

House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Africa Hearings
on the Conflict in Western Sahara
and U. S. Policy

Statement by Professor Anne Lippert, Ohio Northern
University, Ada, Ohio

July 23, 1979

Mr. Chairman:

(I have visited the refugee camps of the Saharawis of Western Sahara (in the area around Tindouf, Algeria) three times. I spent two weeks in the camps in 1977, ten days in 1978. This summer I traversed part of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (the former Spanish Sahara) during a ten day period.)

The Saharan Arab Democratic Republic is a territory about 110,000 square miles, approximately the size of Colorado, or about one half the size of France and just slightly smaller than Italy. Spanish colonizers gave 75,000 persons as the population, but there are reasons to believe that that number is considerably less than the actual population. Reasons for the discrepancy include the following: 1) a largely nomadic population during the Spanish protectorate; 2) Spanish efforts (aided by France and Morocco in the 1950's) at repression of the Saharawis in the 1950's and 1960's which caused a good many of the Saharawis to flee to Mauritania, southern Morocco, Algeria and the Canaries; 3) Spain's desire to retain the territory (lack of a sufficient population is still being used today as an argument for approval of Morocco's invasion of the territory). There are presently over 100,000 Saharawis in the refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria (persons who fled to that area from the S.A.D.R. beginning in 1976) and there are still Saharawis in cities in the S.A.D.R. (those controlled by Morocco), in Morocco and Mauritania, and, of course, in the Polisario fighting force in the S.A.D.R.

The Atlantic coastline of the S.A.D.R. is over 1,000 kilometers long. This is one of the richest fishing fields in the world today. About 1,500,000 tons of fish were harvested from this area during Spain's protectorate yearly. Of this fish Spanish boats took only about 270,000 tons. Fishing rights were extended to many nations including the U.S., the Soviet Union, Japan, South Korea, etc. The phosphate resources of the S.A.D.R. are the fourth richest in the world. The area around Fos Bou Craa is 80% phosphate. In an area nearby that I visited this summer and where I picked up phosphate from the ground, it was said to be 65%. Mining tests undertaken in the 1960's indicate that there are vast mineral resources in the S.A.D.R., titanium, vanadium, zinc, uranium, copper, gold, natural gas, magnetite, iron, and petroleum. Iron reserves are estimated at 70 million tons. The large petroleum discovery made by Esso geologists in 1969 around Tarfaya (southern Morocco) indicated that the greatest part of that find of petroleum is located within the S.A.D.R.

The S.A.D.R. has one of the largest underground fresh water lakes in the world. According to the Saharawis, there was cultivation of corn, wheat, and barley in the north central area of that country, i.e., south of the Oued Draa and along Oued Jat to the west. At Tifariti (S.A.D.R.) I observed the well

that was used to feed the gardens and saw remains of a garden area. I was told that it would be possible to raise sufficient food in the S.A.D.R. (herds, fish, and land crops) to feed all of Morocco and Mauritania. The vegetation that exists that I saw --accacia trees, ground covers, thorn trees, etc.---as well as the fauna I observed --rabbits, desert foxes, gazelles, birds of all kinds--- indicate that the desert of this region is supporting life and can continue to do so. The limited farming by the Spanish was due to their policy of importation, i.e., providing a market for Spanish goods and food imports.

As you will note from this description, the S.A.D.R. can support an appropriate population for its area with its present resources. This territory has been described by some analysts as the potential Kuwait of North-West Africa. Certainly it can support the Saharawi population currently in exile or on the battlefield (a population estimated between 350,000 to 750,000 persons).

One of the fears frequently expressed in meetings about the Western Sahara region is that a new "microstate" would pose an irredentist threat to surrounding states, would prove unstable or be bound to another state (usually the fear is expressed about Algeria) so that it would not be a truly independent state. This microstate argument was used by the French government to disapprove the formation of the S.A.D.R. at a time when France was moving to implement independence for Djibouti, a country considerably smaller in size. What is an appropriate size for a nation is frequently a matter of political expediency and interest of another established state.

In studying the political institutions of the Saharawis and in discussing with them their long-term goals, I have noted the following: that the Saharawis are committed to their formalized goal of non-alignment. This position has not altered since I first spoke with Saharawi leaders in 1977. In 1978 Bachir Mustapha Sayed, Adjunct Secretary General of the Polisario Front and member of the Revolutionary Council, the President of the National Council and two members of that Council, including a member of the former Djemaa (Saharawi governing group formed during the Spanish protectorate), discussed with me for several hours Saharawi political philosophy. The points made at that meeting included the following: 1) the Polisario Front is a national movement for independence, 2) national goals are defined through the General Congresses, popular meetings, and political organization, 3) the Saharawis would not like to see the war escalate which would increase foreign involvement on all sides and might force them from their non-aligned stance. In 1979 this goal/policy of non-alignment was once again emphasized to me in the territory of the S.A.D.R. by members of the External Affairs Committee and of the Ministry of the Interior. I was told that the Polisario Front had been offered foreign troops by several nations, but that they had refused this assistance because of their desire to remain non-aligned, to liberate their territory themselves, to be truly independent at the moment of national independence.

