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Morocco's compromise initiative for the Western Sahara (Updated: April 25, 2007)

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U.S. calls for talks between Morocco and Polisario rebels

The Associated Press
Published: April 11, 2007

WASHINGTON: The State Department praised Morocco's autonomy plan for Western Sahara and expressed hope Wednesday that it will be a catalyst for discussions with Polisario Front rebels.

After a meeting with a Moroccan delegation to discuss Western Sahara problems, Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns described the Moroccan initiative "a serious and credible proposal" to provide autonomy for the region.

Burns suggested there cannot be a final settlement without Polisario participation.

"The United States hopes Morocco's presentation of its initiative to the United Nations will spur discussion and create an opportunity for Morocco and the Polisario to engage in direct negotiations, without preconditions, to resolve the Western Sahara dispute," he said.

Burns' meeting with the Moroccans occurred as the North African nation delivered the autonomy proposal to U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in New York.



Morocco calls for a democratically self-governing Western Sahara under its control

The Associated Press
Published: April 11, 2007

UNITED NATIONS: Morocco delivered its autonomy proposal for the disputed Western Sahara to the U.N. secretary-general on Wednesday, a day after the rival Polisario Front called for a referendum on independence.

Morocco, which took control of the desert region in the 1970s after Spain pulled out, proposed that the territory govern itself while remaining part of the North African kingdom.

The Polisario Front, an Algerian-backed independence movement, asked for free elections to decide the region's status and offered a "special relationship" with Morocco if it does gain independence.

The Moroccan plan "aims to allow all Saharawis to democratically manage their affairs, while respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the kingdom," Morocco's ambassador, El Mostafa Sahel, said in a statement in French released after he met Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to deliver the proposal.

The Polisario plan, delivered Tuesday, would offer Saharawis three choices: independence, autonomy within the Moroccan state or total integration with Morocco, said Ahmed Boukhari, the Polisario representative to the U.N. The proposal also outlines a plan for a special economic and political relationship with Morocco, if Western Sahara votes for independence.

Boukhari said Morocco's proposal was "based on something that cannot be acceptable. It is based on that all of Western Sahara belongs to Morocco."

That issue must be decided by elections, he said.

Before elections, Boukhari said, the Polisario was ready to "engage in direct negotiations" with Morocco.

In October, the U.N. Security Council extended a peacekeeping mission that for 15 years has monitored a cease-fire between Moroccan troops and Polisario rebels in the sparsely populated, mineral-rich region. But the U.N. has been unable to resolve the standoff between the Polisario Front and the Moroccan government.

Council members have said they want to see progress on a negotiated solution to the impasse before the current mandate for the 225-member U.N. mission expires on April 30.

U.N. deputy spokeswoman Marie Okabe said that during Ban's meeting with the Moroccan ambassador, the secretary-general "expressed his appreciation as well as his hope that the parties would find a mutually acceptable solution."

Acting U.S. Ambassador Alejandro Wolff said he had received a description of Morocco's plan and was "encouraged by the fact it encouraged a process of negotiations."

"The key focus here is going to be to see if we can get the parties to engage directly," he added.

After meeting with a Moroccan delegation in Washington, U.S. Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns called the country's plan "a serious and credible proposal to provide real autonomy for the Western Sahara."

Before the plan was submitted to the secretary-general, the French Foreign Ministry said it offered a constructive step toward negotiations and the possibility of "a political solution endorsed by all the parties within the framework of the United Nations."

Sahel said the plan grew out of "a large process of democratic consultations at the local and national levels with the participation of political parties."

He called the plan "innovative, responsible and open" and said it respected international law and U.N. principles.

The initiative offers "a chance for peace and promising perspectives for a better future, based on stability, security, democracy and prosperity for all the countries of the Maghreb," Sahel said.

Morocco and Mauritania split Western Sahara after its Spanish colonizers left the territory in 1975. Full-scale war broke out the following year, and Morocco took over the whole of Western Sahara after Mauritania pulled out in 1979.

The fighting, which pitted 15,000 Polisario guerrillas against Morocco's U.S.-equipped army, ended in 1991 with a U.N.-negotiated cease-fire that called for a referendum on the region's future. But the vote has never happened.

Morocco presents W.Sahara autonomy plan-official

Wed 11 Apr 2007, 13:45 GMT

[-] Text [+]

RABAT, April 11 (Reuters) - Morocco has presented to the United Nations an autonomy plan for Western Sahara it sees as a solution to Africa's oldest territorial dispute, a senior government official said on Wednesday.

"Morocco's representative Mustapha Sahel handed a copy of the autonomy plan to U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today," he told Reuters.

Rabat says its staunch ally France and neighbouring Spain lent their backing to the plan which, officials said, grants larger autonomy for Sahrawis to run their domestic affairs in the former Spanish colony.

Morocco's central government will keep control of symbols of state sovereignty like defence and diplomacy, officials said.

"France and Spain support our plan because they see it as a solution to satisfy the demands of the population in Western Sahara as well as the demands of the international community," the top government official said, adding that details of the proposal would be made public later on.

Morocco claims centuries-old rights over the territory rich in phosphates, fisheries and possibly offshore oil.

