

## JCGS POLICY-BRIEF

### Plight of the local population: A case of Western Sahara dispute

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#### **Introduction**

Since the withdrawal of Spain from Western Sahara in 1976, the region located on the north-western coast of Africa, has been a disputed '[non-self-governing territory](#)'. Many countries have claimed the region for more than four decades. Today about 80% of the region is occupied and administered by the Moroccan authorities and the remaining 20% of the territory is controlled by the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, that is, Polisario Front. Amidst the dispute, the region has suffered from extreme poverty, overdependence on natural resources, and has caused a looming refugee crisis in the neighbouring states. In the background of this dispute, the Sahrawi people as well as the local population of neighbouring countries face vulnerabilities amid the larger geopolitical games of the countries. Diplomatic inattention due to less human costs has further pushed and marginalized the communities in the region.

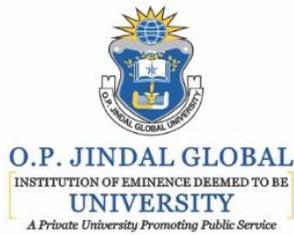


## Background of the Dispute

The conflict began in 1975 with Spain relinquishing the territory. Spain decided to hold a referendum to decide the fate of the territory but was opposed by Morocco, which claimed the whole region; Mauritania, also claimed the territory along with the Sahrawi nationalist movement, that is, Polisario Front which had led two-years of armed struggle against the foreign colonizers with the support of Algeria to achieve self-rule for themselves. This led to Spain withdrawing its plan to hold a referendum and instead reaching an agreement with Morocco and Mauritania to divide the administration of the territory. This caused a significant number of people to flee to camps in Algeria and Mauritania.

The division of the territory steered an armed struggle between Polisario Front and these countries. Morocco and Mauritania declared Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in parts that were not controlled by them. The subsequent dispute led to Mauritania withdrawing its claims, causing Morocco to consolidate its parts of the territory and additionally, claim parts of territory controlled by Nouakchott (capital of Mauritania). Mauritania along with African Union (AU) recognized the SADR in exile which even established its relations with many countries of Asia and Latin America. Polisario Front was and continues to be supported in all manner by Algeria. The withdrawal of Mauritania also led many refugees to shift to camps in Algeria. It also caused the division of Sahara between two parts along the 'sand berm' which is a system of defensive walls built along the borders of Algeria and Mauritania. The west part of the sand berm was controlled by Morocco while the eastern part was controlled by Polisario Front.

In 1991, United Nations (UN) initiated a ceasefire along the sand berm and sent United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), a mission which aimed to monitor the ceasefire and to conduct a referendum which would allow the people of Western Sahara to decide the territory's future status' (UN Peacekeeping, 2000). UN failed to break the deadlock and the referendum never took place. In subsequent years, several rounds of negotiations also failed between the two parties.



## **Plight of the local Population**

### **1. Sahrawis- under Moroccan authorities**

In the course of the occupation, Morocco has built up various infrastructural projects in Western Sahara. Roads have been built along the coast running from Morocco in the north to Mauritania in the south. An asphalt road connects Laayoune to Smara, an interior town. Fishing and phosphates are the mainstay of Sahara's economy and have been expanded and developed. The ports cities of Laayoune, Dakhla and Boujdour have also been expanded and serve as major fishing industries. The Moroccan government has managed to raise the GDP per capita of the region, improve the healthcare, education and living standards of the people (ICG, 2021). According to UN Development Programme's Human Development Index, the living standards of the people in the region rose from 0.399 in 1980 to 0.617 in 2013. (UN Development Programme, 2019, p. 166). Yet there is a high unemployment rate and lack of opportunities for young people. Moreover, the economic benefits accrue mostly to the Moroccans and a few Sahrawi elites.

The Moroccan government has paid subsidies to its own people in the north to settle and work in Sahara. In the three provinces of Rabat-controlled Western Sahara, which represents around 80 per cent of the Saharan territory, the population of the Moroccans has risen gradually while Sahrawis have become a minority over the past 40 years (ICG, 2021). The attraction of the population is associated with the effect that the locals will become a minority in the region. Though Sahrawis have benefitted from the development of the fishing and phosphate industry, it is the Sahrawis that are largely unemployed in the country (Dunbar, Morrison, 2009). Moroccan settlers primarily work in the phosphate industries and are provided management-level jobs while Sahrawis are limited to the low-level jobs (Dunbar, Morrison, 2009). They are also paid less wages as compared to their Moroccan counterparts (ICG, 2007).

Morocco also distributes the economic benefits to Hassaniya-speaking elites that help them produce pro-Morocco supporters. This has helped Morocco in getting high-turnout rates in the local elections and the authority also hopes to win the referendum with the help of these loyal



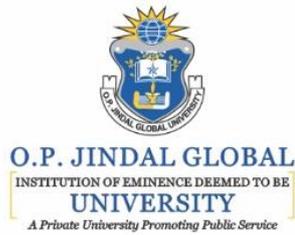
Sahrawis. At the same time, it is impossible for these elite groups to freely express their opinion in the conflict. Any claim of independence by the Sahrawis living in this region is met by torture and arbitrary arrests (ICG, 2007). The political-economic pacts signed with the Sahrawi elites for securing the support of Moroccan authorities has posed an obstacle to change (ICG, 2021).