In the weeks that I have spent in the refugee camps of the Saharawis and in the S.A.D.R. I have noted the absence of other nationals. This has been corroborated in discussions I have had with Red Cross officials and a number of journalists. The non-alignment policy of the Saharawis seems to resemble that of other African states like Nigeria and Tanzania. I have also noted the political organization of the Saharawis and their apparent control and direction of the war as well as of the camps.

In a communique from the Fourth General Popular Congress of the Polisario Front held from September 25 to September 28, 1978 in the S.A.D.R., the following statements were published as part of the outcomes of the meeting. The Saharawi

delegates to that Congress asked that their neighboring states: 1) recognize the national sovereignty of their people over their territory and respect their legitimate rights to self-determination and independence; 2) recognize the territorial integrity of the S.A.D.R. in conformity with the principal of historic frontiers inherited from the colonial period and which are internationally recognized; 3) respect the principal of non-recourse to force in relations with them and non-interference in their internal affairs; 4) respect the principal of settling differences by peaceful methods. The Congress also reiterated the fact that the Saharawis' battle is one for national independence. It is not intended to provoke the fall of foreign regimes, but is directed against the imperialistic aggression and expansionist policies of those nations that have invaded the S.A.D.R.

I have noted, as I said before, in all three visits I have made that within the refugee camps of the Saharawis it is they who direct all the activities of their daily life. The Saharawi Red Crescent distributes food stuffs, medicines, and clothing supplied by Support Committees, humanitarian groups, and the Algerian Red Crescent to local communities. Each camp (about 23 in all, grouped in three wilayas) has five committees: Child Care, Justice and Social Affairs, Supplies, Health, Crafts and Culture. At one time local health and education committees directed all local activities. Now Health and Education are national ministries and are organized on a national level. Saharawis guarantee the security of the camps.

The Political Bureau of the Polisario Front is an elected group. The heads of the Women, Students, and Workers groups are automatically members. The 18 other members are elected by the Popular Congress delegates at the National Assembly. Delegates to the Popular Congress are elected in local and regional meetings.

The Saharawi National Council, composed of the 21 member Political Bureau and 19 representatives of popular meetings at local levels exercises on-going legislative responsibility. The Popular Congress also selects the Executive Committee, the highest authority of the Saharawi Republic. Heading its Executive Committee is the Secretary General of the Polisario Front, Mohamed Abdelaziz, who names cabinet officers with both internal and external responsibilities. (It has seemed to me that this democratic representative form of government is a modernization of traditional tribal organizations and confederations.)

Since the announcement of the formation of the S.A.D.R. on February 27, 1976, there has been a gradual development of governmental structures, formulation of policies, and a systematized statement of goals enunciated in a Constitution (approved by the Third Popular Congress of 1978) and in policy statements emanating from each Congress and implemented in the succeeding year. As one example of these policies, education is considered to be a primary goal for the development of the S.A.D.R. by the Saharawis. Policy decisions have included the building of local and regional schools. Children above the age of 6 now receive academic training in boarding schools in the refugee camps. Students for higher education or specialized training are sent abroad. The need (formulated into a goal at the Popular Congresses) for an alphabetization program for women and the old has developed into local programs in the camps and a boarding school for women where they can pursue their studies uninterrupted by the work of the camps. Another example of a policy that has been implemented is the Saharawi concept of the equality of all persons, stated in the Constitution of the S.A.D.R. This policy has been translated into the literacy and military training programs for all persons. (Women at one of the Popular Congresses insisted on military training

for able-bodied women.) It is demonstrated by the participation of all in the work of the camps. I noted that the principle that all work is good and equal was demonstrated by the soldiers as well. There seemed little deference to status. I saw field commanders and ministry officials making bread or tea in the field, helping to repair tires or fan belts. Respect is shown for the leaders, but it is not demonstrated by perks or special treatment.

In my discussions with official representatives of the Polisario government about the future of the S.A.D.R. after independence, these persons have repeated that they would be interested in developing economic ties with the West once independence is won. They are aware of their resources and their need for technology to develop and exploit these resources. They are aware that the U.S. and certain other Western nations could be their partners in this development. They are eager for collaboration. The fact that they have not rejected the West is further emphasized by the fact that schooling plans include Spanish to be taught as a second language to all school children.