Rabat annexed Western Sahara in 1975 when Spain withdrew, triggering a low-level guerrilla war with the Polisario Front, which is headquartered in Algeria.

A U.N. ceasefire agreement in 1991 promised a referendum to decide the fate of the territory. The vote never happened and Rabat now says such a referendum is impossible and autonomy is the most it will offer.

Morocco says its plan would ensure all political and human rights for the Sahrawis in the territory, and stability and prosperity in the Maghreb region as it would end strained links with Algeria because of the dispute.

Polisario, which seeks the independence of the territory, has rejected any autonomy plan and offered its own "flexible" solution.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Polisario said in a statement it had presented its plan to the United Nations on Tuesday.

The Polisario described its proposal as "a flexible and constructive solution which guarantees Sahrawi national rights" but gave no specific details.

Morocco willing to negotiate with Polisario on proposed autonomy for Western Sahara

The Associated Press
Published: April 13, 2007

RABAT, Morocco: Morocco is willing to negotiate details of its proposed autonomy plan for Western Sahara with the independence-seeking Polisario Front, Morocco's Interior Minister said Friday.

Morocco has resisted past offers by Polisario to engage in talks over the fate of the desert territory.

Interior Minister Chakib Benmoussa told reporters the plan was "largely open to negotiation" and stressed that Morocco would not press ahead with it without the agreement of the United Nations and Polisario.

He said the plan's language was purposefully broad to allow for open debate with Polisario. Previously, Morocco has said it would implement the plan with U.N. approval even if Polisario objected.

The Moroccan plan, submitted Wednesday to the U.N. Security Council, would create a regional government in Western Sahara to oversee day-to-day affairs.

But the Moroccan state would retain control of major areas such as defense, foreign relations and customs. Western Sahara would continue to use the Moroccan flag, currency and stamps and would recognize King Mohamed VI as the highest religious authority in the land.

On Tuesday, Polisario called for an independence referendum and offered to forge a "special relationship" with Morocco should it lead to a sovereign Saharawi state.

Benmoussa called Polisario's proposal a stalling tactic designed to sow confusion. "We consider autonomy the only way out" of the conflict, Benmoussa said.

Morocco has been keen to promote its plan, but its submission to the U.N. was overshadowed by three suicide bombings Tuesday in Casablanca, the kingdom's commercial capital.

Morocco and Mauritania split Western Sahara in 1975 after former colonizer Spain ceded them the territory. Full-scale war broke out the following year with Polisario, an Algerian-backed independence movement founded in 1973 to contest Spanish rule. Mauritania withdrew its troops in 1979, but Morocco continued fighting until the United Nations brokered a cease-fire in 1991.

The United Nations installed a peacekeeping mission to organize an independence referendum, but it has foundered on disagreement over voter lists. In 2003, Morocco rejected a U.N. plan, accepted by Polisario, that envisaged temporary autonomy followed by a referendum in which both Saharawis and Moroccan settlers would vote.

Morocco has annexed most of Western Sahara, where Moroccan settlers now outnumber an estimated 90,000 Saharawis by more than two to one. Saharawi and international human rights groups complain of regular abuses by Moroccan police against pro-independence activists.

Some 160,000 Saharawi refugees live in Polisario's bleak camps in southwest Algeria and depend on foreign aid. The Moroccan and Polisario armies still face off across a desert no man's land.

The conflict poisons relations between regional big-hitters Morocco and Algeria, which the U.S. wants working together against terrorism.

Dispute over desert land limits counterterror progress in North Africa, officials say

The Associated Press
Published: April 13, 2007

WASHINGTON: With its endless expanse of desolate sands, the Western Sahara might not seem worth fighting over.

But the thinly populated, Italy-sized region on Africa's northwest coast is at the heart of a three-decade-long dispute that, U.S. officials and analysts say, inhibits the fight against terrorism across North Africa.

Any doubts about the seriousness of the terrorist problem in the region were undercut by attacks in Morocco, on Tuesday and Saturday, and Algeria, on Wednesday. In the latest attack, two suicide bombers blew themselves up in Casablanca near an American cultural center.

The incidents followed expressions of interest by al-Qaida in expanding its activities in the area.

It is a region that offers relatively easy access to potential targets across the Mediterranean in Europe. Detection of Muslim militants can be difficult in North Africa, with its undulating deserts and majestic mountains.

For three decades Morocco and Algeria have been divided over the phosphate-rich Western Sahara. Morocco claims sovereignty in the territory. Algeria supports the pro-independence Polisario Front rebels, who are based in Algeria, a short distance from the Western Saharan border.

The United States believes resolving the conflict could be a catalyst for improved counterterror cooperation throughout North Africa and for a free trade agreement that would promote economic growth and reduce the appeal of terrorist groups for unemployed youth.

"The United States remains concerned that that Western Sahara is a primary stumbling block for regional cooperation and development goals for the region," State Department deputy spokesman Tom Casey said.

"We look forward to realistic and workable solutions that bring peace, stability and economic prosperity" to the region that encompasses Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia.

