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A Sahrawi woman walks in the desert near the Western Sahara village of Tifariti [AFP]

Below is the response of Morocco's minister of communications to an article published last month on these pages. In the spirit of transparency, we publish the minister's response as received.

On June 5, Al Jazeera website published an article in English entitled “[Western Sahara’s struggle for freedom cut off by a wall](#)“, which we consider, to be biased, non professional and lacking credibility and accuracy about the history of the Sahara, the Wall, the “MINURSO”, the issue of human rights and the exploitation of resources in the region. The article was based on a unilateral opinion about the Moroccan Sahara issue without taking into consideration the views of Morocco concerning the issues it raised.

In the context of the right of reply, we would like to state, in the beginning, that the Moroccan Sahara issue is settled historically, socially and legally. There are hundreds of documents that serve as evidence about the legitimacy of the allegiance of the tribes of the Sahara to the Moroccan State, which was transmitted by the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice in 1975.



Pro-independence Polisario Front rebel soldiers [AFP]

These documents include correspondences, epithelia of appointment of judges and assignments directed to the Sahara tribes, as there are more than 12 international conventions concluded by Morocco before the French Protectorate with both Britain, the United States, France and Spain, under which most of these countries recognise the Moroccan-ness of the Sahara. thus in-

most of these countries recognise the Moroccanness of the Sahara, thus including the Sahara in the application of agreements between Morocco and these countries.

Also the principle of the inviolability of borders inherited from colonisation does not apply to the Moroccan Sahara region because it was always an integral part of Morocco prior to the many colonial periods the country has known.

The Defensive Wall

The data in the article concerning the wall, and describing it as “the wall of shame”, is but a promotion of the misleading propaganda targeting Morocco. The data in the article is contrary to the documented historical facts related to this fabricated conflict for the following reasons:

The tensions and provocations that came from the Polisario east of the wall were recorded as violations of the ceasefire.

1. This wall was built for purely defensive purposes to protect the inhabitants of the Moroccan Sahara. A report by the Secretary-General of the United Na-

tions in October 20, 1988 described it as “the defensive sandstone wall”.

2. The United Nations adopted the wall as a line defining the military exclusion zone, which was included in the military agreement of 1988, as part of the settlement proposals that were adopted by the Security Council in its resolution, after its acceptance by the parties, on August 30, 1988. These proposals were presented in the Secretary-General’s report, on June 18, 1990, and were then approved by the Security Council under resolution number 658, issued on June 17, 1990, making the region east of the wall under the responsibility of the United Nations.

3. Despite repeated demands since 1991 by the Polisario to deploy militaries in the area extending east of the wall to the international border of Morocco with Algeria, these demands were denied. In fact according to the report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations S No. / 404, issued on May 19, 1995, under the paragraph entitled “The Limits of The Presence of The Polisario Front in Specific Sites”, it is noted that the Polisario Front objected to the proposal limiting the presence of its troops out of the province, while Morocco refused to agree to limit the presence of the Polisario Front forces to the area between the wall and the international borders of the Sahara. The same demand was mentioned in the report of the Security Council No. S / 779, of September 8, 1995. But the objection of the Polisario was rejected. Morocco then sent an official letter on August 23, 1995, to confirm this rejection, which was reported by the Secretary-General of the United of Nations Security Council, in a report on this long lasting conflict, on September 8, 1995, making any military presence of the Polisario, between the east of the wall and the international border with Algeria, in violation of international legitimacy.

4. The report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations S / 461, issued on June 22, 2000, noted that the Polisario submitted a proposal to exclusive limit access to the east of the wall, in the framework of the return of the population of the camps based on the application of the settlement plan, which implies the non-existence between the east of the wall and international border of Morocco with Algeria.

5. The tensions and provocations that came from the Polisario east of the wall were recorded as violations of the ceasefire.

6. The wall never came under any criticism in any recommendation issued by the United Nations in general, and the Security Council special report. More than that, no report of the Security Council or the General Assembly of the United Nations ever referred to the wall as being illegal.

