

Basic Findings from Interviews with Recent Returnees from Tindouf¹

Introduction

They saw the Algerian helicopter chasing the truck they were fleeing in. They jumped from the truck and ran for about a kilometer to safety with the Moroccan security forces. Two of them made it. Five had to go back. They do not know what happened to them..

Tens of thousands of refugees are currently being held by the Polisario Front, an Algerian-backed separatist group, in one of the most inhospitable environments on Earth—the Sahara desert. Yet most of the world doesn't know about them... For over 30 years these people, who belong to various tribes known as Sahrawis, have been caught in the middle of a conflict over the future of the Western Sahara. This territory, historically linked to Morocco, was once colonized by Spain, an occupation opposed by the Polisario Front. When Spain withdrew, Morocco reasserted its historic ties to its southern region, only to be rebuffed by the Polisario, which demanded independence until their control. Since that time, the Polisario Front continues to prolong the dispute—and the suffering—of the refugees held in the Tindouf camps of southern Algeria.²



In 2007, Morocco launched an historic initiative to resolve the conflict through a credible political compromise – full autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty. While negotiations based on this proposal carry on under UN auspices, the plight of the refugees drags on. The prospects for a near-term solution are hard to determine. Yet something must be done to help the refugees. Since the conflict began, numerous NGOs and United Nations organizations have tried to shed light on the

¹ This report was compiled from face-to-face interviews in the south of Morocco conducted in January 2008 by Robert M. Holley, former Foreign Service Officer and Executive Director of the Moroccan American Center for Policy (MACP); and Jordan Paul, Director of Government Affairs at MACP.

² For more information on the conflict in the Western Sahara, including Morocco's historic autonomy initiative, please visit www.moroccanamericanpolicy.org.

harsh conditions of life in the refugee camps and to ensure that those detained there enjoy basic freedoms. Very few people are listening. Little is known about the conditions of refugee life in the camps around Tindouf, Algeria, because information in and out of the camps is so tightly controlled. There is little information about the status of the refugees. Some critical questions:

- Are their basic rights, as defined by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), being observed?
- Is there sufficient humanitarian aid for their families?
- What about freedom of movement, the ability to work and move freely, and basic safety?
- What has happened to the families separated by his conflict?
- Are there any eye-witness testimonies from people who have escaped from the camps to freedom in Morocco that can detail life in the camps and provide insights into conditions there?

This report begins to answer those questions. There are refugees who have escaped and are ready to tell their stories. Over the past 30 years, thousands of Sahrawis have fled the Polisario camps for Morocco, Mauritania, the Canary Islands, Europe, and elsewhere. The **Moroccan American Center for Policy (MACP)** has spoken with hundreds of former refugees over the years who left the camps to resettle in Morocco, their traditional homeland.³

In January, 2008, MACP conducted a series of interviews to find answers to these questions. Open-ended interviews were held with 30 former refugees in Laayoune and Dakhla in southern Morocco. Most of those interviewed had been back in Morocco for less than six months and all had returned within the last year. Some had come back only days or weeks before the interview. The sample included men and women, old and young, former Polisario military and police officers, teachers, smugglers, “small business” people, and average everyday camp residents. Each person was interviewed individually; there were no group interviews. The interviews were done in a private setting. Questions were posed through an interpreter and each interview lasted on average about 75 minutes. Interviews were focused on their lives and their personal stories, not on their political views on the Western Sahara.

The interviews covered the following topics:

- Freedom to return to Morocco
- Means used to return to Morocco
- Reasons for wanting to leave the camps
- General freedom of movement issues
- Availability of humanitarian aid
- Availability of other basic food and non-food necessities
- General quality and conditions of life in the camp
- Attitudes about the Polisario leadership
- Access to information about the world outside the camps

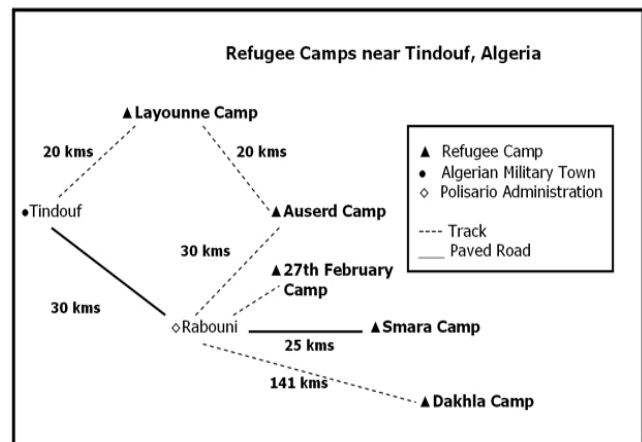
³ For example, 70 former refugees were interviewed by MACP in a series of group sessions in November 2006.