As a political organization the Polisario Front dates from 1973 while Spain still administered the Spanish Sahara as a Protectorate. Resistance to colonization in the area dates from the 14th and 15th centuries. There was very active resistance in the 30's, the 50's, the 60's and the 70's, prior to to Spain's departure. Given this history and the seriousness of Polisario's efforts to maintain political independence once national independence is arrived at, I find it very difficult to envision an S.A.D.R. directed as a satellite state of another nation. The very fabric of their political organization militates against such as eventuality, as the fledgling U.S. resisted becoming a French protege or pawn following our own independence.

It is true that some Soviet arms have been supplied to the Polisario Front by Algeria and Libya. (I have only seen the Russian banana guns myself.) Much of the equipment used by Polisario to wage its war, however, still comes from captured arms from Morocco. In the ten days I spent in the S.A.D.R., all the trucks or landrovers I saw or rode in were formerly Moroccan as the stenciled i.d. marks indicated.

The argument is proffered that since Polisario receives arms from other nations, the U.S. should become even more involved in arms sales and grants to Morocco. Morocco is currently supplied with arms by France and the U.S. That nation has received major increases in U.S. arms grants and sales since 1975. In my opinion, what the U.S. needs to remember in its will to assist a friendly nation, Morocco, is that its friendship should not extend to approving immoral and illegal actions by its friends nor assisting them in these endeavors. It must be recalled that Morocco was the aggressor in this conflict. There would be no attacks on Tan Tan, Morocco, if Morocco had not, even prior to the Madrid Accords and the Green March, invaded the territory of the S.A.D.R. with armed Moroccan forces. As an example, Echederia (Jdeira if you choose Arabic spelling over Spanish) was taken by Moroccan forces on October 31, 1975. It was liberated by the Polisario forces on June 5, 1979, after the entire city was leveled by the Moroccans. (I visited it on June 29, 1979. Only part of one building remained in the rubble. Wells were poisoned and the area was mined.) The Polisario Front in its earlier attacks in Mauritania (stopped since the cease-fire of 1978) and now in Morocco, is acting as the Allies and the Soviets did against Germany and Japan in World War II, attempting to dissuade an aggressor from its policy of aggression by attacking in their own territory.

If the U.S. is truly committed to retaining its friendship with Morocco, and

is interested in Hassan II's continued presence on the Moroccan throne, then our nation should be using every diplomatic device available to it, to assist Morocco to extricate itself from this war that is ruining that nation. Newspaper reports claim that the war is costing Morocco \$1 million a day. The rate of inflation is quoted from 15 to 32%. Forty thousand Moroccan military personnel are presently in the S.A.D.R. (There are about 100,000-110,000 Moroccan military personnel in all.) The majority of these forces are confined to the cities they hold. Convoys travel between Bou Craa and el Aiun, but Smara and other cities can only be supplied by airlift. The Polisario claims it takes a force of 8,000 men to guard the convoy between Bou Craa and el Aiun.

In discussing U. S. involvement abroad, a great deal is made of U.S. national interest. As a citizen I am most certainly concerned about the national interest, and it is in this context that I say that I firmly believe that our national interest would be jeopardized by further involvement militarily by the U.S. in this Moroccan war. Since 1963 the United Nations General Assembly has passed resolutions stating that the Saharawis of the former Spanish Sahara have the right to self-determination and that this right should be exercised, to the creation of an independent state if the Saharawis should so decide. The last resolution was passed at the U.N. in 1978. To inhibit (or to assist in inhibiting) the clearly legal right of a people to self-determination, would most certainly be contrary to U.S. national interest, given the fact that over 1/8 of the nations of the world (22 nations) recognize the S.A.D.R., given the fact that the Polisario Front is recognized as the political organization of the Saharawis by the majority of O.A.U. members, given the fact that both the U.N. and the O.A.U. consider the Western Sahara a decolonization question.

I will not take the time in these few minutes to discuss the opinion of the International Court of Justice which came out clearly for self-determination of the Saharawis in 1975, or the illegal status of the Madrid Accords, or the fact that the S.A.D.R. is actually a state because it currently complies with the internationally accepted definition of what is a state. I will, instead, refer you to an article by Dr. Jeffrey Schulman of Urbana College on "The Legal Issues of the War in Western Sahara," which I am submitting for inclusion in the Hearing Report. But I feel it is important to add here that even Spain, the colonizing and administering party of the former Spanish Sahara, in the person of Adolfo Suarez, the Head of the Spanish Government, has stated publicly that although having definitively ended its administration of the territory on February 26, 1976, Spain could not transfer sovereignty of the territory because it did not possess it, and that Spain is for a just solution which would involve the self-determination of the Saharawi people.