Opposed to Sahrawian elites, there is also a group of human-right activists that criticize the Moroccan occupation and demand the referendum according to the 1991 agreement. Morocco has repressed and muffled these voices. Many reports reveal arbitrary arrests, torture, harassment, rape and human rights violations of these activists (ICG, 2021).

## **2. Sahrawi Refugees- living in camps in Algeria**

Amidst the dispute, many Sahrawi refugees have fled to Algeria and Mauritania but are mainly organized around camps in Tindouf, Western Algeria. According to United Nations High Commission for refugees, there are around 98,500 registered refugees currently residing in these camps (UNHCR 2022). These refugees are also separated from their families in the Moroccan-occupied Sahara. UNHCR had built a “humanitarian bridge” between the Sahara Territory and the refugee camps under “Confidence Building Measures” (CBM) but the programme was suspended in 2014 due to disagreements between both parties of the conflict.

These refugees live in isolation, poverty and feel serious food, electricity and water shortages in these camps. Out of the four refugee camps, only two of them have their own water supplies while water has to be trucked in the other two camps (Refugee International, 2003). The camp areas are located in a deserted location that is not easily accessible and confines children to face hunger and malnutrition (Refugee International, 2003). According to World Food Programme, 30 per cent of camp residents are food insecure and 58% are at risk. In Dhakla, one of the refugee camps, 62 per cent of children suffer from anaemia, 31.6 per cent of the population is underweight, and 31.4 per cent of the population suffers from chronic malnutrition (Errazzouki, 2014). The humanitarian emergencies in other parts of the world and



the low human cost involved in this conflict has further moved donors from the list of Tindouf camps.

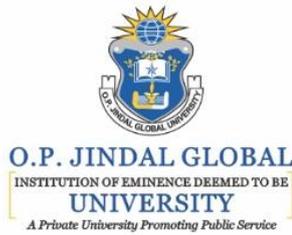
Most refugees living here back the demand for independence. In 2020, SADR took up arms in the border area of Guerguarat, a no-man's land area, post the Moroccan government violating the 1991 ceasefire. Both sides opened up fires and casualties and deaths were reported on both sides. Post the resumption of these hostilities, support of the Polisario's campaign has increased and provided hope for the youth, frustrated with life in exile under harsh conditions, for a diplomatic solution.

Overall, this chaos, the lockdowns imposed in the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the jobs and income of these refugees. Known for raising livestock to meet their ends, these refugees faced an epidemic affecting livestock in Boujdour, one of the five camps of Tindouf. The epidemic resulted in the death of over 1,700 sheep and goats in the camps this year (Fraser and Djouri, 2020).

#### **4. Local Moroccans, Algerians, Mauritians**

In the year-long dispute, Moroccans also had to bear heavy costs. Morocco has faced exorbitant financial costs in Sahara for investments, military budget, gaining the support of Sahrawis and paying salaries of officials. Worried about under-development, Morocco has even tried to promote structural changes in the region and to end patronage and rents given to Sahrawi elites which freezes competition in sectors but fails to implement it due to opposition from Sahrawi elites. This huge amount spent on Sahara has hampered the national development of Morocco which has driven the country into extreme poverty. Hundreds of Moroccan troops have also died in the conflict. Many of them have been captured and tortured by Polisario.

Even Algeria has prodigal financial costs in terms of humanitarian aid and donations to refugees. Thousands of Sahrawi refugees live on its soil, and it has already spent enormous resources from its investments for the Sahrawi cause. They also provided military equipment to Polisario and diplomatic commitment to the cause, sometimes at the expense of other



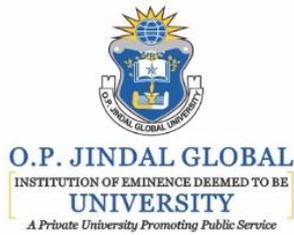
interests. These large investments in the Sahara dispute are at the expense of Algeria's declining economy and influence in the region and its efforts to wean the economy off oil and gas. The rise in unemployment, corruption and clientelist system also led to the resignation of the Algerian president in 2019.

Mauritania, too, hosts tens of thousands of ethnic Sahrawis and has digressed its investment in sustaining these refugees. According to 2003 data of UNHCR, 26,000 registered Sahrawi refugees were living in Mauritania, most of them residing in the northern towns of Zouérat Nouadhibou (UNHCR, 2004). The country also paid the price of the conflict with the 1978 coup d'état which brought a long period of instability in the country.