What follows is a description of the refugees' accounts about the harsh conditions they endured in the camps, the difficulties they faced when they tried to escape, and the toll on family members still held in the camps. Many of these stories have never been shared publicly before.⁴

The key finding shared by all those interviewed is that without exception the Polisario forbids the refugees to leave the camps and return to Morocco. They have no freedom of movement; they have no freedom of choice.

Refugee Life in the Tindouf Camps

No one really knows how many, but approximately 90,000 refugees are spread out among the Polisario controlled camps in the Tindouf desert region of southern Algeria. It is impossible to determine the exact number of inhabitants in these camps because for the last 30 plus years both Algeria and the Polisario Front have repeatedly refused to allow the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to conduct a census of the camps to establish the actual size of the population.⁵ Without a census, it is impossible to ensure that appropriate humanitarian aid is delivered to sustain the refugees. Also, as confirmed by many of those MACP interviewed as well as international reports, this lack of oversight makes it much easier for corrupt Polisario officials to sell the humanitarian aid on the black market in Algeria and neighboring Mauritania.



The following themes appeared over and over during the interviews as reasons why the refugees sought to leave the camps and seek a better life in Morocco:

- Inadequate food supplies for the family
- Poor educational opportunities
- Very few work opportunities
- Lack of or no money
- Dislike of Polisario leadership and bad governance
- Poor health care
- Belief that life would be better for them in Morocco

⁴ The identities of the interviewees as well as some dates and places has have been concealed to protect the families of those interviewed who are still held in the Polisario-controlled refugee camps.

⁵ For more information, please visit the website of the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (<http://www.refugees.org/countryreports.aspx?id=1978>)

- In general, difficult living conditions with no prospect for relief in sight
- Desire to rejoin family in Morocco – many of whom had fled the camps earlier
- Bad weather conditions (It is unbearably hot in the summer when most of those in the leadership and their close friends, family, and associates leave the camps for cooler areas. This is common knowledge according to those interviewed.)

Survival and Humanitarian Aid

Overall, daily life in the camps is largely occupied with the struggle to meet basic everyday needs. Humanitarian aid is delivered monthly and includes small rations of rice, lentils, flour, edible oils, a little sugar, and a few days supply of tea. During the course of the interviews, it became clear that **the humanitarian aid that is supposed to last for a month usually runs out and is quite insufficient.** Sometimes it stretches to two weeks, not much further. There are no fruits, vegetables, or meat included in the humanitarian aid supplies. These food staples must be purchased by camp residents either in the local camp markets (more expensive) or in Tindouf. All those interviewed reported that allocated humanitarian aid was grossly inadequate to sustain nutritional requirements, and that this aid had been progressively reduced over the previous two years.

Most of those interviewed confirmed that it is common knowledge that the Polisario leadership and their associates are stealing the humanitarian aid (both food and non-food) and selling it for their personal profit in the markets in Mauritania and Algeria. Former police officials, as well as admitted smugglers and average camp residents, confirm that the Polisario openly traffic stolen humanitarian aid, and many had witnessed this theft first-hand. Some of those interviewed even escaped the camps on the back of trucks carrying smuggled humanitarian aid to Mauritania.

The numerous accounts of the Polisario's corruption of the humanitarian aid efforts further corroborated the findings from the 2006 investigation by the Inspectors General of the World Food Programme and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights of mismanagement of humanitarian aid by the Polisario.⁶

It also became evident from the refugees' testimonies that **smuggling contraband materials through the Polisario controlled camps is big business.** They described a system in which the Polisario leadership and those with close ties to them are making substantial sums of money through contraband traffic. There are also other "small scale" smuggling operations that go on which are not directly connected to the Polisario leadership. The system survives through bribes for Polisario and Algerian law enforcement officials. This smuggling also includes human trafficking of sub-Saharan Africans being moved north for onward travel to Europe as illegal immigrants, and oil and gas, medicines, cigarettes, and humanitarian aid. (None of those interviewed admitted to knowledge of arms or

⁶ For more information, please see the Center for Individual Freedom's exclusive report "UN Mismanagement Plagues Aid Program in Western Sahara" (http://www.cfif.org/htdocs/freedomline/un_monitor/in_our_opinion/UN-Mismanagement-Plagues-Aid-Program-Sahara.htm)

drug trafficking through these networks). What is clear is that the Polisario leadership and its associates reportedly control most of this contraband traffic.