An Ad Hoc Committee of the O.A.U. has studied the problem and it is on the agenda for the O.A.U. Heads of State meeting this month in Monrovia. It is important, it seems to me, that in policy decisions the U.S. be cognizant of the fact that no nation in the world (outside of Morocco) recognizes Moroccan sovereignty of this territory while 22 nations regard the S.A.D.R. as a sovereign state.

In the days that I travelled in the S.A.D.R. recently, in a region generally held to be controlled by Moroccan forces, I saw no Moroccans. In those ten days we covered between 2,500 and 3,000 kilometers. We travelled during the day and at night. Only in two areas was I aware of a Moroccan presence. In Echederia which is close to the southern Moroccan border I heard a reconnaissance plane. In an area about 30 kilometers from el Aiun I heard occasional reconnaissance planes and saw a flight of 3 U.S. F-5's. I also heard a helicopter that had a plane cover. (I was asked not to look up as my glasses glinted, and I can't see

without them.) In those miles I noted that Polisario forces have bases throughout the Moroccan "controlled" territory. I visited the liberated towns of Tifariti, Echederia, Haousa, Amgala, and Lemsig (sp?) on the Atlantic Coast. Our group, my husband and two Spanish journalists, stayed with Polisario units throughout the territory, drank tea and warmed ourselves at fires while reconnaissance planes were about, observed Polisario send up flares to signify our position when our landrover broke down about 40 kilometers from el Aiun. What all this indicated to me is that Polisario's claims to military success are true. One field commander told us that they would soon win the war. That conviction after several years of war (6 for many combatants), Polisario's knowledge of the terrain and its ability to fight a guerrilla war, the Saharawis commitment to independence of their territory (soldiers in the field, people in the camps), indicate that Polisario will, indeed, win this war that was begun by Morocco and Mauritania.

I repeat the statement about Moroccan and Mauritanian responsibility for the instability in the region because it is essential that basic facts not be forgotten. The instability in North-West Africa stems from the greed of those two nations and those nations that have aided them in attempting to satisfy that greed, and not from the Polisario Front that has defended its people and its territory. Further escalation of the conflict will lead to even greater instability in the region. The present Mauritanian instability in government is a direct result of Mauritania's efforts to subjugate part of the S.A.D.R. The same might well be true for Morocco if the conflict continues.

I have been told by the U.S. State Department in a number of letters that the official position of the U.S. in the conflict is one of neutrality. It is difficult to square this statement with the fact that the U.S. ignored Moroccan violations of its 1960 arms agreement with the U.S. from 1975 to 1978 and continues to do so (use of U.S. arms outside of Moroccan territory). It is difficult to square this with the dramatic increases in arms aid and sales by the U.S. to Morocco just prior to and just after the Green March of 1975. It is hard to square this with the testimony I received of a Moroccan pilot of an F-5 downed over the S.A.D.R. last summer, or when I pick up bullets dated 1976 from an American-made machine gun (Dayton, Ohio) around the well at Amgala (S.A.D.R.) which was the last battle of the Moroccan troops at that site. I find this difficult to square with the F-5's I saw in the S.A.D.R. flying above my head, or when I learn we are supplying replacement parts for those same F-5's even though we know they will be used in the S.A.D.R., or when I photograph U.S. arms captured from the Moroccans.

In recent days President Carter has asked U.S. citizens to reaffirm their belief in their nation, in its traditional beliefs and goals. As I learned these goals as a child, as an adolescent, and as an adult who has lived and travelled in several nations (thus learning to appreciate my own country and our freedoms), I grew to believe that the U.S. stands for a nation committed to democracy, to personal and national liberty, to equality, to life, and to the pursuit of happiness in justice---this, despite our imperfections. I cannot see how the rejection of these principles through support of an illegal aggression by another state, even a friendly state, serves our nation or our national interest. U.S. contribution to the genocide of the Saharawi people is unthinkable. Such hypocritical activity could only lead to the undoing of our own nation and the continued eroding of its place in the international community, particularly among the nations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. I am not advocating that the U.S. abandon its friends, but I am stating that support of friends can not be rooted in the sale of arms and support for an untenable position. Some newspapers report that there are U.S. technicians already at el Aiun. We continue to provide U.S. military training for Moroccan personnel who will fight in this desert war.

We continue to send arms to Morocco for this conflict, even while saying we cannot be certain that they will use them for it. In light of this, and in light of the very just cause of the Saharawi people, I urge that the U.S. exercise extreme restraint in arms sales and grants to Morocco, insist on Moroccan compliance with the 1960 arms agreement or cease all arms shipments, and assist Morocco diplomatically to extricate itself from this war, which like our own experience in Viet Nam, is causing the economic and moral ruin of a friendly nation.

Respectfully submitted,



Anne Lippert
July 23, 1979