

At this very moment thousands of men, women and children are caught in the middle of a three decades old political conflict in the middle of the Sahara desert. Recently the Moroccan American Center for Policy (MACP) sponsored the visit of a delegation of former Sahrawi refugees to bring awareness about this forgotten humanitarian crisis.

The Sahrawi delegation was made up of eight courageous individuals, all of whom managed to escape the refugee camps in Tindouf, Southern Algeria which are controlled by the Polisario Front, an Algerian-backed separatist group. Each had a personal story of how their lives, families and future have been affected—interrupted—by the politically motivated and cruel practices of the Polisario. However, they shared one common message: *the separation of families and the oppression of the Sahrawi people must come to an end.*

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

**Q. What is the Polisario Front?**

A. The Polisario Front (a Spanish acronym for the “Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro”) was formed in 1973 as an independence movement against the Spanish colonization in the Sahara. After Spain relinquished the territory, the Polisario Front radically changed its mission and became the separatist group that it is today. The group was supported and armed by Algeria, Libya and Cuba in their respective attempts to undermine and destabilize United States ally, Morocco.

**Q. Are the Sahrawi people Moroccan?**

A. Yes. As early as 1578, the nomadic Bedouin tribes who inhabited the Sahara paid allegiance to the Moroccan Sultan (Moulay Ahmed El Mansour)—over 300 years before the arrival of the Spanish colonizers in 1884.

**Q. Where is the disputed Sahara territory?**

A. The disputed Sahara is 266,000 sq km area (about the size of Colorado) in Southern Morocco and it is bordered by Mauritania to the South and Algeria to the Northeast. (*Click here to see a map.*)

**Q. Where exactly do the Sahrawi people live?**

A. The Sahrawi refugee camps are located in and around Tindouf in Southern Algeria. There are approximately four major camps. The total population of refugees in the camps is a matter of much concern since Algeria and the Polisario have never allowed a census to be conducted by the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees. The Polisario claims that there are 150,000 refugees in the camps, but other reliable research puts the number at no more than 90,000 and probably substantially fewer.

**Q. Why would the Polisario Front say that there are more Sahrawi refugees than there really are?**

A. The Polisario Front regularly inflates the number of the Sahrawi refugees in the camps in order to obtain more humanitarian aid which is then sold in the black market all over North Africa. The proceeds from these illegal sales go directly to the Polisario leadership for their own personal gain. Numerous international NGOs, including France Libertés, stopped providing humanitarian aid to the Sahrawi refugees once the Polisario Front's corrupt practices were brought to light. *(Click here to read about the international reaction to the Polisario Front's fraudulent diversion of humanitarian aid.)*

**Q. Are the Sahrawis really "refugees"?**

A. No. The Sahrawis are really "hostages" held by the Polisario Front because they are not free to leave the refugee camps.

**Q. You mean the Sahrawis are NOT free to leave the territory?**

A. No. The Sahrawis are kept against their will in the refugee camps in southern Algeria, which is why they are really "hostages." Those lucky enough to leave the camps must escape—often camouflaged and under the cover of night—or bribe Polisario Front officials for temporary travel passes to Mauritania.

**Q. Why won't the Polisario allow the refugees move freely in and out of the territory?**

A. The Polisario Front knows that, if given the option, many Sahrawis would "vote with their feet" and leave the territory to return to Morocco.

**Q. How many Sahrawis have been able to escape the refugee camps?**

A. About 7,000 former refugees have left the camps and now live in Morocco. However, many of their family members are still suffering in the refugee camps. So these former refugees still fight to end the humanitarian crisis so that their families can be reunited.

**Q. Why do you say that the Sahrawi people are "interrupted"?**

A. For more than 30 years, the Sahrawi people have been pawns in the Sahara conflict. During this period, Sahrawi families have been forcibly separated and their culture and way of life has been stifled by the oppressive separatist regime known as the Polisario Front.

**Q. Where does the Polisario Front get its support?**

A. Algeria is the primary financial, political and military supporter of the Polisario Front. Libya and countries of the former Soviet Block also backed the Polisario Front, though their support has decreased since the end of the Cold War. Fidel Castro's regime in Cuba also supports the Polisario Front by being the primary destination for Sahrawi youth who have been kidnapped from the refugee camps.

**Q. Cuba?!? What does Cuba have to do with the Sahrawis?**

A. Since the early 1980's, Cuba, Algeria and the Polisario have attempted to create a communist, anti-imperialist rogue state in the Sahara. Fidel Castro's regime has partnered with the Polisario Front to accept children taken away from their parents against their will for brainwashing and indoctrination.