Jonathan Alterman, of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, says Algerian-Moroccan counterterrorism cooperation is too limited. "There is no question they could cooperate more. It seems to me that the benefits of resolving the (Western Sahara) issue are obvious," he says.

An internal report by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, leaked in October, criticized Morocco for not giving Western Saharans the right to determine their future.

It accused Morocco of abusing the rights of pro-independence activists and using excessive force on them. Morocco said the report failed to take into account Polisario rights violations.

Of particular concern to the U.S. is the Algerian-based Salafist Group for Call and Combat. A year ago, the State Department's then-counterterrorism chief, Henry Crumpton, told a conference in Algeria that the group had become a "regional terrorist organization," and had forged links with militant groups in North Africa and beyond.

Months after Crumpton spoke, the group established formal ties with al-Qaida and later staged a series of seven near-simultaneous bombings in the Kabylie region of Algeria, killing six and wounding 30. In January, Tunisia announced that it had killed 12 and arrested 15 extremists who, it said, had crossed the border from Algeria.

Two suicide bombings in Algiers on Wednesday killed 33 people and wounded more than 200. Among the targets was the main government building in the capital.

The day before, in the Moroccan coastal city of Casablanca, suicide bombers killed one policeman and wounded 10 people.

Saturday's attack in Casablanca injured one woman. Police arrested a man wearing an explosive belt and two other suspects in the neighborhood, which is also home to the American Consulate and a synagogue, an Interior Ministry official said.

A cease-fire between Morocco and the Polisario has been in effect since 1991. It is monitored by a 230-member U.N. peacekeeping force whose mandate ends April 30.

The U.S. has pushed for a settlement in Western Sahara, but compromise does not come easy. James A. Baker, the former secretary of state, tried for seven years to broker a settlement on behalf of the United Nations but gave up in 2004.

Morocco presented an autonomy plan to the United Nations on Thursday that would permit the election of a parliament and create a regional government in Western Sahara to oversee day-to-day affairs. But sovereignty would remain with the Moroccan government in Rabat.

In a new sign of flexibility, Morocco indicated a willingness to negotiate details of the plan with the Polisario rebels.

Days before the shift in the Moroccan position, Polisario leaders had urged an independence referendum and offered to forge a "special relationship" with Morocco should it lead to a sovereign state for the Saharawis, as the people of Western Sahara are known.

The Bush administration made clear its view to Moroccan officials this past week that the Polisario interests must be taken into account if lasting peace is to be achieved.

Overall, Morocco is one of the United States' closest allies among the Arabs. The Polisario's closest ally is Cuba, but it has strong diplomatic support among other developing countries, particularly in Africa.

The Washington Times

www.washingtontimes.com

A solution in the Western Sahara?

Published April 13, 2007

On Wednesday, the Moroccan government presented the United Nations with a framework for autonomy for the Western Sahara region, taking the first step, which the United Nations has called for repeatedly, toward a political dialogue with its longtime adversary, the Polisario Front. The plan is a starting point, but it immediately won plaudits from Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns, who called it "a serious and credible proposal."

The bloody conflict between the Moroccan government and the Algerian-backed Polisario Front, which represents the Sahwari tribe, dates back more than three decades. From 1975 until a U.N.-brokered cease-fire agreement in 1991, Moroccan forces were engaged in a guerrilla war with the Polisario. Since then, the two sides have been locked in a protracted political struggle over the territory known as the Western Sahara, where the Sahrawi claim sovereignty.

The terms of the 1991 cease-fire agreement were not fully met until August 2005, when the Polisario, under pressure from the international community -- particularly the United Nations and the United States -- finally released the last 404 Moroccan prisoners of war. The heinous conditions the POWs faced, including barbaric torture and forced labor, was a human face on the political struggle, and revealed the true nature of the Polisario Front, which had long portrayed itself as victim.

Allowing the Sahrawi people to vote on a referendum seems like a simple enough solution, but the Polisario's insistence on restricting the voter lists locked that process into more than six years of effectively fruitless discussion. Recognizing this deadlock, the United Nations shifted its approach to encouraging direct negotiations between the Moroccan government and the Polisario. If the two sides come together and negotiate a mutually acceptable solution, the thinking goes, the issue of who was allowed to vote wouldn't be so contentious.

The Moroccan initiative is the first, and to date the only, proposed framework for a political solution to come from either side, and from it the two sides can craft a final agreement. It preserves Moroccan sovereignty, but gives the Western Sahara sufficient autonomy to become effectively self-governing. The autonomous region would, for instance, have a local legislature that would, in turn, elect an executive, who would be invested by the king.

Resolving this issue is also necessary for the entire Maghreb region to move forward economically. The region will prosper collectively, but that kind of integration isn't possible until this political issue has been resolved. Inasmuch as poverty and dire economic circumstances fuel the recruitment of terrorists, two incidents this week -- one an attack in Algiers claimed by a group that now calls itself al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, the other a standoff in Casablanca that ended after three suicide bombers blew themselves up and a fourth was killed by police -- testify to the importance of helping the region.

