



Forum: The Fourth General Assembly

Topic: Responding to the Exploitation of Resources and
Colonization in Western Sahara

Deputy President

Introduction

Western Sahara is a sparsely inhabited region on the northwest coast of Africa, bordered by Morocco in the north, Algeria in the northeast, Mauritania to the east and south, and the Atlantic Ocean to the west. Despite its sparse inhabitation, it holds immense strategic and economic significance. Its rich offshore fishing grounds, vast phosphate deposits and strategic proximity to profitable trans-Atlantic shipping corridors have rendered it a recurrent battleground of political conflict. These natural and geographic assets have attracted much external interest claiming territorial ownership. At its center lies the Sahrawi people's quest for self-determination, a principle in international law and reaffirmed in dozens of United Nations resolutions. This right has consistently been blocked, making Western Sahara one of the world's longest and unresolved decolonization processes. With Spain's withdrawal from the country in 1975, Morocco's occupation led to war with the Polisario Front, a liberation movement established to act on behalf of the Sahrawi. The Polisario Front subsequently established the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), which gained little international recognition and rules part of the country in exile and in Algerian refugee camps.

This issue is of paramount international importance as it serves as a link to escalating international problems: the inability of the international community to execute orders of decolonization, violation of the wishes of native populations by extracting natural resources, and further human rights violations on occupied territory. The 1975 International Court of Justice advisory opinion held that there were no bonds of sovereignty under international law linking Western Sahara to Morocco or Mauritania, and confirmed the right of the people of Western Sahara to choose their own political destiny. Almost half a century later, that right is still to be exercised.

Definition of Key Terms

Polisario Front

A political and military group formed in 1973 fighting for the independence of Western Sahara from Moroccan control. It represents the Sahrawi people and leads the call for self-determination, playing a central role in resisting resource exploitation and colonization.

Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)

A government-in-exile declared by the Polisario Front in 1976, claiming sovereignty over

Western Sahara. SADR reflects the Sahrawi people's demand for independence and highlights the ongoing conflict over territorial control and natural resources.

Madrid Accords

A 1975 agreement in which Spain gave administrative control of Western Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania without involving the Sahrawi people. This deal is seen as illegitimate under international law and sparked Morocco's occupation and resource exploitation in the region.

MINURSO (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara)

A UN peacekeeping mission established in 1991 to oversee the ceasefire and prepare for a referendum on self-determination. MINURSO shows international concern but has failed to deliver a referendum, allowing continued occupation and extraction of resources.

Green March

A mass mobilization of Moroccan civilians into Western Sahara in 1975 to claim the land, which led to Spain's withdrawal. This action helped justify Morocco's takeover and remains symbolic of the start of the colonization and displacement of Sahrawis.

The Berm

A 2,700km fortified wall built by Morocco in the 1980s to separate Moroccan-controlled areas from Polisario-held regions. It restricts movement, divides families, blocks access to resources and symbolizes the ongoing occupation and division of Western Sahara.

General Overview

Western Sahara is the globe's longest-persistent border dispute. A non-self-governing territory in UN terms, it is a symbol of unfinished decolonization. Located on the northwest African coast, the territory is geopolitically significant due to its extensive phosphate reserves, fishing oceans, potential offshore oil, and strategic placement on major trade and migration arteries. With the 1975 withdrawal of Spain, Morocco asserted sovereignty over most of the territory, something to which the Sahrawi separatist movement, the Polisario Front, has been forcibly resistant in demanding freedom in a UN-monitored referendum. Though supported by over 40 states and the African Union, SADR has no backing from Western powers, making the

political stalemate even more complex. A 1991 UN-brokered ceasefire sanctioned by the Organization of African Unity (now AU) had contemplated a referendum on self-determination. But talks over the franchise and political intervention have brought the process to a halt for over three decades. The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was mandated to monitor the ceasefire and referendum but has made no concrete headway.

Morocco currently holds approximately 80% of the territory and invested heavily in settlement and infrastructure schemes. Tens of thousands of Sahrawis are stuck in Algerian refugee camps in desperate living conditions. The sand berm separating the land and perpetuating the stalemate is occupied by Morocco. Both sides accuse the other of human rights abuses, including repression and restricted freedoms on occupied territory held by Morocco, and increasing desperation among the camps. The war has also strained regional relationships of Morocco and Algeria. The U.S. 2020 normalization of Moroccan sovereignty confounded international consensus and undermined Sahrawi diplomatic attempts. The Western Sahara situation is a transnational case, an international test of will to rule of law, human rights, and self-determination. Without new political will, unbiased mediation, and adherence to international legal principles, the Sahrawi people will remain in limbo between occupation and diplomacy.

