

## Western Sahara:



## Africa's Unfinished Business

*By Howard Smith\**

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One of the anomalies of Twenty-first Century Africa is the existence of a single remaining colony on the continent, Western Sahara, colonised by neighbour the Kingdom of Morocco. In this contribution, Howard Smith gives a brief resumé of the Western Sahara issue, and then asks, “What more can be done?”.

## **Introduction**

The Swiss organization Crans Montana Forum<sup>1</sup> purportedly operating “Under the High Patronage of His Majesty King Mohammed VI (of Morocco)”,<sup>2</sup> has planned an international event for March 2015 in Dakhla within the illegally-occupied Western Sahara. The Forum states that the venue has been chosen “as a signal of its strong commitment to Peace and Global Dialogue” and that this event is “dedicated to Africa and the South-South Cooperation.”<sup>3</sup> Its partner for this Forum is ISESCO, the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, established by the Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 1979 and headquartered in Rabat, Morocco. Initiatives designed to give legitimacy to Morocco’s occupation of Western Sahara, such as this, require a response based on an understanding of Western Sahara’s history, its position in international law and current efforts to secure its independence.

## **A Brief History**

When in 1976 Spain withdrew from its colony of Western Sahara, Morocco invaded the territory. Its peoples’ aspirations were repressed and the government of the fledgling Saharawi Democratic People’s Republic was forced into exile; development was arrested while foreign commercial interests commenced the plundering of its natural resources, most notably phosphate deposits and the rich fishing grounds.

The Saharawi people’s struggle for independence included two decades of armed actions led by their liberation movement the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamray de Río de Oro (Frente POLISARIO) and was marked by a UN-brokered ceasefire in September 1991. Monitored by the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) this has been observed by both sides despite ongoing human rights abuses by the Moroccan administration and military. To defend the rights of the Saharawi people pressure is being mounted on the UN to add a human rights mandate to MINURSO.

## **International Law and Initiatives under the UN**

In international law Morocco’s occupation is illegal. When Spain withdrew, Morocco claimed Western Sahara as historically part of the Kingdom of Morocco but opinion from the International Court of Justice rejected this claim. When the OAU, now the AU, recognised the exiled government, Morocco withdrew from the OAU – another anomaly, it is the only country in Africa not a member of the AU.

Under UN auspices, there is agreement to have a referendum by the people of Western Sahara to determine their future. Its implementation has been hampered by Morocco’s insistence, supported by France and the USA, that the question be a choice between incorporation into the Kingdom of Morocco or autonomy under

Morocco. POLISARIO rejects this, arguing that the referendum be a choice between autonomy and full independence; the AU and most countries internationally including South Africa support this position.

## **Recent African and AU Positions**

The AU's appointment of a Special Envoy for Western Sahara last year was a significant step, but rejection by Morocco failed to produce the outcry on the African continent it should have done. When Morocco was denied the hosting of the African Cup Football Competition in 2014 it was not for its defiance of international policy on Western Sahara, but for its insulting decision to exclude supporters from Ebola-affected areas of West Africa. Responding to an appeal from the Saharawi Government, the AU Executive Council and then its Assembly have condemned the planned Crans-Montana/ISESCO event for its defiance of AU Policies and International Law.

## **Consensus on Western Sahara**

There is overwhelming regional and international consensus on the Saharawi people's right to self determination. Western Sahara was discussed at a SALO workshop in September 2013. Speakers included the Ambassador of Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, South Africa's Deputy Minister of International Relations and Cooperation Ebrahim Ebrahim and former Foreign Affairs Deputy Minister Aziz Pahad. Together they covered the history and current situation of Western Sahara and the international community, UN, AU and South Africa's policy stances on the issue. The commitment of the Saharawi Government, the AU and South Africa to the implementation of existing international agreements, was very clear from all the three speakers. The need for continued international pressure to this end was stressed.

## **What More Can Be Done?**

The issue of Western Sahara's independence has not been raised to a sufficiently prominent level in the public in Africa. While considerable responsibility lies with the AU and UN, SA's anti-apartheid struggle demonstrates what pressure from popular campaigns on many fronts can achieve. There is therefore need to escalate and replicate the ongoing pro-Western Sahara campaigns in South Africa, Namibia, Algeria, Sweden, France and Spain inter alia. Trade unions, political parties, prominent individuals and community-based organisations have been involved, but it can be asked, is there more that can be done?

Is it possible to link up what are disconnected and incident-based protests into an ongoing campaign? Can better links between the campaigns in Europe and in Africa be forged? Is there value in suggesting a concerted boycott campaign against Morocco to pressure it to end its intransigence – in the sports, cultural,

travel, academic and sports fields? What are the possibilities of using political and economic pressure? Could the qualitative character of solidarity work, particularly in Africa, be deepened by more and better education and media material? How might that be organised and what could various role-players, including the AU and member governments, contribute? After all, the objective of ridding Africa of its last vestige of colonialism should be capable of attracting popular and enthusiastic support across society.

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<sup>1</sup> In its own words, the Crans Montana Forum is 'a Swiss International Organization created in Crans Montana (Switzerland) in 1986 with the support and the involvement of Swiss Authorities whose importance and prestige are well-established.' Also, 'For some thirty years, the *Crans Montana Forum* has been committed to building a better World, more humane and impartial.' (<http://www.cmf.ch>, last accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2015). Notwithstanding these phrases, its events over many years have given a further platform to the rich and powerful, while those for whom a better world is an imperative are disregarded. .

<sup>2</sup> From Crans Montana Forum's notice of the event, <http://www.cmf.ch/events/upcoming-events> (last accessed 18th February 2015)

<sup>3</sup> From Crans Montana Forum's notice of the event, *op.cit.*