### **Larger Geopolitical Contentions**

In May 2021, Spain gave medical treatment to Braham Ghali, leader of the Polisario Front. The move infuriated Morocco and caused a diplomatic rift with Spain. Though Spain explained the treatment as based "strictly for humanitarian reasons, for medical treatment", Rabat condemned the act and called it a "premeditated act" that would have repercussions (Reuters, 2021). The rift between the two countries deepened when Morocco allowed undocumented migrants to enter Ceuta, a Spanish enclave on the northern coast of Morocco. Many of the migrants also entered Melilla, another Spanish enclave in the northern part of Morocco. Around 8,000 migrants were reported to enter the Spanish territory either by swimming or using dinghies and inflatables (CNBC, 2021). Later, 6,500 of the 8,000 migrants that entered Spanish territory were sent back to Morocco (France24, 2021).

The incident is a clear demonstration of how the larger geopolitical contentions between nations have impacted the people and the migrants who were shifted from one territory to another, further deteriorating their conditions, pushing them into dire conditions of poverty, conflict and misery. Rabat's protest over the medical treatment of a human also reflects how humans are denied basic facilities over a conflict.

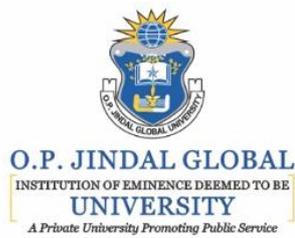


The current impasse has also contributed to Algerians cutting the supplies of natural gas pipelines to Rabat, with whom the country has cut its diplomatic ties. The people of the region were denied the use of natural gas because of a decade-long conflict. In November 2021, three Algerians, suspected to be members of the Polisario Front were killed in an attack by Moroccans. These innocent people were attacked in a “barbaric bombing of their trucks while they were travelling between Nouakchott and Ouargla” (Al Jazeera, 2021). The incident reflects the grave consequences that innocent people face over larger geo-politics.

### **Analysis**

The United Nations has not been able to resolve the decades-long conflict, hold the conflicting parties responsible for a referendum to decide the disputed territory's future. This has strengthened the distrust of the UN. The comparatively low human cost involved in the conflict is one of the reasons for the neglect of the dispute which has allowed a self-perpetuating peace process to continue in the region. The hard choice of forcing the conflicting parties to hold a referendum and therefore end the dispute would also have grave consequences for the whole region, the repercussions of which would be suffered by the local population. Even references regarding the conflict are not made in UN resolutions which demonstrate things to be regressing rather than progressing.

Trump's recognition of Morocco's claim over Western Sahara and opening a consulate there, as part of a large deal with Rabat to recognize the state of Israel in 2020 has further collapsed the 1991 ceasefire that promised a referendum. But with the coming of Biden in power, the administration decided to review its predecessor's controversial order and to appoint a new envoy to discuss the conflict. To date, Washington has not taken any stance as revoking the decision would antagonise both Morocco and Israel. The delay in the appointment of a new envoy has further frozen the conflict. These moves have destroyed US's credibility as a mediator of the conflict. This increases the risk of increasing armed groups in the Sahel region that may be pulled into the war. Again, the war and armed rebellions would affect the local population.



The African Union also presents deep divisions concerning the issue. Rabat's reluctance to deal with the issue outside the UN framework also undermines AU's ineffectiveness. Even the European Union has not come up with any concrete plan to resolve the stalemate. Over that, it continues to import products from Morocco that includes products from Western Sahara and is reluctant to remove Sahara from the trade agreement, fearing the disruption of trade relations between the countries. The beneficiaries of the trade are Moroccans only while the geo-politics and trade are further bringing Sahrawis of Moroccan-occupied territory into poverty.

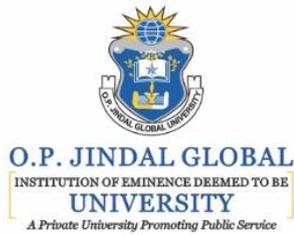
This failure of foreign players in developing a strategy to address the conflict has strengthened Morocco's position which has taken a hard-nosed approach to the conflict. This has aggravated Morocco's diplomatic crisis with Spain, Algeria and Germany and even with African Union. All these developments have an adverse impact on the local people of the region. There is a huge potential for the development of fishing and phosphate industries in the Sahara, the benefits of which could be given to the local population but the current impasse is meddling with it.

United Nations, backed by other international actors, should focus on rebuilding confidence and relaunching negotiations. The international actors should also provide diplomatic manoeuvres to kick the efforts for negotiations. They also need to provide education, job opportunities and financial incentives for the Sahrawi people and refugees.

## **Conclusion**

The overall cost of the conflict is high for the region as it hampers human development and regional development and delays foreign investments, economic integration and economic growth. The repercussions are felt by the local population of the whole region which manifests in the form of drug trafficking, smuggling of goods, and even radicalization of the youth. This hinders the security of the whole region and the local people.

The world needs to step up and not underestimate the conflict as there is a huge risk of military escalations between Morocco and the Polisario Front, the impact of which would be felt by the



Sahrawi people. This would also escalate tensions with other neighbours which would have grave consequences for the people.

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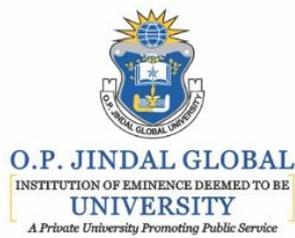
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