This culture of corruption and Polisario patronage is so pervasive in the refugee camps that it is threatening traditional Sahrawi tribal structures and societal customs and norms. Those interviewed describe the progressive development of a kind of “class system” in the camps which began in the late 1990’s. The leadership and those associated with them are becoming the “wealthy” and “middle class” strata, with most camp residents being among the “have-nots”, dependent on humanitarian aid and small enterprise activity to meet daily needs.



This disparity is becoming more visible as the leadership has the newest cars, color TVs, better housing, and the ability to vacate the camps during the height of the summer heat. There is also a common perception that being close to the leadership requires membership in the right tribe and fraction. Life is still tribal in the camps and former police officials report that their most common camp duty (other than collecting bribes, which they readily admit) is breaking up fights that have begun because of tribal disputes. **Those interviewed were uniformly critical of the Polisario leadership for its corruption, favoritism, and arrogance.**

So, with insufficient aid coupled with Polisario corruption, the refugee has become quite resourceful in order to make up for the difference between what they need and what they receive. Most of those interviewed said that an average family needs approximately US\$250-\$350 per month for basic food needs not covered by the humanitarian aid. However, the lack of a formal economy complicates this already difficult task. According to those interviewed, salaries are uncommon, even for police, military officials, and teachers. Those who are paid, are paid very small sums. This is particularly common among police officers who, lacking a salary, have created a system of eliciting bribes from smugglers to survive.

The interviews also uncovered other instances of how the refugees cope. Several took the difficult step of undertaking small enterprise market operations which required making difficult journeys to Tindouf or Mauritania to buy goods and then re-sell or trade the items to other camp refugees. Others set up small shops offering services to the refugees that were otherwise unobtainable.

Escape, Family Separation, and Contact with the Outside World

In general, people reported that life in the camps was extremely difficult. Although cell phones are available, the costs are quite high. Without cell phones, contact with the outside world for many is limited. This enforced separation from family members in Morocco is very hard on them since Sahrawi society is traditionally centered on kinship relationships.

Those interviewed said that the Polisario continues to tell people that life in Morocco is repressive and that they will be tortured, jailed, or worse if they return. According to accounts of those who have resettled in Morocco, the sacrifices made to return are worth the hardship because their lives are much better than what was expected. Most of those interviewed said few people, especially the younger generation, believed the Polisario's propaganda anymore, especially since they have access to information via cell phone or intermittent satellite television from Morocco that tells a different story.



Most of those interviewed said that they believed that nearly everyone, except the Polisario leadership and those who were close to them, would return to Morocco or elsewhere to be reunited with family if they were free to do so. The gap between the desire to return and making it happen is wide and dangerous.

Once the decision is made to flee the camps, the refugees told no one, not even close family members out of fear that the Polisario authorities would learn of their plans and put them in jail. During one interview, **a recent escapee from the camps said that he left without telling anyone because he knew of four people who were put in jail for a year for just talking about leaving the camps.** Additionally, according to one of the refugees, it is not possible to trust anyone in the camp since one of the best ways make money was to work as an informant for the Polisario.

Most refugees returned to Morocco through Mauritania using a variety of ruses to get out of the camps past fixed camp and border check points and roving Polisario and Algerian patrols. Some of those interviewed returned through the open desert to the Moroccan military defensive positions along the berm erected in the late 1980s to inhibit Polisario attacks inside Morocco from Polisario safe havens in Algeria. This is a dangerous route through minefields and **a couple who took this route was fired on by Polisario guards during their escape.**

A common ruse to exit the camps was to tell authorities at the camp entry/exit checkpoints or roving patrols that one was going to the countryside or to do business or visit a relative in Mauritania.

The trip itself is relatively expensive for camp residents. The cost runs on average about \$500 for the trip to Mauritania. Some had friends or relatives with transportation who would take them, but most said that the person driving the vehicle was unaware that their passengers intended to return to Morocco. Two adults in the sample (one with some, but not all of her children) decided to stay in Morocco during an official UNHCR family visit trip.⁷ Another mother interviewed is still trying to have her remaining small children in the camps returned to her in Morocco. Her husband still resides in the camps with his ailing parents and she reports that he agrees with her desire to bring the remaining children to Morocco. It is not known what happens to family members left in the camps when others choose to remain in Morocco.



