

Historical Areas

The Western Sahara is a territory in Northwest Africa, bordered by Morocco to the North, Algeria to the Northeast, Mauritania to the East and South, and the Atlantic Ocean on the West. It is 266,000 km² in total. The historic territory of the Western Sahara is constituted by the two regions; Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro, from which the POLISARIO has derived its name.

The "Berm"

Soon after the crossing of Moroccan civilians and troops into the Western Sahara, the concept of a defensive wall surfaced. Between 1980 and 1987, following advice given to King Hassan II from Ariel Sharon and with funding from Saudi Arabia, Morocco constructed a 2,270 km long system of "defensive" walls. Longer than the Great Wall of China, the "wall of shame," so named by Sahrawis, was ostensibly erected to prevent POLISARIO attacks on Moroccan soldiers and settlers but has served primarily to facilitate Morocco's annexation of the territory.

The "berm" cuts diagonally through the Western Sahara, extending from the Northeast corner down to the Southwest near the Mauritanian border* securing Morocco 85% of the territory, which constitutes the most fertile land, including the coast with its fishing industry, phosphate deposits, and oil reserves. The wall is a massive earthwork with regularly spaced garrisons manned by Moroccan troops, barbed wire and several million landmines.

Coercing Tools and Ideology

As with the apartheid wall constructed by Israel, the "berm" serves not only as a tool of land confiscation but also as a means to fragment the Sahrawi population. The wall has separated communities and families for 27 years, with those living in the POLISARIO controlled "free zone" and refugee camps unable to access the Moroccan occupied territory. Severe restrictions on freedom of mobility not only prevent the normal functioning of Sahrawi social relations, but also impede the traditional practice of nomadic pastoralism, sedentarizing Sahrawis and forcing them to locate alternative means of economic survival in urban areas.

Unlike Israel, Morocco has not focused on the expulsion of the Sahrawi population; rather it seeks its integration into Moroccan society. In addition to imposing a sedentary lifestyle upon many Sahrawi, Morocco has applied the 'divide and conquer' approach used by Israel, playing on Sahrawi tribal divisions to create disunity. Top POLISARIO officials have been enticed by high paying government jobs and Sahrawi elites are granted incentives to collaborate with and support the monarchy.

As in all cases, violence is consistently used as a tool to suppress dissent from Sahrawis and their Moroccan sympathizers. In response to the Intifada begun in May 2005, UN OHCHR found Moroccan soldiers and state agents had used excessive force resulting in death and applied intimidation and torture to prevent the expression of political views on the Western Sahara.

"Development"

Morocco's most prominent tool to facilitate settler implantation and land confiscation, in tandem with the construction of the berm, is "development." The resource wealth of the region provides significant incentive for Morocco to maintain control of the region. As

in Tibet and Israel, "development" has been instrumental in Moroccanizing the territory by attracting settlers and dislocating the indigenous population.

Between 1975 and 1991, King Hassan II invested in infrastructural build-up in the Western Sahara. Unofficial estimates of investment in infrastructure in the Western Sahara range between 20-30 billion dirhams (up to 1996). Since the start of the occupation, schools, hospitals, houses, factories, two airports, three airfields, four seaports, over 10,000 km of roads and water and electricity infrastructure have been built. Between 2004 and 2008 investment projects in the region have amounted to approximately 870 million USD.

The Moroccan controlled zone comprises the phosphate and fishing industry and more recently, oil and gas resources. The strategic construction of the "berm" has enabled Morocco to exploit the phosphate resources at Bu Cra with an annual capacity of 2.4 million tonnes, as well as the fish rich waters of the Western Saharan coast, valued at 242 million USD in 2005. On July 26, 2006, the European Union signed a fisheries agreement with the government of Morocco granting EU fishing vessels access to its territorial waters, including those of the Western Sahara. Morocco has also granted contracts to a variety of foreign firms to map the offshore Aaiun Basin for onshore oil exploration. In 2002, UN undersecretary of legal affairs, Hans Corel, ruled that Morocco had no right to award contracts that would allow oil extraction in the Western Sahara. Despite its obligations under international law, Morocco has and continues to exploit the resources of the occupied territories without consultation or consent of the indigenous population. Sahrawis living in the camps are denied access to the existing and potential benefits of resource exploitation.

