

Figures

Forced Eviction

Following the “Green March” and the incursion of Moroccan and Mauritanian forces into the Western Sahara, 240,000 Sahrawis fled to Algeria, Mauritania, or Morocco. 90,000 others became internally displaced within the territory that gradually was divided between the Moroccan-occupied zone and the POLISARIO controlled “liberated zone.”

During the armed conflict (1976–91), Sahrawis abandoned their homes in order to escape the violence. Makeshift camps were set up elsewhere in the territory, but the Moroccan military bombed those shelters; forcing Sahrawis to seek refuge further afield in POLISARIO-controlled areas.

Refugees

The majority of the Sahrawi people inhabits the POLISARIO-controlled refugee camps outside of Tindouf, Algeria, where the SADR government-in-exile is also based. The camps are divided into four *wilayat* (provinces) named after cities in Western Sahara: Aswerd, Smara, Laayoune, and Dakhla. While the camps are well organized, with a majority of women holding key posts as decision makers, the living conditions in the isolated camps are harsh. A lack of infrastructure limits travel between camps and surrounding towns in Mauritania and the “liberated zone.” The camps occupy uninhabitable desert, where the

temperatures can reach 50° Celsius in summer. Sahrawi refugees are largely dependent on international aid for the provision of water, food, medicine and other basic supplies.

Implantation of Settlers

The implantation of settlers is a key strategy alongside "development" and "security" to create facts on the ground that would alter the outcome of a referendum and impede the Sahrawis right to self-determination.

Since the Green March that enflamed the conflict, Morocco has pursued an unrelenting strategy of settler implantation in the occupied territory. In the late 1970s, occupation authorities forced Sahrawis to take in Moroccan lodgers and forced some out of their homes to accommodate the Moroccan occupants. As in the case of Israeli settlement expansion beyond the 1948 Armistice Line, Rabat has attracted populations from the north of Morocco through the provision of incentives. In the occupied zone, necessities such as basic food commodities, income, fuel, energy, water, medical care, and education are subsidized for Moroccans. Luxury items are also available at half their cost in Morocco. Moroccans in the territory, who constitute almost the entire payroll of the government and State agencies, are paid 85% more than their counterparts inside Morocco, and they are exempt from income tax and value-added tax. Morocco diverts an estimated US\$2 million daily to maintain the militarized border and support the settlers.

Sahrawis constitute a minority in the occupied territory. Apart from northern Moroccans and ethnic Sahrawis long settled in the territories, thousands of ethnic Sahrawis have been transferred from areas such as Tan Tan in the Tarfaya Strip to camps in the occupied urban centres such as Laayoune and Smara as part of a strategy to Moroccanize the Strip. The administration of the camps in Laayoune and Smara is closely linked to the Moroccan government and the population is reliant upon State handouts for survival. The induced dispersal and relocation of indigenous inhabitants, alongside settler implantation, further distorts demographic compositions of the territory for Morocco's strategic purposes.

As part of the strategy of integration, Morocco maintains no statistical differentiation between ethnic Sahrawis and settlers. No census has taken place since 1994, and the administrative boundaries further complicate the extrapolation of data. Sahrawis are without accurate means to measure their own numbers against those of the settler population.

Since 1991, Morocco has obstructed the administration of the referendum on self-determination, and has challenged voter criteria in an effort to include settlers in the registry. Morocco's success in delaying the referendum has prolonged the opportunity to pursue the policy of settler implantation, in order to secure its position as self-acclaimed sovereign over the Western Sahara should a referendum ever come to pass.

Population Transfer in International Law

The UN Committee on Economic, social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), in its General Comment No 7, has defined “forced eviction” as “the permanent or temporary removal against their will of individuals, families and/or communities from their homes and/or land which they occupy, without the provision of, and access to, appropriate forms CESCR and the UN Commission on Human Rights have determined forced eviction as a grave violation of human rights, particularly the human right to adequate housing.

The UN Special Rapporteurs have defined population transfer as resulting from economic or political processes that are massive or incremental, direct (military operations, deportations, evictions or implantations) or indirect (administrative measures, impoverishment or economic incitements). They are discriminatory, systematic and coercive, and imply a political will.

Population transfer has been declared illegal in most international treaties and laws since the *Allied Declaration on German War Crimes* in 1942. The latest and its strongest condemnation is found in the 1998 *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court* that defined deportation, forcible transfer of population and implantation of settlers as war crimes.



Smara refugee camp, near Tindouf, Algeria (1997)
Source: Larry Mangino / The Image Works

