MISSILE DOWNS US AID PLANE IN ACCIDENT 25 KILOMETERS FROM DEFENSE WALL IN WESTERN SAHARA

The accident was inevitable. Despite UN/OAU efforts for several years to bring Morocco to negotiate directly with the Polisario Front, Morocco continues to resist. It was a given that in such circumstances, sooner or later, additional innocent victims would be claimed in the war of the Sahrawis to exercise their right to self-determination, a right upheld by the UN, the OAU, the Non-Aligned Nations. The Sahrawis' right to self-determination is also recognized by the over 71 nations that currently recognize the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, the nation proclaimed by the Sahrawis in 1976.

What is unfortunate is that the incident occurred at a point in time when both parties in the almost 14-year conflict have agreed in principle to the UN/OAU Peace Plan, but have not yet settled the sticky issues of Moroccan military presence (over 150,000 military personnel), Moroccan civilian presence (settlers and administrative personnel), and a ceasefire.

In the U.S. it is about 6:00 A.M. EDT, Friday, December 9. Two AID planes who have just finished spraying locust infestations in the region of Dakar, Senegal, are to return to Agadir, Morocco. Instead of taking the safest route over the sea, the pilots and crews decide to use the overland route, a route which leads them directly over a region in the Western Sahara that has very recently been the site of major Moroccan-Polisario battles. The AID personnel are aware of the war. AID officials interviewed by National Public Radio Friday were reported as saying that AID had not told the pilots of the two planes to take the route they chose. The AID officials further stated that the agency and its personnel were well aware of the conflict over Western Sahara.

Moroccan officials also know that taking that inland route is dangerous. Heavy battles have taken place at Oum Dreiga and in the area around Guelta Zemmour in recent weeks. The particular region chosen for the planes' flight over Western Sahara is near Guelta Zemmour, an area used by Polisario for staging massive troop actions.

The planes are flying some 11,000 feet in the air. They are DC-7's. On the ground are Polisario soldiers. They hear the planes, believe them to be Moroccan. Who else flies over the region? They believe the planes to be Moroccan C-130's, bought from the U.S. and used...
for troop transport. Two SA-7
hand-held missiles are ejected.
Both planes are hit. One, con-
taining pilot Jack Loughran
and T&G Aviation owner Sergio
Tomassoni, is crippled. Lough-
ran manages to steer it some
twenty-five to thirty feet
above ground until he can land
at an abandoned air field at
Sidni Ifni. The other plane,
according to Sergio Tomassoni,
contained Joel Blackmer, Frank
Kennedy, Ben Rossini, Frank
Hedeman and Wes Wilson. All
are killed.

In a communique Sunday, Decem-
ber 11, Polisario officials
stated that shooting down the
plane was an accident. Madjid
Abduallah, Polisario representa-
tive to North America, noted
that once the incident had oc-
curred, the Polisario Front had
launched its own investigation.
Polisario authorities found
that a unit of the National
Liberation Army had attacked
the planes by accident, be-
lieving they were C-130’s. He
noted the planes were about 25
kilometers from the Moroccan
defense wall. Abduallah said
that Polisario officials had
contacted the U.S. government,
the U.S. Embassy in Algiers,
and are in the process of at-
tempting to retrieve the bod-
ies of those killed, which
will be returned to U.S.
government officials. He noted
that the Polisario Front
regrets the incident and the
loss of these AID workers.

A question that must be asked
in the aftermath of such an
incident is why the planes took
the inland route given recent
heavy military action in the
region between Moroccan forces
and the Polisario Front. It is
not that U.S. officials are ign-
orant of the conflict or of
recent events. Were the planes
only involved in the humani-
tarian war against the locust
plague that is currently be-
sieging the continent of Afri-
ca? Were the planes involved
in taking surveillance photo-
graphs of the region, since it
had been reported that Poli-
sario forces were massing in
the territory?

Recent events (Contragate, for
example) have made us suspect
plots where there may be none.
The question to be answered,
however, as we join everyone in
regretting the loss of life in
this accident, is why did the
planes choose that particular
route rather than the safe sea
route? That question needs to
be answered.

This map is an
adapted map taken
from USA TODAY.
The map shows the
inland route taken
by the AID planes
rented from T&G
Aviation, Phoenix.
Usually planes in
the region are
Moroccan C-130
Transport planes
or Moroccan sur-
veillance planes. 
The Polisario
Front has no airforce.