



POLISARIO Threats to Return to War Hinder Ongoing UN Negotiations

The Morocco American Center for Policy (MACP), a US-based NGO that supports strong ties between Morocco and the United States, is deeply concerned with recent hostile statements by the Polisario Front threatening war if they do not achieve full control of the Western Sahara – a clear contradiction to the goal of the ongoing UN-hosted negotiations aimed at a compromise political settlement to the conflict.

This drumbeat for war began in advance of the Polisario Front's "National Congress" which concluded on December 21, 2007. For example,

“Two main options will be proposed to the congress -- should we pursue peace talks or resume armed struggle to speed up the process?”

Were the provocative words stated by Mohamed Beissat, Ambassador to Algeria of the Polisario Front in an interview with *Reuters* newswire service. This theme was repeated in interviews and statements by Mr. Beissat and the Polisario's Secretary General Mohammed Abdelaziz before and during the Congress. Resolutions and reports from the Congress indicate that re-arming the Polisario's militias will take place while the negotiations go forward, creating a pall of uncertainty and tension among the negotiators.

The Polisario Front has been at war with Morocco in what is known as the Western Sahara since the 1970's. Historically affiliated with Morocco, the Western Sahara is a territory about the size of Colorado that had been occupied by Spain. When the Spanish withdrew in 1975, the Polisario Front, backed at the time by Algeria, Libya, and Cuba sought to control the region. However, Morocco, based on its long-standing ties to the area, opposed the Polisario in a war that lasted until the UN brokered a ceasefire in 1991. Despite periodic United Nations efforts at a settlement, the conflict remains unresolved. Unfortunately, one high price of the unresolved conflict is that since the mid 1970's tens of thousands of refugees have lived under the one-party authoritarian rule of the Polisario Front in camps in Algeria.

The Polisario's supporters in the UN, U.S., and the US Congress should not give them a free pass on these war-mongering statements. While Morocco is criticized from time to time for its need to improve its behavior, it seems sensible to remind the Polisario, and its sponsors in Algeria, that these threats can undo the years of efforts that made the negotiations possible.

The UN Secretary General and those members of the US Congress who support the Polisario must condemn in the strongest terms these threats to resume war. The Polisario should not continue to harbor delusions that independence can be obtained through obstinance and war. The stability of the region and of our ally Morocco should not be hostage to our energy reliance on Algeria, which continues its own destabilizing massive offensive arms purchases from Russia and elsewhere. Further, the Bush Administration, which has called Morocco's compromise proposal to resolve the problem in the Western Sahara "serious and credible" should also make clear to Algeria and the Polisario front that threats of war in a region already under an increasingly alarming attack from Al Queda extremists is clearly not what the United States considers responsible behavior in the war on terrorism.

Without a serious challenge to the statements by the Polisario Front, the consequences for progress during the negotiations scheduled for January 7-8 are dire. Too much is at stake. North Africa needs to address multiple economic and security concerns so that the broader region can thrive in the 21st century. The first step is to resolve this relic of the past in a realistic and practical way, not afflicted by resurgent threats to resume armed conflict, which only encourage terrorism and instability. The UN Security Council, the EU, and the U.S. must bring pressure on the Polisario Front through its supporters in Algeria, to shed the rhetoric and work seriously to end this humanitarian debacle in the Western Sahara.

MACP encourages the Bush Administration and the Polisario's supporters in Congress to distance themselves from the Polisario Front's threats, condemn the notion of war as a means to solve the Western Sahara conflict, remind Algeria and the Polisario that the negotiations are serious and an indicator of their commitment to resolve the conflict, and that all parties are expected to participate fully and in a spirit of compromise throughout the negotiations.