

WESTERN SAHARA UNDER MOROCCAN OCCUPATION

An explainer

Did you know?

- 1880s - Spain colonises Western Sahara.
- 1976 - Morocco annexes most of Western Sahara facing the resistance of Polisario Front, the Saharawi independence movement, Thousands of refugees flee.
- 1991 - After decades of resistance, the Polisario Front and Moroccan occupying forces agree to a UN-brokered cease-fire but attacks continue against Saharawi people.
- 2000s - Morocco repeatedly criticised for its actions in Western Sahara by international human rights organisations. Morocco continues to prevent the holding of an agreed referendum on independence.
- 2016 - The European Court of Justice affirms that Morocco has no sovereignty over Western Sahara but EU fails to respect Saharawi rights in striking deals with Moroccan regime.

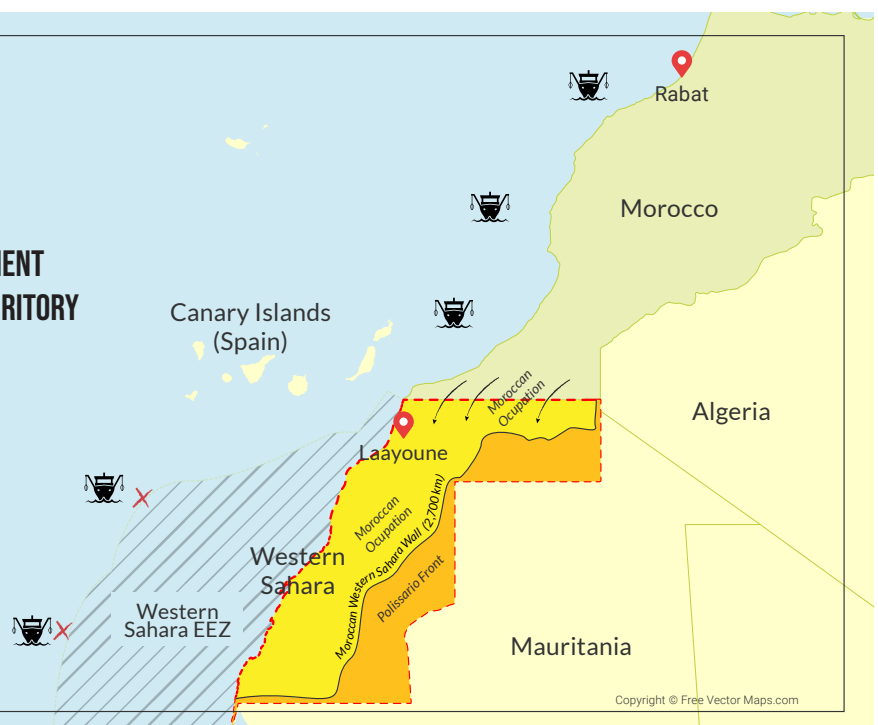
Background

Systematic human rights abuses, police brutality, violations of international law and fundamental rights, the Sahrawi people of Africa's last colony, Western Sahara, have endured decades of repression at the hands of Moroccan occupying forces. Since replacing Spain as coloniser, Morocco has attempted to control a territory about the size of the UK using military force to suppress free speech and pro-independence protests. Europe has largely stood by watching a tragedy unfold on its doorstep. In recent plenary and committee votes, MEPs further consolidated the EU's shameful record on this subject.

While the 1975 annexation and the resulting conflict forced tens of thousands of Sahrawi people into refugee camps in the desert, European countries and Morocco have remained fixed on exploiting the occupied territory's resources, such as fertile fishing grounds off the coast. Finally, in 1991, the Moroccans and the Polisario Front independent movement signed a ceasefire. The two parties agreed to hold a referendum on national self-determination for the Sahrawi. However, Morocco has persistently worked to defer the referendum, which has still not taken place. Moroccan authorities also continued to block journalists and human-rights organisations from entering the territory and investigating abuses.

“ THE [EU-MOROCCO] AGREEMENT DOES NOT APPLY TO THE TERRITORY OF WESTERN SAHARA

European Court of Justice,
21 Dec 2016



What our MEPs say

Paloma López

(Izquierda Unida, Spain):

"I voted against this report (in January in Strasbourg) because it fails to comply with the rulings of the Court regarding the recognition of Western Sahara as an independent territory from Morocco and the necessary consent of the Saharawi people on the use of their resources."

Patrick Le Hyaric

(PCF, France)

"A responsible approach towards this sensitive issue would have been to at least wait for the Court to take a position on the Commission's hastily organised consultation process that could not possibly have gained the consent of the Saharawi people through their representative organisation."

Lidia Senra

(Independent, Galicia)

"To ratify any agreement, the EU must negotiate with the Polisario Front whose sovereignty over Western Sahara is recognised by the UN. Concluding this fisheries agreement is therefore a violation of Saharawi resources and their human rights - and legitimising the Moroccan occupation"

Court rules against Morocco

In 2016, the European Court of Justice reaffirmed that Morocco had no sovereignty over Western Sahara, meaning that the EU's agreements with Morocco cannot cover the territory. At last, it looked like the Sahrawi cause would be at the forefront of the EU agenda, after four decades of European passivity and complicity with the illegal occupying force.

However, while the Court's judgment meant the European Commission would first need to obtain the consent of the Sahrawi people before finalising agreements with Rabat, the Commission went on to relaunch a new trade deal, the EU-Morocco Association Agreement. What followed was a sham effort at 'consultation' by the Commission, involving a strange assortment of groups such as Morocco's largest mining firm, officials elected illegally under Moroccan occupation, Moroccan state-owned companies and private corporate interests.

Dodgy lobbying

Things became even murkier in November 2018 when it was revealed that the European Parliament's lead negotiator on the trade deal, French liberal MEP Patricia Lalonde, was a board member at a secretive Morocco-based foundation, EuroMedA, alongside former Moroccan government ministers and state officials. Lalonde resigned from her role and is now (January 2019), undergoing an investigation by the European Parliament into possible conflicts of interest.

Despite the whiff of scandal and abundant signs of unethical behaviour surrounding the dossier, MEPs proceeded to vote on it. They sadly went on to consolidate the illegal annexation by extending various EU-Morocco deals to cover Western Sahara. This clear violation of international law and the rights of the Sahrawi people to determine their future is extremely damaging to efforts towards peace in this conflict. What is the incentive for Morocco to engage in peace talks when it has Europe's consent to carry on ignoring international law? This also undermines our own EU legal order as it contradicts the European Court of Justice ruling.

Of course, for Morocco, this is all good news. The regime is set to receive millions of EU funds every year in return for allowing the exploitation of resources that do not belong to it.

A people looking for justice

But amid all of this - negotiations, votes, rulings, resolutions - the fate of the people of the Western Sahara is at issue. A people who endure, who just want to live their lives, enjoy basic rights free from violence, to be citizens of their own country. Many demonstrate in search of social justice, against the assassination of activists, against the plundering of their natural resources by Morocco and the EU. When will Europe stop ignoring these calls for fundamental rights and dignity? When will we stop signing agreements with repressive regimes in violation of EU and international law? When will we show some respect for the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination? Our reputation, and more importantly, the lives of our fellow humans, rides on how we answer these questions.



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