The Polisario now needs to reciprocate the Moroccan government's move to the negotiating table. Getting it to do so may be challenging, however. The Polisario continues to demand a referendum and threaten renewed violence. International pressure was crucial to bringing about a

successful, albeit much belated, resolution of the Moroccan POW situation, and it will be important again in compelling the Polisario to come to the table and discuss a political solution for the Western Sahara. A firm line is required. The United States can make clear to the Polisario that if it cares for the Sahrawi people, it needs to begin serious negotiations.



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INTERNATIONAL INTELLIGENCE - ANALYSIS

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Analysis: Morocco's dual offensive

By CLAUDE SALHANI

UPI International Editor

WASHINGTON, April 16, 2007 (UPI) -- As Morocco faces renewed violence from terrorist groups affiliated with al-Qaida, authorities have counter-attacked by launching a dual assault: anti-terror police operations to thwart the Islamist terrorists and a political campaign aimed at resolving the long-standing dispute over Western Sahara.

On April 10 U.S. State Department Undersecretary Nicholas Burns met with a senior Moroccan delegation to discuss the Western Sahara issue, while at the same time an autonomy proposal was delivered by the Moroccans to U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in New York.

EI Mostafa Sahel, the new permanent representative of Morocco to the United Nations, told United Press International that the proposal came in "reply to the international community."

"Morocco has come up with a new proposal," said the diplomat. "There is something new, to put hand in hand to build something, to build peace in agreement with the people of the Sahara," he said.

The Moroccan ambassador told UPI said he fears a continuation of the conflict would benefit al-Qaida. Although there are no links between the two conflicts, continued unrest in Western Sahara can only benefit the terrorists.

Indeed, al-Qaida has re-emerged in Morocco last week by staging a series of suicide attacks, the latest resulting in the death of only the attackers.

Sahel said that Osama bin Laden's terrorist organization has established a base of operation in southern Algeria from where they can hit targets in the Maghreb and from there in Europe.

Al-Qaida's activities in the Maghreb are "very, very serious," the Moroccan ambassador said. "These are very dangerous groups who have lots of money from the traffic of arms and cigarettes and people and drugs. They have money, they have people and they have a philosophy."

Meanwhile, Moroccan officials have arrested two men suspected of leading the group that carried out the recent suicide attacks in Casablanca. Security experts believe the two are connected to a series of explosions in Casablanca last week and in March.

Moroccan police arrested the men Saturday, soon after two suicide bombers detonated their explosives belts in Casablanca, in a street where the U.S. cultural center and the U.S. Consulate are located.

Security in the area prevented the attackers from reaching their targets, who ended up killing only themselves and wounding a woman passerby. Authorities identified one of the dead bombers as Mohamed Maha. Another suspected terrorist was wearing an explosives belt at the time of his arrest.

Last week a man blew himself up when police broke into an apartment in the course of their investigation into the March 11 suicide bombing at an Internet cafe in Casablanca that wounded four people. Police shot and killed a second suspect before he could detonate his explosives. A third man fled and later blew himself up.

The re-emerging problems with al-Qaida might partially explain why after decades of stagnation, Morocco is re-launching a diplomatic offensive to pacify once and for all the crisis in the Sahara, which since it has occupied after the departure of the Spanish has remained like a desert thorn in Morocco's side.

Burns called Morocco's initiative "a serious and credible proposal to provide real autonomy for the Western Sahara." The United States hopes Morocco's initiative will create an opportunity for Morocco and the Polisario, a Sahrawi rebel movement working for the separation of Western Sahara from Morocco, to engage in direct negotiations, without preconditions, to resolve the Western Sahara dispute.

The proposal calling for negotiating autonomy for the Sahara Region includes a Moroccan commitment to a final political solution through a "positive, constructive and dynamic process" aimed at bringing autonomy to the Sahara, "within the framework of the kingdom's sovereignty and national unity."

The initiative says it would guarantee individual freedoms, raise economic and social development and bring hope for a better future to the region's populations by putting an end to separation and exile and promoting reconciliation.

The Moroccan initiative calls for a referendum at the outcome of the negotiations and calls on the other parties "to avail the opportunity to write a new chapter in the region's history."

Morocco guarantees Sahrawis inside and outside the territory to play a leading role in the bodies and institutions of the region, without discrimination or exclusion.

"The Sahara populations will themselves run their affairs democratically, through legislative, executive and judicial bodies enjoying exclusive powers. They will have the financial resources needed for the region's development in all fields, and will take an active part in the nation's economic, social and cultural life," the initiative suggests.

Morocco, however, wants to retain power in the "royal domains," especially in regards to defense, external relations and the constitutional and religious prerogatives of the king.

In short, the initiative would mean acceptance of Morocco's sovereignty over the territory, a fact that the Polisario rejects.

"That is unacceptable," Ahmed Boukhari, the Polisario's U.N. representative, told UPI. "The Moroccan initiative says this territory, the Western Sahara, is Moroccan. They are saying this territory is mine."

The Polisario also presented the same day their proposal to the U.N. secretary-general. It is based on calling for a referendum as well, but unlike Morocco's initiative, the Polisario's offers three solutions: autonomy, independence or full integration.

The United Nations has rejected both proposals and has called for direct negotiations between the two parties.

"We are back at square zero," Boukhari said.