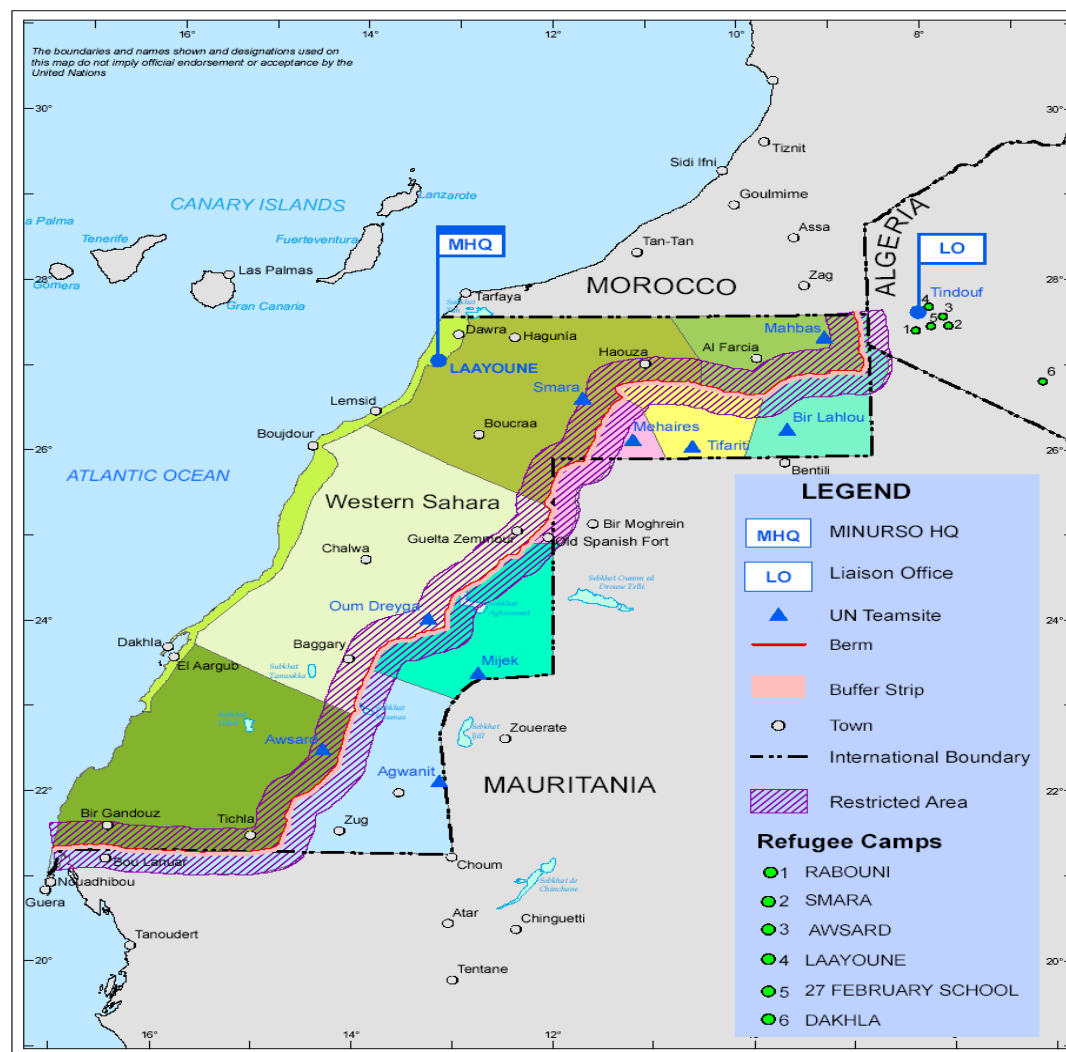
Land Rights in International Law

Land can be considered as belonging to the resources that every human being has the right to access. This right to access to environmental goods and services is recognized in international law as one of the components of the right to adequate housing [General Comment 4 on Art. 11(1) of the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights].

Yet, especially in the Kurdish, Palestinian, Tibetan and Western Sahara cases, and generally for all indigenous peoples, land represents much more than a resource. It is the basis of their existence as a people, and the space on which they should enjoy and practice their right to self-determination.

Besides in the texts related to Indigenous Peoples, land rights are directly referred to in many international declarations and treaties. Most recently, the 1998 *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* recognized the appropriation of property carried out unlawfully and wantonly as a war crime.

DEPLOYMENT OF MINURSO



Map No: A4-010

This map shows the Operational Area of MINURSO including location of refugee camps in Tindouf.

MINURSO GIS Cell

04 May 2007

UN Map showing *de facto* land divisions in occupied and liberated territories of Western Sahara.