In conclusion, the wall purpose is the protection of civilians, and the reduction of any aggression aimed at individuals, which threatens the security of the population in the cities of the Sahara. The wall also provided a security framework to monitor and combat smuggling, terrorism and international crime, including drug trafficking, arms and human trafficking activities. No international resolution was issued about its legitimacy. On the contrary, it was introduced within the development of the settlement plan.

The description of the wall by the author of the article as limiting of communication between Sahrawi families is a blatant slander that contradicts the Moroccan concrete political process based on “the promotion of family communication”, where Morocco strongly supports family visits and considers them to be an essential element in the Commission’s programme of “Trust-Building Measures” underway since 2004.

Morocco was the first to give its approval in March 2003 concerning the “telephone calls” programme, which began on April 15, 2003. Morocco was also the first to give consent to the exchange of visits between Saharawi families, which was launched in March 5, 2004, under the supervision of the High Commission for Refugees programme, and with the logistical support of the MINURSO.

This operation was a major humanitarian and political success, as pointed out in the report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations issued on April 10, 2015, which mentions that the programme of visits was effectively underway and had benefited a total of 20,699 people since 2004, including 997 people during the first half of 2014.

In this regard, it is important to recall that there was never any indication that the wall was the cause of disruption in the programme of return to Morocco, in any of the reports of the Secretary General of the United Nations addressed to the Security Council, including the April 2015 report.

The Returnees File

Since the 1988 appeal made by the late King Hassan II; “The home is Forgiving, Merciful”, and with respect to the returnees file, a total of 10,000 people returned to Morocco, including some founding leaders of the Polisario. Morocco has worked for the integration of the returnees and to provide psychological counseling for these Moroccans and provide training and assistance to enable them to integrate socially, economically and professionally.

A number of testimonies of returning Sahrawis insist on the squalid conditions experienced by the populations of the Tindouf camps, and the exploitation by the Polisario leaders of the humanitarian aid destined for the camps. This was the subject of a clear European decision, in light of the results of an investigation led by the European Office for The Fight against Fraud in 2007 after exposure of aid manipulation, and whose results became clear only in 2014.

Human rights in the region

For years, Morocco has chosen to face with responsibility the subject of human rights issues in the Sahara region, and take the initiative to take the necessary measures to “repair the damage”, and the expansion of basic freedoms.

The first of these steps was the creation of an independent arbitration body, which was followed by the creation of the Equity and Reconciliation Commission, to address the totality of the problem of gross human rights violations, turn the page on the past and look into the violations that took place between 1956 and 1999. Nearly 5,000 files were received from people in the Sahara cities, with the allocation of \$72 million to compensate the victims, as well as the effort made for social integration. Cases from the Southern Sahara regions accounted for almost half of the beneficiary cases at the national level.

During the year 2011, the National Council for Human Rights established three regional committees in the Sahara, including Sahrawi Moroccan members. The Security Council in its resolution No. 1979, issued in 2011, praised the establishment of the National Council for Human Rights of those regional committees. This was confirmed by the report of the Secretary-General to the Security Council, S / 246, issued in April 2015, which covered the period from April 10, 2014 to April 30, 2015.

According to this report 13 foreign delegations from national legislative bodies and diplomatic missions of government and non-governmental institutions, as well as a number of journalists and academic researchers visited the Moroccan Sahara region. According to the same report; “public life proceeded peacefully and included large gatherings at social events in urban areas without major incidents ... this part to receive significant Moroccan public infrastructure investments, notably in roads and port facilities in Bougdour and Dakhla”.

As for the human rights situation in the refugee camps, it is sufficient to refer to the portion about the Tindouf camps in the “Human Right Watch” report, published in the 2008 (*take additional data from the 2014 report*), entitled “The Human Rights Situation in Western Sahara and the Tindouf Refugee Camps”, which talked about the spread of the phenomenon of slavery, the prevention from freedom of expression of any opponents of the Polisario Front, and the denial of the right of return to the camps, all of which corroborated by evidence documents obtained by Human Rights Watch, in spite of

the lacking conditions for the exercise of investigation, because of the totalitarian domination and control that exist in these camps.