History

Recent history of Western Sahara is marked by colonization, conflict, and a protracted fight for independence. Spain annexed the territory in 1884 and reasserted its grip after the discovery of lucrative phosphate deposits in the 1940s. As the African movements of decolonization gained strength, Sahrawi nationalists formed the Polisario Front in 1973 to campaign for independence. Meanwhile, Morocco and Mauritania also laid claim to the territory. In 1975, the International Court of Justice acknowledged historical ties to neighboring nations but reaffirmed the Sahrawi right to self-determination. Ignoring this, Spain signed the Madrid Accords, handing over control to Morocco and Mauritania without Sahrawi consent. War erupted, prompting the Polisario, supported by Algeria to announce the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in exile. Mauritania withdrew in 1979, but Morocco took over its share and built infrastructure and a vast sand berm to separate its area from the Polisario-held Free Zone. A UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991 established MINURSO to oversee a referendum, but political stalemate stalled the voting. Morocco currently occupies most of the territory, though international law considers it non-self-governing. Despite setbacks, the Sahrawi independence movement persists, backed by legal rulings and global support.

Resource Exploitation

Western Sahara's rich natural resources, phosphates, fishery, and petroleum are the primary driving force behind Morocco's continued occupation of Western Sahara. Morocco's Office Chérifien des Phosphates, (OCP), a state-owned entity of the Bou Craa mine of phosphates, annually produces millions of tons of phosphates. Sahrawis occupy a meagre 21% of the jobs, with minimal technical input or decision-making roles. WSRW, 2023. The 2019 EU-Morocco Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement of €208 million invested 77% of its amount in projects in occupied Western Sahara, that were primarily Moroccan settles rather than native Sahrawi people European Commission, 2019. Sahrawis make up only around 5% of staff in a large fishing center of Dakhla, which is a sign of their marginalization from lucrative industries. WSRW, 2020. Morocco's determination to proceed with offshore oil exploration and production has raised serious ethical and legal issues. Under international law, the 2002 UN Legal Opinion of Han Corell, natural resource exploitation in non-self-governing nations is required to obtain the free, prior, and informed consent of the indigenous people, UN Doc. S/2002/161. Morocco's action, taken in disregard of Sahrawi acquiescence, violates this mandate. Thus, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) has ruled to nullify certain EU-Morocco trade and fishing deals reaching as far as Western Sahara based on the lack of Sahrawi people's approval as a violation of their rights, CJEU 2021. Rather than spurring local progress, resource exploitation has helped reinforce socioeconomic inequalities, further entrenched Morocco's occupation, and undermined an equitable war conclusion.

Settler Colonialism and Demographics

Since Moroccan occupation in 1975, Western Sahara has been subjected to demographic engineering to entrench Moroccan dominance. Moroccan and state incentives, coupled with the Green March, encouraged mass settlement, ensuring that settlers reached 66-70% of the population on occupied land. Settler colonialism aims to displace indigenous Sahrawis and undermine their identity. Morocco attempts to present settlers as natives, whereas Polisario opposes incorporating them into any referendum on the basis of pre-1975 voter registration. Sahrawis are discriminated against systemically in politics, accommodation, work, and services. The key sectors including phosphates and fisheries are dominated by the settlers. Activists such as Sultana Khaya are subject to repression, including house arrest. All of these acts violate Article 49(6) of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which forbids population transfer into occupied territory, however, Morocco bears little international responsibility. EU trade agreements continue to tap the natural resources of Western Sahara, notwithstanding European Court decisions mandating Sahrawi approval.

Humanitarian and Legal Implications

Over 173,000 Sahrawi refugees live in Algerian camps and are completely reliant on international assistance. Aid has increased food shortages, with World Food Programme recording a 70% cut in rations and high malnutrition alongside Moroccan restrictions of access for observers and journalists. Sahrawis continually suffer arbitrary detention, torture, and political repression. Education and health care are also disproportionately distributed, favoring settlers. Although school attendance is high in these camps, learning remains curtailed and access to health care is restricted. Legally, the occupation contravenes multiple international norms. The ICJ opinion of 1975 reaffirmed no sovereign link between Morocco and Western Sahara, justifying the Sahrawi right to self-determination. Ongoing settlement and utilization of resources are violations of UNGA Resolutions 1514 and 2625, as well as Article 1 of the ICCPR. MINURSO, without a human rights mandate, cannot even monitor abuse. Corporations and states meanwhile engage in economic activities in Western Sahara in the absence of Sahrawi consent, against EU court decisions affirming the territory's unique legal status. The continuation of Sahrawi rights denial forms part of a broader failure of international accountability. Without legal enforcement and substantive diplomatic engagement, the occupation-repression-displacement cycle will continue. Justice on paper is insufficient; the issue requires timely action to ensure that Sahrawi sovereignty and dignity are restored. True liberation demands more than promises, it requires deliberate international will to dismantle injustice and uphold the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination.

