



On World Refugee Day 2008, the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants details abuses in Polisario refugee camps

Washington, DC (June 20, 2008) – Today, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) marks World Refugee Day 2008 and calls the international community to action on behalf of the more than 30 million refugees dispersed in conflicts across the globe. On this occasion, the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) released its annual report detailing the plights of these often ignored refugee communities, including the tens of thousands of Sahrawi refugees currently being held by a rebel separatist group, known as the Polisario Front, in southern Algeria.

The USCRI's *World Refugee Survey 2008* details the stifling and deteriorating conditions for the tens of thousands of Sahrawi refugees held captive by the Polisario Front with the "acquiescence of the Government of Algeria." Specifically, the USCRI's findings confirm past accounts by hundreds of former Sahrawi refugees that there is no freedom of movement in the tightly-controlled Polisario camps. According to the *Survey*, "[the] Polisario forbade return to the Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara [...] and arrested those who expressed an interest in doing so."

The *Survey* also revealed that the Sahrawi refugees under Polisario control were forced to undergo military training, that unwed refugee mothers were confined to a detention center and that Polisario military officials "reportedly opened fire [...] upon at least one pair of persons attempting to cross the sand wall separating the camps from Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara." The USCRI further highlighted the role of Algeria in this on-going humanitarian crisis, particularly its complicity in the systematic diversion of international humanitarian aid. "[Algeria's] refusal to allow a registration census prevented UNHCR from profiling the population for humanitarian and protection needs or monitoring aid distribution," outlined the *Survey*.

For the complete USCRI's *World Refugee Survey 2008*, please visit www.refugees.org

Earlier this month, the *New York Times* ("Western Sahara's Conflict Traps Refugees in Limbo", June 4, 2008) highlighted the testimonies of six former Sahrawi refugees who recently visited the U.S. to speak out on behalf of their family members and thousands of others still being held by the Polisario Front. (For more information about the former refugees' visit to the U.S., please visit www.moroccanamericanpolicy.org) Their accounts, along with the extensive findings by the USCRI, underscore the urgency for the international community to call upon Algeria and the Polisario Front to open their camps and allow the refugees the choice to leave or stay.

"Refugees are not unique because they are away from home," declared António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, on World Refugee Day 2007. "What sets them apart is that they cannot return there."

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