**Q. What do you mean by "brainwashing" and "indoctrination"?**

A. In Cuba, Sahrawi children are taught to believe that Morocco and the United States are their "enemy" and that they should always be prepared for the impending "War." Kidnapped Sahrawi youth are also inundated with anti-Western, Marxist and Leninist teachings.

**Q. I don't get it. Why does the Polisario Front take children away from their families?**

A. This cruel practice of the Polisario Front has two purposes: 1) to separate families and destroy the most basic, critical element of a society and 2) to keep pressure on family members in the camps to stay there and go along with the Polisario Front's schemes, hoping that their children will one day return.

**Q. How old are Sahrawi children when they are taken from refugee camps to Cuba?**

A. They are usually between 8 and 12 years old.

**Q. How many Sahrawi children are in Cuba today?**

A. Though the number of children taken varies from year to year, there are always around 3,000 Sahrawi children at any given time in Cuba.

**Q. What is life like for the Sahrawi children who are taken to Cuba?**

A. Sahrawi children are stolen from their parents and then their childhood is stolen from them. In the mornings, Sahrawi children attend school and in the afternoons they are forced to work in the Cuban tobacco, sugar cane and citrus fields. As Sadaani, a member of the Sahrawi delegation recounted, "They [the Polisario leadership in Cuba] made sure that we were busy day and night so that we would have no free time to think about home or how to return to our families." Kidnapped Sahrawi youth are also taught to reject their own culture and religious traditions and practices, including being forced to eat pork. ([Click here to read Sadaani's story](#))

**Q. Do the Sahrawi children keep in touch with their families while they are in Cuba?**

A. No. Sahrawi children are cut off completely from their families—without any communication—for sometimes as long as 15 years.

**Q. Aren't the Sahrawi children given educational opportunities while in Cuba?**

A. Yes, but this “education” comes costs them dearly for they must forfeit the love, caring and affection of their family, not to mention their childhood. Dr. Ghalli Bentaleb, a member of the Sahrawi delegation is quick to point out that “it is not necessary to rip a child away from the loving arms of his or her parents in order to provide a ‘good education.’” ([Click here to read Ghalli’s story](#))

**Q. Are Sahrawi children kidnapped and taken to countries other than Cuba?**

A. Yes, to Libya, Algeria and members of the former Soviet Block, although in lesser numbers.

**Q. What else does the Polisario Front do to keep Sahrawis in the refugee camps once they have returned from Cuba, Algeria, Libya or other Soviet Block countries?**

A. The Polisario Front’s schemes are many. For example, the diplomas earned by Sahrawis from Cuban Universities are confiscated upon graduation so that the graduates cannot practice their profession and pursue a better life in Morocco or elsewhere in the world.

**Q. Settling the conflict in the Sahara is very political and complicated, so won’t the Sahrawis’ plight have to be resolved as a part of this long, pain-staking process?**

A. Reuniting long-separated families and alleviating human suffering are simple, humanitarian issues—there is nothing political or complicated about defending basic human rights. As Bachir Edkhil, a former Polisario Front official-turned vocal critic of the oppressive regime, made clear while he shared his experiences with US lawmakers, “Resolving the Saharan conflict does not concern us. We are not diplomats, nor politicians. We are simply human beings who want to reunite our families—who have been separated for more than 30 years—for at least once in our lives.”

**Q. So, what can Morocco, Algeria and the Polisario Front do?**

A. Morocco, Algeria and the Polisario Front can come to the negotiating table and work out a political solution to the conflict in the Sahara.

**Q. What do you mean by a “political solution”?**

A. This means that Morocco, the Polisario Front and Algeria must find a “compromise” arrangement on how the disputed Sahara territory will be governed which will be accepted and respected by all the parties involved.

**Q. What can the United States do?**

A. The United States can insist that the United Nations do more to insure that the humanitarian aid intended for the Sahrawi refugees is not stolen and sold for personal profit by the Polisario Front. Specifically the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) should perform an accurate census of the populations in the refugee camps as well as an audit of the humanitarian aid—just as they do in other refugee communities around the world. US policymakers can encourage Morocco,

Algeria and the Polisario to come to the negotiating table to arrive at a political solution to the conflict.

**Q. What does the international community think of this “political solution” idea?**

A. Leaders from all over the world have spoken out strongly in favor of a “political solution” to the Sahara conflict. *(Click here to see what these world leaders have said.)*

**Q. Have US Lawmakers spoken out on behalf of the Sahrawis?**

A. Yes, they certainly have. Click here to see what they have said about the Sahrawis. *(Link here to “What people are saying” quotes.)*

**Q. What can I do?**

A. Spread the word about this humanitarian crisis to members of your religious, community and civic organizations. Also, urge your representative in Congress to help bring this humanitarian crisis to an end. *(Click here to find the contact information for your representative.)*