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Benaissa slams Algeria's stance on Western Sahara issue

Rabat accuses Algiers of trying to wreck WSahara plan

Moroccan FM accuses Algeria of encouraging Polisario to present its own plans about Western Sahara's autonomy.

RABAT - Morocco accused Algeria on Monday of trying to wreck its proposal to give autonomy to the disputed Western Sahara territory by encouraging the separatist Polisario Front there to present its own plans.

Speaking less than a week after the plan was presented to the UN, Foreign Minister Mohamed Benaissa told a parliamentary committee that Algeria was attacking it "based on erroneous and unfounded grounds".

He said Algiers was "encouraging the Polisario Front to deceive the international community by tabling an initiative that has no other aim but to block our own constructive proposal".

On Wednesday, the day Rabat presented the proposal to the UN, the Polisario Front submitted its own plan advocating independence in the Western Sahara and "good neighbourly relations with the Kingdom of Morocco".

Benaissa said the Moroccan proposal was "an open proposition aimed at reaching a consensual and realistic settlement that could be enriched by suggestions from other parties during negotiations".

The Algerian-backed Polisario Front fought Morocco for independence in the Western Sahara from when the territory was annexed by Rabat in the 1970s until a UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991.



Middle East Times

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Commentary: Morocco's crucial role

Marc S. Ellenbogen

UPI

April 17, 2007

TANGIER, Morocco -- The two explosions by Islamist cells in Casablanca in the past week should not eclipse Morocco's crucial role for Europe and the United States. Morocco is a strong economic partner and an indispensable strategic ally. It should be made a full member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and have complete access to European markets.

Even though an earlier March 11 explosion marked three years to the day of the ghastly Madrid bombings, vigilance by Morocco's security services prevented greater damage. Since the five suicide bombings that killed 45 people in Morocco in May 2003, police have pursued an unprecedented crackdown on suspected militants. Thousands of potential terrorists and their allies - including some accused of working with [Al Qaeda](#) affiliates to plot attacks in Morocco and abroad - have been arrested. While strengthening security, Morocco has continued with economic and social reforms.

King [Mohammed VI](#) of Morocco is a modernizing, forward-thinking, and energetic leader. Over the past five years he has implemented remarkable reforms in this North African country. The monarch has focused on literacy, healthcare, poverty, and economic equality.

In January 2006, a ratified [Free Trade Agreement](#) (FTA) with Morocco made it the first country in Africa to have an FTA with the United States. Hassan Abouyoub, the former trade minister and chief foreign policy adviser to the king, has described it as "the best market access package of any emerging economy in the world." Trade between Morocco and the United States is about \$1 billion per year.

At the first briefing of its kind to the king's Cabinet, Global Panel and the Prague Society brought ranking members of the Cabinet together with leaders from the Czech Republic, Germany, Romania, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The Morocco Strategic Initiative represented business, the legislature, military, security, ministers, and the NGO sector. Over four days, ideas were brainstormed and later presented to the king's counsel, interior minister, [national security](#) adviser, deputy interior and foreign ministers, and the head of the local government council.

Morocco is roughly the size of France (including Western Sahara) and California (or Sweden) excluding Western Sahara. It lies just 72 kilometers (45 miles) from Spain, immediately across the Strait of Gibraltar, bordering the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea. The northern coast and interior are mountainous with large areas of plateaus. The rest of the country consists of valleys and rich coastal plains. Its highest point is Jbel Toubkal in the High Atlas Mountains at around 4,189 meters (13,745 feet) - some 200 meters shorter than California's Mount Whitney - making it the highest peak in North Africa.

Morocco has a population of 32 million. Its life expectancy is around 70 years - comparable to the West. The Moroccan population is young, with the average age being 24 whereas the equivalent in the US is 36. Ninety-eight percent of Moroccans are Muslim - Judaism, Islam, and Christianity have peacefully coexisted in the country for thousands of years. Berber, Arabic, and French are the principal spoken languages. Berber culture dates back some 4,000 years - predating Arabic culture in Morocco.

A crucial date for the North African country will be the September 7 national elections. In the past, Islamists and their allies could count on getting up to 30 percent of the vote, but not 30 percent of the seats. If they fall to 20 percent, it will be a sure sign that the reforms in Morocco are working. Regardless, Global Panel and the Prague Society are committed to joining international election-monitoring teams, the same ones that have previously monitored US elections.

Morocco is particularly interested in issues surrounding the Mediterranean basin. It has FTAs with Spain, France, and Italy but would like to expand these agreements. The revitalization of the Barcelona Process is a key goal.

The Barcelona Process (Euro-Mediterranean Partnership) began in 1995. An ambitious initiative, it calls for a framework of political, social, and economic relations between the European Union and Partners of the Southern Mediterranean: Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey. Cyprus and Malta are now also members of the EU. The Barcelona Declaration laid the foundations for a common security area, a common economic zone (free trade area), and rapprochement between the various cultures of the zone.

A key issue that has long dogged Morocco is the Western Sahara. Moroccan Western Sahara has been on the list of UN non-self-governing territories since 1960, even though the restoration to Morocco by Spain in 1975 was legal. Since 1991, there has been a ceasefire in place between the Moroccan government, the Polisario Front, and the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. Most of the territory - among the most sparsely populated worldwide - is controlled by Morocco. International powers have generally taken an ambiguous and neutral position and have pushed for a peaceful resolution.