Major Parties Involved

Morocco

Morocco claims complete sovereignty over Western Sahara and occupies the lion's portion of its land. It denies independence, promotes an autonomy proposal under Moroccan rule, and celebrates domination by expansive settlement, investment, and use of resources. These have entrenched its occupation but ended UN peace efforts and provoked Sahrawi outrage.

Polisario Front (Frente Polisario)

The Polisario Front demands total independence of Western Sahara and is the Sahrawi representation in Algerian refugee camps. The Polisario Front declared the SADR and advocates legal and diplomatic opposition to Moroccan domination. Its struggle gained international attention for Sahrawi rights but was unable to force Morocco allow a referendum.

Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR)

The SADR governs the Free Zone under Polisario authority and advocates for total independence and a referendum held under UN control. It condemns Moroccan actions as being contrary to international law. While recognized by the majority of states and the AU, limited administration and inability to enforce are hindrances to progress.

European Union (EU)

The EU entered into trade agreements with Morocco for Western Sahara resources against ECJ judgments that require Sahrawi consent. The EU legally resolved the special status of the territory, although its decision watered down Sahrawi rights and was criticized for giving economic interests a priority over legal obligation.

United States of America (USA)

In 2020, the U.S. defied worldwide opinion to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, undermining the UN-supervised referendum process and giving leverage to the stance of Morocco. To date, the U.S. has not reversed that stance, locking diplomatic momentum on a negotiated solution.

Timeline of Events

Date	Event and Impact
1884	Spain formally asserts sovereignty over Western Sahara coastal areas at the Berlin Conference initializing European colonization across the area.
1946	Spain reorganizes its Spanish West African colonies to consolidate political and economic domination. Western Sahara becomes more integrated into the colonial state.
1940s	Discovery of phosphates, oil and other mineral deposits in Western Sahara, leading to increased Spanish control.

- 1958 Spanish colonies Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro are merged and made into a single province called Spanish Sahara. This administrative restructuring fortifies Spanish control.
- 1974 Spain plans to conduct a referendum on the fate of Western Sahara. The process becomes shelved by local disputes and mounting external pressure delaying Sahrawi self-determination and creating a power vacuum
- 1975 The Western Saharan territory is invaded and occupied by Moroccan and Mauritanian troops as Morocco launches the "Green March", sending 350,000 unarmed civilians into Western Sahara. Effectively marking the beginning of open conflict and ending Spanish colonial rule.
- 1976 Spain withdraws, leading to Morocco and Mauritania taking over administration as well as the Madrid Accords.
The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) is established as an independent state triggering a war for independence and international recognition.
- 1979 Mauritania signs a peace treaty with the Polisario Front, withdraws from occupied Western Sahara, and recognizes the SADR.
This weakens Morocco's alliance and bolsters the political credibility of the Polisario.

1979-1991	Morocco builds a heavily mined and patrolled berm, securing its control over most of the territory and solidifying the territorial stalemate.
1991	<p>A UN-brokered ceasefire is established, however, the conflict over Western Sahara's status continues.</p> <p>The United Nations promises a referendum on the status of the territory including the options of independence, autonomy, or integration with Morocco.</p>
2007	Supported by the United States and France, Morocco establishes a Plan that offers Sahrawis greater autonomy.
2020	<p>The Guerguerat incident: a military operation launched by Morocco at the Guerguerat border crossing area of Western Sahara breaking the decades-long ceasefire and reigniting tensions with the Polisario Front.</p>
2021	<p>After the leader of the Polisario Front is admitted into Spain for hospitalization, Morocco relaxes its surveillance of the border with Ceuta, allowing over 8,000 immigrants to pass. A diplomatic rift strains Spanish – Moroccan relations.</p>

Ongoing

The continued exploitation of phosphates, fishing, and potential oil and gas reserves.

The United Nations continues to list Western Sahara as a non-self-governing territory awaiting decolonization.

Attempts to solve the issue

[S/RES/725 \(1991\) – A Security Council resolution supporting the Secretary-General's Settlement Plan for Western Sahara.](#)

The resolution endorsed the 1991 ceasefire and reasserted the Secretary-General's Settlement Plan, which would give the Sahrawi people a referendum to choose independence or integration into Morocco. MINURSO was authorized to monitor the ceasefire and make preparations for the vote. The execution, however, was put off by differences over who could vote. As diplomatically valuable as it was, it failed to prevent Moroccan occupation and resource exploitation. The referendum date remains unimplemented.

[The Situation Concerning Western Sahara 1991 \(S/RES/725\)](#)

Adopted shortly after the ceasefire agreement, this resolution endorsed the Secretary-General's Settlement Plan and reaffirmed support for MINURSO's efforts. It emphasized cooperation among all parties, including the Polisario Front and Morocco. Although it provided political backing, the resolution lacked enforcement mechanisms and failed to resolve the underlying stalemate.

