

BY STEPHEN MANGAN

*For over 35 years, Western Sahara has been deadlocked in conflict, stalemate and sanctions. Aggressive tactics adopted by Moroccan forces on the indigenous Sahrawi population continue to suppress any form of pro-independence opposition, leaving little hope of self-determination.*

SALEC NAYEM can't return to his home in the Moroccan controlled territory of Western Sahara because of a conflict derived from post-colonial accession that has divided his homeland.

He fled the Moroccan controlled territory of Western Sahara almost twenty years ago because he feared his life was in danger. He fears that should he ever return he will be detained by Moroccan authorities because he is a peaceful activist protesting for Sahrawi independence.

Now living in exile in Dublin, Ireland, Nayem can not travel to his home in El-Ayoun, the capital city in the Moroccan controlled territory because "the Moroccan authorities would be waiting for me at the airport," he says.

The worst blow since fleeing his homeland in 1988 came when his mother passed away in 1998. Nayem could not return to El-Ayoun to be with his family because he says "if you go back to the Moroccan controlled territory you are risking your life".

He carries this personal grief with quiet dignity. But the despair that hangs over the conflict torn territory has driven about 200,000 Sahrawi refugees to makeshift tent villages in neighbouring Algeria.

Morocco still has the heavy economic burden of supplying 120,000 troops to patrol the disputed region and some four million indigenous Sahrawi's are dispersed and divided between two bordering territories with no land to call their own.

Western Sahara is the bleeding heart of north Africa. Running along the Atlantic coast of north-western Africa between Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania it's mostly desert, but is rich in phosphates used in fertilisers; boasts valuable fishing grounds and the possibility of offshore oil.

Traditionally inhabited by nomadic Arab tribes and famous for their long history of resistance to outside domination, the land of Western Sahara was occupied by Spain from the late 1800s through the mid-1970s.

The roots of the present conflict began with General Franco of Spain. The region was a Spanish colony until Spain abandoned it at a time when the country was virtually leaderless during the dying days of Franco, who died in November 1975.

The region was granted independence that year with disastrous results. As soon as the Spanish left, the land was plunged into conflict as Moroccan and Mauritanian armies invaded Western Sahara to claim the land as their own.

Mauritania, however, withdrew its forces within 3 years and subsequently declared their recognition of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.

However, the region was annexed by Morocco in the “Green March” protests against Spanish rule of Western Sahara. Morocco then pursued the nationalist Polisario Front, who opposed Moroccan rule through an armed campaign, until a ceasefire in 1991.

The Polisario Front claim Western Sahara is their native home and that they should have the right to self determination under the UN Resolution 1514 (XV) which states the “right of colonised peoples to independence”.

In 1975, the UN enforced this resolution but this was ignored and deemed to be invalid by Morocco. Since then the conflict has been on the agenda of the UN Security Council, but its subsequent proposals have amounted to little.

When Morocco again entertained the possibility of supporting the UN resolution, talks collapsed and ended all long term prospects for a solution. Thirty five years later the Sahrawi people are still waiting for the right to self determination, with no sight of their circumstances changing.

Despite the decades of exile, war, repression and international abandonment, Sahrawi nationalism still exists within Western Saharan society and has been passed onto the younger generation of 20-somethings that were born and raised in the refugee camps.

Young Sahrawi’s are today exposed to patterns of harassment by Moroccan authorities “that applies particularly to young men who may be picked up for questioning; for taking part in a demonstration; for writing pro-independence graffiti or they may just be picked up at random,” says Jim Loughran, of the international human rights organisation, Frontline Defenders.

In a recent fact finding mission to Western Sahara, Loughran says he met a group of 15 young men all in the age group 18-25 all of whom spoke of having been picked up by the police and beaten or tortured in custody.

Since 1975, Hamd Hamad has been incarcerated ten times in Moroccan jails for his role as a protestor and human rights activist. He was incarcerated last in 2005, without trial, following a peaceful demonstration in El-Ayoum.

