

COUNTRY PROFILE: WESTERN SAHARA

August 2008



BASIC FACTS

- Population of 382,617 (2007 est.), area of 252,120 sq km (97,344 sq miles)
- Life expectancy at birth – 62 years (men), 66 years (women)
- Total adult literacy rate – 50% (estimate).
- GDP per capita – US\$ unknown

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT:

Western Sahara fell under Spanish rule in 1884, becoming a Spanish province in 1934. Nationalism emerged in the 1960s, as nomadic Saharans, or Saharawis, settled in the region. In October 1975 the International Court of Justice rejected territorial claims by Morocco and Mauritania. The court recognised the Saharawis' right to self-determination and Spain agreed to organise a referendum. But in November 1975, Moroccan King Hassan II ordered a "Green March" of over 300,000 Moroccans into the territory. Spain backed down and negotiated a settlement with Morocco and Mauritania, known as the Madrid Agreement. Signed on 14 November 1975, the deal partitioned the region. Morocco acquired two-thirds in the north and Mauritania the remaining third. Spain agreed to end colonial rule.

Polisario (Popular Front for the Liberation of the Sagua el Hamra and Rio de Oro), was set up on 10 May 1973 and established itself as the sole representative of the Saharan people. Polisario declared the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) on 27 February 1976 and announced its first government on 4 March. The current SADR president, Mohamed Abdelaziz, was elected Polisario secretary-general in August 1976.

In August 1978, one month after a coup, a new Mauritanian government signed a peace deal with Polisario and renounced all territorial claims. Morocco moved to occupy areas allocated to Mauritania. Polisario led a guerrilla war against Moroccan forces until 1991. Algeria in turn allowed refugees to settle in its southern town of Tindouf, where Polisario still has its main base. Some 100,000 refugees currently live in Polisario's camps in Algeria.



The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.

AT A GLANCE:

- **Territory:** Western Sahara
- **Status:** Disputed territory claimed by Morocco and Saharawis seeking self-determination
- **Population:** 380,000 (estimate)
- **Main town:** Laayoune
- **Area:** 252,120 sq km (97,344 sq miles)
- **Major language:** Arabic
- **Major religion:** Islam
- **Life expectancy:** 62 years (men), 66 years (women) (UN)
- **Economic resources:** Phosphate deposits, fishing, possibly oil
- **Currency in use:** Moroccan dirham

In April 1991 the UN established MINURSO, the United Nations Mission for a Referendum in Western Sahara. Its brief was to implement a peace plan outlined in a 1990 Security Council resolution. In September 1991, a UN-brokered ceasefire was declared. A UN-organized referendum on final status has been repeatedly postponed. In April 2007, Morocco presented an autonomy plan for the territory to the UN. The Polisario also presented a plan to the UN in 2007. Since August 2007, representatives from the Government of Morocco and the Polisario Front have met three times to negotiate the status of Western Sahara, and a fourth round of negotiations in March 2008 brought no conclusion.

POLITICS:

The legal status of the territory and the question of its sovereignty remain unresolved. The territory is contested between Morocco and the Polisario Front. It is considered a non self-governed territory by the United Nations.

The government of Morocco is a formal constitutional monarchy under Mohammed VI with a bicameral parliament. The Morocco-controlled parts of Western Sahara are divided into several provinces treated as integral parts of the kingdom. The Moroccan government heavily subsidizes the Saharan provinces under its control.

The exiled government of the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) is a single-party parliamentary and presidential system, but according to its constitution, this will be changed into a multi-party system at the achievement of independence. It is presently based at the Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria. It also claims to control the part of Western Sahara to the east of the Moroccan Wall, known as the Free Zone. This area has a very small population, estimated to be approximately 30,000 nomads. The Moroccan government views it as a no-man's land patrolled by UN troops. The SADR government, whose troops also patrol the area, regard it as the liberated territories and have proclaimed a village in the area, Bir Lehlou, as

SADR's provisional capital. The Polisario's government-in-exile was seated as an Organization of African Unity (OAU) member in 1984.

A UN-administered cease-fire has remained in effect since September 1991, and is administered by the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), but attempts to hold a referendum have failed and parties thus far have rejected all brokered proposals. Several states have extended diplomatic relations to the "Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic" represented by the Polisario Front in exile in Algeria, while others recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Most of the approximately 102,000 Sahrawi refugees are sheltered in camps in Tindouf, Algeria

ECONOMY:

Western Sahara depends on pastoral nomadism, fishing, and phosphate mining as the principal sources of income for the population. The territory lacks sufficient rainfall for sustainable agricultural production, and most of the food for the urban population must be imported. Incomes in Western Sahara are substantially below neighbouring countries. The Moroccan Government controls all trade and heavy subsidies have created a state-dominated economy in the Moroccan-controlled parts of Western Sahara, with the Moroccan government as the single biggest employer.

Morocco and the EU signed a four-year agreement in July 2006 allowing European vessels to fish off the coast of Morocco, including the disputed waters off the coast of Western Sahara. Moroccan energy interests in 2001 signed contracts to explore for oil off the coast of Western Sahara, which has angered the Polisario. However, in 2006 the Polisario awarded similar exploration licenses in the disputed territory, which would come into force if Morocco and the Polisario resolve their dispute over Western Sahara.

Sources:

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Wikipedia - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_sahara

UNHCR - <http://www.unhcr.org/country/esh.html>

MINURSO - <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/minurso/>