As with most territorial issues, the United Nations' involvement has been mostly ineffective - even counterproductive. It would be best to remove the issue from the UN agenda and allow the principal parties to negotiate among themselves - with external help from foreign experts, should the need arise.

Morocco is an inspiring and key emerging democracy; it just needs to do a better job of promoting its marvelous story.

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End the Stalemate in the Sahara

by Talal Belrhiti

04.17.2007

The Kingdom of Morocco, an unflinching ally of the United States in the war on terror, faces a major threat to its national sovereignty. This threat comes from the Polisario, a secessionist group, which is challenging the territorial integrity of the kingdom. Such a challenge will either be supported or rebuffed by the international community when the United Nations Security Council debates Morocco's proposal to grant autonomy to the Sahara region on April 20. America ought to support the plan and reward Morocco, which has helped the United States prosecute the war on terror, in addition to relentlessly pursuing democratic reforms.

Morocco achieved independence from France in 1956, but its southern part remained under Spanish control. Morocco immediately called for full independence of all its territory, and through negotiations regained Tarfaya in 1958, Sidi Ifni in 1969 and the rest of the Sahara in 1975. The Cuban- and Algerian-backed Polisario refused to recognize Moroccan sovereignty and waged a guerilla war of secession which ended in 1991 after a UN-brokered ceasefire agreement.

The Polisario is the Spanish acronym for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro, and was launched in 1973 by a group of Moroccan students of Sahraoui origin led by the charismatic Mohamed el-Ouali. The Polisario, which originally did not make any declarations for independence from Morocco, favored violent struggle against Spain and eventually grew impatient with Moroccan gradualism. Moreover, the period leading up to 1975 in Morocco was one of intense ideological and political struggle, as Marxists and other anti-monarchists intended to overthrow the king. The monarchy fought back by repressing most leftists, including members of the then-embryonic Polisario. Disillusioned, the latter sought and received material support from revolutionary states, such as Libya, Cuba, and Algeria. Today, the group has softened its socialist revolutionary rhetoric, but continues to draw support from Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez. Though the Cold War ideological differences between Morocco and the Polisario no longer persist, the problem of the Sahara remains as a phantom, an artificial conflict from a by-gone era.

The Polisario argues that Morocco has no right to claim the desert territory. Its members point out that, historically, some tribes did not always favor Moroccan sovereignty. True, but they neglect the fact that for centuries, many more tribes pledged allegiance to the Moroccan sultan than not. Moreover, the International Court of Justice ruled in 1975 that historically "there were legal ties between this territory and the Kingdom of Morocco."

After the 1991 ceasefire agreement both Morocco and the Polisario showed good will to

resolve this issue and agreed to a referendum for the self-determination of the people of the Sahara. However, after years of preparation, this plan has proven unworkable because the two sides cannot agree on a common list of eligible voters, thereby postponing the referendum indefinitely. After 16 years, this process has become an irritant for the UN and a burden on the people of the region. The United Nations continues to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to keep its mission, MINURSO, operating; one third of the Sahraoui people continue to suffer in the desolate, sequestered Algerian desert camps of Tindouf; and Morocco's efforts for political and economic reform have been hamstrung. All the while, the Maghreb Union, which promises to deliver economic integration and prosperity to the countries of the Maghreb, remains in limbo. In times and situations like this, a swift and fair solution to the problem is no longer a luxury; it is a moral and strategic necessity.

After two years of painstaking consultation and negotiations with various contingents, including tribal leaders and human rights groups, Morocco is proposing a solution. Morocco's proposal gives the people of the region all the prerogatives of self-rule. The plan respects international standards for autonomy, guarantees the social and cultural characteristics of the Sahara region, allows people to rule themselves democratically, and guarantees Moroccan sovereignty and the security and stability of the region.

It is time for serious leadership to emerge from the Polisario and respond in a constructive manner to Rabat's proposal. So far, however, Polisario chief Mohamed Abdelaziz, who has been at the helm of the group for 31 years, has responded with what he calls a "flexible" plan, which proposes a special relationship between Rabat and the newly proposed state in the Sahara if such a state is formed by a referendum. Unfortunately, this plan is not a serious proposal; it is merely another call for the same referendum that the parties have been unable to implement for 16 years.

At a time when North Africa is facing an onslaught of renewed Al-Qaeda activity, the United States and the international community ought to support the stability of the region by safeguarding the territorial integrity of Morocco. The kingdom has played a positive role in the Middle East and Africa, and has been unique in the region for initiating far reaching economic, social and political reforms. The United States in particular ought to show its goodwill to one of its oldest allies by taking a clear stand at the UN in support of Morocco's initiative to dialogue. With this problem solved, Morocco has the potential to serve as a beacon to the region in terms of political and economic reform and will continue to play an essential role in the fight against terrorism. The alternative is bleak: conflict in North Africa will continue, and a Sahara with weak authority will become a marketplace for groups with the most nefarious motives such as drug trafficking, human smuggling and terror.

