal because American officials better understand the real sense of the problem of the Sahara in its context. This better understanding has led them to review their position as much in terms of policy principles as at the factual level. The best proof of this is that—in spite of general budgetary restrictions in the United States—military credits to Morocco have increased 50%. This is enormous in the American context and underlines the exceptional character of the real position of the United States." (Translated from French)
American arms are supplied to Morocco under the terms of a 1960 bilateral defense agreement. The United States continues to stand by its interpretation of this treaty as limiting the use of U.S. supplied weapons to the defense of Morocco itself, not including the Western Sahara. King Hassan, however, refuses to accept the American interpretation of the 1960 agreement and claims Western Sahara is an integral part of Morocco. The State Department openly acknowledges Morocco is using U.S. supplied weapons in Western Sahara.

In spite of obvious violations of the agreement under which these weapons are sold to Morocco, however, the United States is now considering further military aid. The State Department has just recently approved the sale of $2.4 million worth of spare parts for Morocco's F-5 and C-130 aircraft. The State Department has also just authorized the sale of $3.0 million worth of F-5 ammunition, including bombs and rockets. It should be obvious to even the casual observer that the only possible need for such quantities is to replenish munitions expended illegally in the Western Sahara.

In addition to these arms the United States is also contributing to a significant improvement in Morocco's war fighting capacity in Western Sahara. Three weapon systems that have been approved for sale to Morocco are particularly disturbing: six CH-47 (Chinook) helicopters, a Forward Area Alerting Radar System (FAAR) and an integrated electronic detection system. None of these systems has an essential mission in the defense of Morocco. All three, however, have clear and important uses in Morocco's Saharan war.

To understand why this is the case, it is important to remember Morocco's military position in the Western Sahara. As I said earlier, the forces of Polisario control most of the country. Moroccan forces hold isolated garrisons, but cannot control the territory in between. Nor can they move well-armed caravans without fear of Polisario attack. For the time being, superior Moroccan fire power and control of the skies—both due mainly to American weapons—mean that the major garrisons are relatively safe. Their continued existence is becoming increasingly problematical, however, as the recent Polisario victory at Tifariti and Amgala suggests. Polisario attacks take a daily toll of Moroccan men, morale and material. It is for these reasons that Morocco so desperately wants these three American weapons systems.

Most Americans remember the Chinook helicopter, the work horse of the Vietnam war. In Vietnam the Chinook proved its capacity as a cargo and troop carrier. Its ability to move upwards of 10 tons of supplies at a time will obviously greatly ease the problem Morocco now faces in resupplying its garrisons in the Western Sahara and help to get around the Polisario's control of ground movements. The Chinook will also make possible the rapid movement of troops both to relieve pressed outposts and to drop troops into combat as the United States did in Vietnam. Such increased mobility and efficiency in the use of manpower will, of course,
improve the amount of effective power Morocco can exercise with its existing armed forces.

I understand that the Chinook helicopter sale is now several years old and the contracts have already been signed. In light of the military significance of this sale to Morocco and the clear likelihood that Morocco will violate the terms of the sale, I believe this sale should be cancelled.

As for the FAAR radar system, Jane's Weapon System—a respected source on military hardware—describes its normal use as "a lightweight early warning air surveillance radar" meant to add extra air defense protection for important targets like air fields, tank parks and dams. In this mode, FAAR might have a role in the national air defense radar system being built for Morocco by Westinghouse, particularly for use with the batteries of surface-to-air missiles now in the Moroccan inventory.

But FAAR has another more sinister use. Jane's tells us, and I quote, "Other applications attributed to the system 360° detection of first round motor and rocket fire and use as a tactical air traffic control center." (p. 572) Set up in a garrison in the Western Sahara, such a system would greatly increase Morocco's capacity to respond to Polisario's hit and run guerrilla attacks. It would give the Moroccans the ability to pinpoint the source of attacks immediately and accurately to direct responding F-5's.

The State Department denies that FAAR is capable of this secondary role attributed to it by Jane's. I am not an arms expert and cannot verify one position or the other.

The third sale has already provoked considerable debate and in fact was turned down once before receiving authorization. I'm referring to the proposed sale by Northrup Page of $200 million Integrated Intrusion Detection and Communications System, a so-called "electronic battlefield". Essentially this is a very sophisticated passive monitoring system using seismic and infrared detectors to spot troop and armor movements in remote areas. Such a system was used, for example, to monitor troop and material movements on the Ho Chi Minh trail. Why Morocco needs such a sophisticated and expensive system for the defense of its borders is hard to imagine.

As I understand it, very few of this system's components are actually on the munitions control list and most are, in fact, available off the shelf in Europe. I also understand, however, that when first considering Northrup Page's proposal to sell such a system to Morocco, the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency felt that the technical know-how the American firm was to supply in setting up the system was more significant than the
components themselves. Apparently this fact figured in the initial decision to turn down the proposed sale, since the system itself in place in the country and the components readily available in Europe, Morocco could easily extend it into Western Sahara. Also, responsible sources have told me that even as planned some of the communication devices will be located in Western Sahara. It would seem to me that logically the communication devices should go behind and not in front of the defensive detection screen.

Although classified as passive and defensive, it seems clear that the Northrup Page system has offensive potential. After all, if it is possible to pinpoint the enemy it is easy to call in air strikes or to prepare for ground attack. Since Morocco's military equipment and manpower are now stretched to their limit, this added efficiency in their deployment will constitute a real increase in Morocco's war fighting capacity. It was for precisely this reason that the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency originally decided that the Northrup Page proposal would violate the American policy of neutrality in the Western Sahara. We still think it does.

Such sales can only hurt the United States. Insofar as the issue of the Western Sahara specifically is concerned, the sale of American ammunition and weapons systems to Morocco makes a mockery of our expressed position of neutrality in the conflict and must be construed as de facto support for Morocco's expansionist policy. Their use by Morocco makes the United States party to the systematic and violent suppression of the human rights of the people of Western Sahara. At the same time, continued arm sales to Morocco, despite our proclaimed position of neutrality, can only further erode U.S. credibility both in Africa and elsewhere in the world. It can also only damage American prestige to continue without protest to provide arms to a country which openly violates the terms of the supply treaty. Such an example will lead other countries in similar situations to ignore their treaty obligations.

I would like to conclude with a brief summation. The people of Western Sahara have been denied their basic rights of independence and self-determination guaranteed under international law. Polisario, the political movement that has been fighting for independence, is strong militarily and politically among the Saharawi people. The Polisario-formed government has been recognized by 16 African states and many more African states recognize Polisario as the representative of the Saharawi people. However, Morocco has refused to recognize the legitimacy of Polisario and its government.

The U.S. has sided with Morocco, although claiming to be neutral. This policy is detrimental to the U.S. and will not save the current Moroccan regime. In spite of U.S. policy, Polisario has expressed a desire for friendly relations with the U.S.

The best path for the U.S. is to stop all arm sales to Morocco and take all possible steps to encourage Morocco to withdraw and to recognize the independence of Western Sahara.