Movement from one camp to another camp requires clearance from the Polisario authorities when leaving the camp, but this seems to be easily completed. A former policeman said they checked IDs against a “Wanted List” of names during the registration. A clearance is required before leaving.

There are Polisario police checkpoints at the exits and entrances in the camps. Movement from the camps to Tindouf in Algeria for shopping appears easy to do, with proper clearance, provided one has the means to do so. Movement from the camps out to the countryside also appears easy to do, though this also requires clearance when departing the camps. Movement from the camps to Mauritania previously required separate individual Polisario authorization papers until last summer (2007). A former Polisario police official reports that now only drivers of vehicles are required to obtain an official permission paper if the destination is Mauritania. Passengers must have their Polisario identification with them and persuade any police check that they are only going to Mauritania to visit relatives or do business. Mauritania does not require people to have a passport to enter if they are in possession of a Polisario identification document.

Some of our sample returned to Morocco through Mauritania using an individual authorization to visit Mauritania when that was required of everyone to do so, using some ruse or official connection to obtain the authorization. Others entered during the same period without permission to travel to Mauritania. Most of those in the sample who went to Mauritania without permission avoided Polisario checkpoints.

There is access to mobile phones, although it was clear that the expensive phone rates restrict frequent calling. There is also a fair amount of access to small black

⁷ The UNHCR program provides for exchanges of family members on a limited scale via aircraft. The program is notoriously underfunded and the Polisario has imposed constraints on those participating. Since March 2004, more than 3000 family members have visited each other, and expansion of the program as a confidence building measure is on the agenda of the autonomy negotiations.

and white televisions while the wealthy have color TV. There are a few internet cafes in the camps, but access to some web pages is reportedly blocked. People do not have individual laptops or the means to connect to the internet outside the cyber cafes. People can see news from outside the camps including broadcasts from the regional channel in Laayoune, Morocco. However, even those with access to the limited technology must still be cautious when communicating with the outside world. During one of the interviews, **a former refugee explained that he hesitates to call his brother in the camps so that the Polisario will not know of his whereabouts and possibly punish the family he left in the camps.**

More Human Rights Concerns

The stifling human rights situation was best summarized by **one former refugee who simply didn't like the way of life or the lack of freedoms in the Tindouf camps. He tired of having no choices and being subject to go to jail for simply saying that he didn't like the Polisario.**

An interview with a former Polisario police officer revealed the existence of secret detention centers where political dissidents and others, either individually or in small groups are kept in holes dug into the ground,. The police officer said that these special facilities were not commonly known among camp residents or even among all police authorities. According to this officer, **one of the jails is merely a big hole in the ground with wooden planks over the hole, next to a hospital so no one can tell it's a jail. The guards bang on the planks constantly as punishment so the prisoners can't sleep.**



Another former police officer with firsthand knowledge of the human rights abuses confirmed that there is a special prison for unwed mothers, which corroborates what MACP interviewers had previously learned. **Unwed mothers and their children are detained in this special prison unless/until some man agrees to marry them or their family members admit her wrongdoing and agree to raise the child.** If

neither of these things occurs, the women are forced to raise their children in this secret prison. This former police officer said that the existence of this special prison is not commonly known and that he had never heard of it until he was assigned to duty there.

The situation is even worse for children in the camps because educational opportunities are limited and reportedly decreasing. According to interviews with two refugees who taught in the make-shift Polisario run "schools", it appears that, at most, less than 8,000 children are receiving what could be described as primary

and middle school education. According to the estimates of the two teachers, there are about 15 primary schools, one middle school, and no secondary schools. **One of the former refugees explained that when he was 6, he was taken away from his family and sent to military school where they trained him how to use weapons.** In addition, approximately 800 students are dispersed between Algeria, Cuba, and other locations for secondary and post-secondary education. Those who received advanced education, if they haven't defected to other countries, have little to no opportunities when they return to exercise any real "profession" or "livelihood" in the camps.

Messages for "America"

The single most often repeated item when asked what message they would like conveyed to Americans about life in the camps was that the situation needed to be brought to a quick resolution so that people in the camps could return to Morocco and be reunited with their families. Most of those interviewed also said that they believed that nearly everyone, except the Polisario leadership and those who were close to them, would return to Morocco or elsewhere to be reunited with family if they were free to do so.