Each of his incarceration periods ranged from six weeks to about eighteen months. “Every time I was in prison” says Hamad “I was subjected to torture. For example, my finger nails were pulled out and electricity cables were attached to my genitals”.

“After one arrest, I was tied by rope to the back of a car while police drove the vehicle” says Hamad. “The only difference in the behaviour of the Moroccan authorities today is that Sahrawi people don’t vanish anymore, but torture and cruelty are still used”.

Hamad is the vice-president of a Sahrawi human rights organisation and is living in forced exile in Spain. When visiting El-Ayoum two months ago Moroccan police were

waiting outside his family home and beat him repeatedly, leaving him in a critical condition in hospital.

Working for any group opposing Moroccan rule is illegal and affiliation is considered a crime. As for the right to freedom of assembly, all kinds of peaceful protests and gatherings are considered illegal and are usually dispersed by force.

None of Western Sahara's human rights groups are legally registered. They are considered by the authorities as supporters of self-determination or "separatists". Some of these groups have tried to register but with no success.

There is also a high proportion of young secondary school students detained by Moroccan authorities, which is causing a lot of unrest in schools, according to Hamud Ugulid who is a teacher and a human rights activist with the Moroccan Association of Human Rights.

Young men who are picked up and accused of taking part in demos may be excluded from the school. The police make routine checks in school and often there is a permanent police presence and they have been known to even sit in the classes, says Ugulid.

However, Morocco justifiably fears an uprising of the Polisario Front, but the humanitarian, economic, political and security price-tag attached to their trepidation is widely ignored by global civil society.

International attention was, however, attracted to events in the territory last November when Moroccan authorities carried out a violent raid on the Gadaym Izik refugee camp, set up near El-Ayoum.

The authorities were repelled by Sahrawi's reportedly armed with batons, knives and Molotov cocktails in the most violent incident since the ceasefire began.

Eleven supposed Sahrawi militants died, 700 were injured and 150 are missing, according to Sahrawi sources, and at least five members of Moroccan security forces were killed.

The raid was the culminating act by Moroccan authorities to dispel months of Sahrawi peaceful protests against discrimination and worsening economic conditions.

After the violent confrontation, Moroccan security forces participated in retaliatory attacks on civilians and homes and detained hundreds of Sahrawi's in connection with street disturbances, many of whom are still being held.

Ahmed – not the real name of a Sahrawi man from El-Ayoum –witnessed the reverberating events in the city immediately after news spread about the raid in the camp.

He recalls seeing "hundreds of armed Moroccan soldiers openly beating Sahrawi people that were protesting on the streets against the violence in the camp [earlier that night]".

“Western Sahara is a peaceful place today, but that night brought us back to the days of many years ago” he says. “For the rest of that night you could hear women screaming, loud bangs and helicopters flying overhead – it was terrifying”.

The continued peaceful resistance of some human rights activists following the raid has succeeded in alerting the international community to human rights abuses in the Moroccan controlled territory.

A high profile trial of three Sahrawi men working as human right activists in the Moroccan territory has provoked further confrontation. The men are charged with “harming state security” because of their work defending the rights of Sahrawi people.

The trial of the three men was due to take place last November but was cancelled due to clashes between authorities and pro-independence protestors. The trial has been rescheduled for January 7th, 2011.

Moroccan authorities are no stranger to taking tough measures to repel Sahrawi resistance. Along the border between the two neighbouring territories there exists a 3-metre high wall of sand and stone which stretches all the way across Western Sahara.

Known as ‘the Berm’, the wall was constructed by the Moroccans in 1980 to divide the territory and also to prevent refugees from returning to the land. It effectively takes all the useful land and leaves the Sahrawi’s with a mass of uninhabitable desert.

Fortified with barbed-wire fencing, artillery posts and one of the highest densities of land mines in the world, ‘the Berm’ resembles constructions separating Israeli and Palestinian populations in the West Bank and the Berlin Wall that divided Europe in the latter half of the 20th century.

The wall has kept Sahrawi’s confined to one of the most inhospitable regions of the world for more than 20 years. Those that did not flee found only sand and wasteland yet they still managed to build an organised society amid suppression and intimidation.

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