

Population¹

The total Sahrawi population is approximately 350,000. An estimated 90,000 Sahrawi live in the Moroccan occupied zone of the Western Sahara along with approximately 300,000 Moroccan settlers. The majority of Sahrawis (160–200,000) live in four refugee camps located outside of Tindouf, Algeria, while a small contingent of the Sahrawi population inhabit the Western Sahara's POLISARIO-controlled "liberated zone." Some Sahrawis have emigrated to Morocco, 10,000 to Algeria, 20–30,000 to Mauritania, 12–15,000 to Spain and approximately 3,500 to Cuba.

The Sahrawi language is Hassaniya, an Arabic dialect descending from the Bani Hassan tribe. The Sahrawi people are Sunni Muslims sect. On 27 February, Sahrawis commemorate the 1976 declaration of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) government in exile, which the African Union and several other States formally recognize.

Origins

Sahrawi literally means "of the desert" and refers to the indigenous population, originally nomadic Berbers of the Sanhaja tribal confederation. In the 13th Century, the Yemeni tribe of Bani Hassan migrated to the region and assimilation with the indigenous Berbers.

Historical Background

Spain colonized the Western Sahara in 1884, making it a Spanish province in 1934. Throughout the period of Spanish colonization, the tribes of the Sahara continuously resisted. On 14 December 1960, the UN General Assembly passed resolution 1514, enshrining the right of colonized peoples to independence. In 1963, the UN designating Western Sahara as a non-self-governing territory, and General Assembly adopted resolution 2229 (1969), reaffirming the applicability of the right to self-determination to the Sahrawi people.

On 10 May 1973, the Frente Popular de Liberacion de Saguia el Hamra y Rio de Oro (POLISARIO) evolved out of a preceding guerilla movement and led the independence struggle against Spanish colonial domination and assumed the political representation of the Sahrawi people. In 1975, Spain attempted to pass off its administration of the territory to Morocco and Mauritania through the unlawful Madrid Agreement. That same year, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that the status of the Western Sahara was to be determined through the free and genuine expression of the Sahrawi people. Following the ruling, Morocco initiated the "Green March," whereby the executive of the Moroccan government facilitated the entry of over 300,000 Moroccans into Sahrawi territory for the purpose of annexation. Sahrawis know this as *al-ghazu* (the invasion). Many Sahrawi civilians were forced to flee the violence that ensued between POLISARIO fighters, Mauritanian, and Moroccan soldiers. Mauritania withdrew its claim to the territory in 1979, and fighting between Morocco and POLISARIO continued until a negotiated ceasefire in 1991. The UN monitoring mission

(MINURSO) was established, as well as the framework for a referendum on self-determination.

Continuum of Discrimination

Following the "Green March," Morocco has continued to pursue policies aimed at Moroccanizing the Western Sahara. While Morocco has invested significant amounts in the "development" of the territory for its purposes, exploiting Sahrawi natural resources and favoring settlers in employment. In 1968, 1,600 Sahrawis employed in the phosphate industry, which now employs a mere 200 Sahrawis of a total workforce of 1,900. As such, Sahrawis are pressured to emigrate to the Canary Islands and other places in search of work. Additionally, there is no university in the occupied zone, thus students wishing to study must do so in Morocco. While there are study grants available to students from the occupied zone, poverty prevents most Sahrawis from surpassing secondary education.

In urban centres such as Laayoune and Boujdour, Sahrawis are outnumbered 4 to 1, and inhabit the most impoverished areas of the cities. These areas are heavily monitored in the interest of "security." Under the rubric or "security" also, Sahrawis living in the occupied zone and in Morocco are discouraged from displays of their distinct cultural identity, unable to form political associations or NGOs. Those in opposition to Moroccan sovereignty are often prevented from participating in elections. Movement is restricted in areas regarded as militarily sensitive and Sahrawis are subject to arbitrary questioning, unlawful detention and torture.

¹ Figures for Sahrawi population in the Moroccan controlled zone and in Morocco are not comprehensive as Morocco does not distinguish between settlers and Sahrawis in its census procedures.