[The Situation Concerning Western Sahara 2023 \(S/RES/2703\)](#)

This extended MINURSO's mandate and emphasized the need for a politically acceptable solution. The resolution requested cooperation between Morocco, Polisario Front, Algeria, and Mauritania but, while continuing diplomatic action, pursued the trend of mission extension without political developments on the ground.

[The Situation Concerning Western Sahara 2024 \(S/RES/2756\)](#)

Resolution 2756 again renewed MINURSO's mandate and reaffirmed support for the UN representative to re-launch political negotiations. In showing international attention to the issue, the resolution was faulted for failing to address the human rights issue and move the negotiations forward. Its impact has been viewed as procedural rather than revolutionary.

In conclusion, these resolutions have helped prevent the conflict from escalating, however they have largely maintained the status quo. Without definitive measures toward an affirmative political solution, the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination remains unfulfilled.

Possible Solutions

Revival and Enforcement of the Referendum Process

Reopening the referendum by issuing a new MINURSO mandate in this instance must be the focus towards ending exploitation and colonization of Western Sahara. The UN with advice from the AU and non-aligned nations must issue a timeframe and instruct MINURSO to hold a fair, internationally monitored referendum on self-determination. A process of autonomous identification of voters must be undertaken in Laayoune and the broader region, supported by international observers and human rights monitors. A continuous dialogue towards agreements for common goals should be established by Morocco and the Polisario Front. A legal referendum should be facilitated to disassemble colonial institutions and consolidate Sahrawi rights.

Special Autonomy Plan

The Moroccan Autonomy Plan can be embraced as an interim political solution, and only after all diplomatic options for a referendum have been exhausted for a long time and by Morocco's and the Polisario Front's mutual agreement. The plan would grant Western Sahara a degree of political and administrative autonomy under locally elected officials, yet remaining under broader international authority, namely the United Nations. To ensure the protection of Sahrawi interests, this agreement must contain binding international guarantees for protection against exploitation of resources, guarantee human rights standards, and guarantee Sahrawi representation in decision-making. Free and fair elections must be called on an agreed timetable and monitored by international observers to legitimize. Importantly, such an initiative must not replace or preclude the Sahrawi people's inalienable right to self-determination but must rather explicitly safeguard the prospect of a future, UN-organized referendum on independence. As an interim step, nonetheless, this could represent a critical confidence-building measure, aimed at reducing tensions and creating an orderly, legal path forward toward a lasting political settlement.

Accountability Mechanisms for Resource Exploitation

To halt to the illegal exploitation of Western Sahara's resources, an open international

monitoring system should be put in place. The UN, in collaboration with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and other relevant environmental and economic organizations, must undertake periodic audits of foreign investment and extraction in the nation. Companies that engage in occupied territories without explicit Sahrawi consent must be sanctioned or face trade embargoes. Such a system would also involve issuing annual reports and having a Resource Oversight Committee in Sahrawi government to provide for Indigenous participation in, as well as benefits sharing of, the resources. Economic justice receives the highest priority in dismantling neo-colonial systems and moving the region towards self-determination.

Guiding Questions

1. What is the historical background of Western Sahara's designation as a non-self-governing territory, and how has colonization influenced its present political status?
2. What roles did Spain, Morocco, and the Polisario Front play in the initial stages of the conflict over Western Sahara, and how have these roles evolved over time?
3. How does the United Nations currently classify Western Sahara, and what has been its role in monitoring, mediating, or resolving the dispute?
4. What natural resources are being exploited in Western Sahara, and which actors, state or non-state, are benefitting from this exploitation?
5. In what ways does the exploitation of natural resources in Western Sahara align with or violate international legal standards, including those on non-self-governing territories?
6. What are the major human rights concerns in Western Sahara, particularly regarding Sahrawi civilians and displaced populations in refugee camps?
7. How does international law address issues of occupation and resource exploitation in disputed or non-self-governing territories such as Western Sahara?
8. What diplomatic initiatives or peace processes have been pursued to resolve the Western Sahara conflict, and what factors have contributed to their success or failure?
9. How can the international community more effectively regulate or prevent the unlawful exploitation of natural resources in disputed territories like Western Sahara?
10. How do international trade agreements and economic partnerships affect the legality and ethical implications of resource extraction in contested regions?

11. What are the social and psychological consequences of protracted displacement on Sahrawi refugees living in camps such as those in Tindouf, Algeria?
12. To what extent could intensified resource exploitation in Western Sahara influence the prospects for peace negotiations or escalate tensions among stakeholders?

Appendix

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- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6sruNoegEE>
- <https://theamericanscholar.org/western-sahara-a-fragile-peace/>
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