Talal Belrhiti is a director at the Maghreb Center, a Washington, DC think tank. The views expressed here are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Maghreb Center.

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=22252&Cr=western&Cr1=sahara#>



Secretary-General recommends 6-month extension of UN mission in Western Sahara

18 April 2007 – Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon today recommends a further six-month extension in the mandate of the United Nations mission in the Western Sahara until October, calling also for the Security Council to urge Morocco and the Frente Polisario to start negotiations in an effort to re-start the long-stalled peace process in the region.

In his latest [report](#) to the 15-member Council, which covers the last six months, Mr. Ban writes that although the overall situation between the two sides has remained “generally calm,” the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) is still needed to monitor the ceasefire.

“I recommend that the Security Council call upon the parties, Morocco and the Frente Polisario, to enter into negotiations without preconditions, with a view to achieving a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution that will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara.” Neighbouring Algeria and Mauritania, should also be invited to the negotiations, he recommends.

“I believe that the presence of [MINURSO](#) remains indispensable for the maintenance of the ceasefire in Western Sahara. Therefore, I recommend that the Security Council extend the mandate of MINURSO for a further period of six months, until 31 October 2007.”

Mr. Ban also calls for the lifting of restrictions of movement imposed on UN personnel, and for all sides to extend their full cooperation to the Mission and “ensure that basic peacekeeping principles are upheld.”

He further highlights the plight of Western Saharan refugees and calls for international assistance to help them, while also urging all parties to respect the human rights of the people of Western Sahara and continue to work with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights ([OHCHR](#)).

MINURSO was established in 1991 to monitor the ceasefire between Morocco and the Frente Polisario and organize a referendum on self-determination in Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony which Morocco has claimed as its own and where Frente Polisario has been fighting for independence.

But in April 2004 Morocco said it could not accept a referendum that included independence as an option. Efforts to resolve the impasse between the two sides have stalled in recent years, with no direct political negotiations taking place.

Morocco's autonomy project for Sahara 'historic,' Algeria should accept negotiations, US congressman

Washington, Apr. 23 - U.S congressman for Florida, Lincoln Diaz-Balart said Morocco's plan to grant autonomy to its Southern Provinces -The Sahara- is "an historic opportunity" to resolve the 30-year-old dispute that opposes Morocco to the Algeria-backed Polisario separatists over the control of the Sahara.



Diaz-Balart told MAP the initiative is "very commendable." The Moroccan initiative, which was submitted to the UN Secretary General early April, consists in granting substantial autonomy to the Sahara, a former Spanish colony that was ceded to Morocco in 1975 under the Madrid Accord, and for which the Polisario is claiming independence.

"The government of Morocco has shown its willingness to negotiate in good faith," Diaz-Balart said, voicing hope to "see the same good faith by the other parties." Officially, the Moroccan initiative is titled "Moroccan Initiative for Negotiating an Autonomy Statute for The Sahara region."

In his report on the initiative, the United Nations chief, Ban Ki-Moon, too called on the parties to enter into negotiations without preconditions. The same call was issued by the UN Security Council members, who insisted "there should be negotiations between the parties."

Diaz-Balart called for "support(ing) diplomatically the Kingdom of Morocco to help the process," underlining that the initiative would not only benefit Morocco and the region, but also the Maghreb Union countries –Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania, Libya and Tunisia. He added that the Moroccan proposal "will benefit the economic development, the creation of jobs and the political stability of the entire Maghreb."

The initiative, which was submitted to the UN chief on April 11, was lauded as "serious and credible" by the U.S., while British Prime Minister, Tony Blair admitted the Moroccan government had "worked hard" to elaborate the plan.

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Sahara dispute: Morocco's autonomy initiative, 'serious and responsible', US Official

Rabat, Apr. 25 - Morocco's proposal to grant substantial autonomy to its southern provinces -the Sahara- is "serious and responsible", said US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Maghreb and Middle-East region, Gordon Gray.

"After several months of preparation and work, Morocco has presented an initiative that we have examined and which we deem serious and responsible," Gray told, Tuesday, the Qatari satellite channel Al-Jazeera, noting that Polisario "has a different concept, which is its right."

The USA endeavors in favor of direct negotiations between the two parties -Morocco and the Algerian-backed separatist movement Polisario- in order to settle the disagreements and settle this conflict that "has long lasted," he said.

"What is essential in this respect is to settle this issue based on a method that takes into consideration self-determination, and which the two parties deem in conformity with their interests," said Gray, underlining that "self-determination does not necessarily mean independence."

As for Algeria's stance, the US official said "the Algerian government agrees with us that direct negotiations are the appropriate path to settle the problem. The Moroccans, for their part, affirm they have a proposal and an initiative that they will present to debate."

In a press release of the Office of the US State Department spokesman, earlier this month, the USA described as "serious and credible" Morocco's proposal.

The spokesman said "the United States hopes Morocco's presentation of its initiative to the United Nations will spur discussion and create opportunity for Morocco and the Polisario to engage in direct negotiations, without preconditions, to resolve the Western Sahara dispute."

Morocco presented, on April 11, to the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Morocco's draft plan of autonomy for the Sahara that Morocco has devised in a bid to solve the three-decade-old dispute with the Polisario over the Sahara. The former Spanish colony was ceded by Spain to Morocco in 1975 under the Madrid Accord.

The draft plan, dubbed "Moroccan Initiative for negotiation towards an autonomy statute for the Sahara region", was discussed by the UN Security Council on April 20.

Commenting on the initiative, President of the foreign relations and defense commission at the Belgian Senate, Roelants du Vivier François said, today, that Morocco had presented a "clear and complete" initiative.

At the end of a meeting with the Secretary General of the Royal Advisory Council for Saharan Affairs, Maouelainin Ben Khalihanna Maouelainin, the Belgian official said the Moroccan proposal is "open to negotiation, which, once approved by the populations concerned, would settle a problem that has long lasted and which poisons the relations of the whole region."

The New York Times

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Will Freedom Bloom in the Desert?

By FREDERICK VREELAND
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Rome



A YEAR ago, unusually heavy rain storms destroyed half of the camps in Algeria where some 90,000 refugees from the disputed territory of the Western Sahara have been eking out a miserable existence for more than 30 years.

I have been involved in North African affairs for 40 years, and for most of that time the problem of the Western Sahara has envenomed relations among its neighbors and immiserated the Saharan population.

Thankfully, Morocco's young king, Mohammed VI, has devised a proposal for granting autonomous status to this region, and it behooves all members of the United Nations Security Council to support it. Here is a rare instance, in the post-9/11 world, in which a little encouragement from the United States and other nations could pay large dividends, fostering not only a final resolution for the region's refugees but also creating a stable North African peace for the first time in decades — a peace that would serve as a bulwark against Islamic extremism.

The Western Sahara, a Colorado-sized desert land on the Atlantic bordered by Algeria, Mauritania and Morocco, has deep roots in Moroccan history. It is here that the 11th-century Moroccans who founded the Andalusian empire, which stretched from Mauritania deep into Spain, originated.

Spain colonized the territory in 1884, then abandoned it in 1976. Around that time, thousands of unarmed Moroccans streamed into the Western Sahara and effectively reclaimed it for their homeland.

But neighboring Algeria helped create and then lent armed support to the Polisario Front, a guerrilla group that resisted Moroccan rule. The group's putative aim is independence for the Western Sahara, but it is worth noting that Algeria would gain a great deal by dominating an area with phosphate reserves and an Atlantic coastline.

For many years there was fierce fighting, from which tens of thousands of families fled, and eventually came under the care of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Though the violence concluded with a United Nations-brokered cease-fire in 1991, the Western Sahara's inhabitants remain caught in the unresolved conflict. Almost a quarter of the 400,000 Saharans, or Sahrawis, are living under deplorable conditions in Algeria, generally unable to leave the refugee camps, communicate with the outside world or maintain their traditional nomadic way of life.

While Morocco exercises control over the greater part of the Western Sahara and has an "open door" policy toward the refugees, the Polisario has made it virtually impossible for those Sahrawis living in the camps in southern Algeria to return. Holding on to the refugees is their strategy for "governing" these people, who exist solely on international assistance. Particularly troubling is the fact that the younger ones have never known life outside these bleak camps.

Enter Mohammed VI. Since assuming the throne seven years ago, the Moroccan king has brought about vital domestic reforms, including elevating and protecting the status of women, as well as establishing an independent commission to face up to Morocco's human rights record. In an effort to advance the Western Sahara issue, the king studied contemporary models of territorial conflict resolution to see which solutions proved viable and durable in similar situations around the world. He created an advisory council to gather the views of both Moroccans and the Sahrawi.

The result? After a year-long national discussion, Morocco is to propose, at the United Nations in April, a plan to establish the Western Sahara as an

autonomous region under Moroccan sovereignty. Autonomy would provide effective self-determination for the Sahrawis, allowing for local decision-making and control over economic, social, linguistic and cultural issues. Successful autonomy regions like this exist elsewhere. The Trentino-Alto Adige region in Italy and the autonomous region of Madeira in Portugal are examples, as are Catalonia and the Basque Provinces in Spain. The creation of these quasi-states has unlocked longstanding disputes once thought resolvable only by force.

Mohammed VI is seeking a solution to the Western Sahara dispute based on common ground rather than conflict. His act of leadership is in everyone's interest. It is no secret that the young people in these horrible camps are prey for recruitment by Al Qaeda and local terrorist groups. Indeed, Algeria's most murderous terrorist group recently renamed itself Al Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb, signaling its wider designs on the region.

This is why it is vital that the Security Council accept Morocco's proposal for an autonomous region and not be pushed into a debate for full Western Saharan independence. A weak independent state would likely morph into a terrorist-controlled one.

This is also why the United States must be forthright in its support for the Moroccan proposal. We would be aiding a modernizing, moderate Islamic country, and a strategic ally. More urgently and no less important, we would be helping the Western Sahara's people to regain their lost liberties and their right to peaceful existence.

Frederick Vreeland, a former deputy assistant secretary of state for Near East and South Asia affairs, was the United States ambassador to Morocco from 1992 to 1993.