Powers of the MINURSO Mission

Contrary to the allegations contained in the article, the MINURSO mission is the only mission that does not have the power to monitor Human Rights, at least five out of twelve UN mission do not have the power to Human Rights monitoring.

The Security Council also praised in its resolution No. 1979, and then in its resolution No. 2044, the creation of regional human rights committees in the Moroccan Sahara region under the umbrella of the National Council for Human Rights, which included Moroccans Sahrawis, and which works to monitor and address the human rights situation in the region, along with other committees in the rest of the regions of Morocco. The resolution also praised the actions taken by Morocco in order to strengthen its commitment to ensure access, without restriction or reservation, to any special mission related to the Human Rights Council of the United Nations.

This recognition of the credible efforts Morocco has been making to promote the mechanisms of respect for human rights in the whole country discredits the justification propagated by some regarding the demand to expand the powers of MINURSO to include human rights monitoring in the Sahara. The creation of local credible human rights monitoring mechanisms all over the

country, including the Sahara region, are sufficient to monitor the human rights situation in the region.

The exploitation of national resources and economic development

Contrary to what was claimed in the article about malicious allegations concerning fishing deals with the European Union and the exploitation of phosphates and natural resources of the region, the national natural resources management happens according to the requirements of development and the needs of the population, not through the logic investment of the region's resources, which fails to meet the pressing needs of the population. Thus, every dirham made from the wealth of the region is offset by seven dirhams spent by the state.

That is why Morocco doubled its investments, including more than double the size of revenue from the Sahara phosphate, in various aspects which yielded sizable results considering the outcomes at the level of human development, through mechanisms and elected institutions represented in 87 local councils, as well as three regional councils, and 52 deputies and representatives in Parliament. All of this represents a solid mechanism to track all the development projects in the Sahara. Therefore the exploitation of the natural resources in the Sahara takes place within the framework of international law with the involvement of the population and for its benefit.

According to the data of 2012, significant numbers of human development indicators in the region are high compared to the national average. For example, the percentage of schooling by age group remains high, far exceeding the national average. In the region of Laayoune, Boujdour, Sakia El Hamra, 81 percent of students meet the secondary cycle requirements, compared to 64 percent as a national average.

The rate of literacy in 2012 among the population of the southern provinces is more than 67 percent, which is higher than the 62 percent average in the rest of Morocco.

Health indicators, as well as major public services in the region have also improved. The connection to the electricity grid in the region represents 84 percent, compared to 70 percent nationally, and the supply of drinking water network in the region represents 70 percent, compared to 55 percent nationally.

The State also plays an important role in the prevention from poverty, and in addressing its symptoms. The estimates of the contribution of the state in the fight against poverty, in the form of direct and indirect aid, averaged 4.6 billion dirhams, while half of the National Recovery Program budget is allocated to the region. In this regard, the southern provinces experience a significant decline in the rates of poverty. Laayoune and Dakhla are among the regions with lower poverty rates in Morocco, respectively 2.2 percent and 2.6 percent, compared with a national average of 8.9 percent.

The Southern provinces development model, prepared in October 2013, represents a framework that will enable the further promotion of development and investment efforts in the region, by adopting a vision of more participatory and inclusive initiatives based on responsible governance.

The report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations on the Sahara for 2015, raised the issue of the management of natural resources, based on a Moroccan official letter to the Secretary General, and made no mention of any illegality in this regard. Also, the Security Council, which studied the report of the Secretary-General, did not refer to the illegality of Morocco's management of its natural resources in the Sahara.

A political solution to the conflict

Morocco has expressed its willingness to reach a solution that preserves its sovereignty and the unity of its national territories, while respecting the cultural specificity and allow the residents of the Sahara the control over the management of their developmental, economic, political, social and cultural affairs, within the national fabric, which makes it interact positively with the first “James Baker” project.

Morocco then proposed the Expanded Autonomy Initiative in April 2007, to grant the southern provinces of the Kingdom their autonomy as a political solution to the conflict, leading to the granting of the Sahara inhabitants wider powers in the management of their affairs, within the framework of Moroccan sovereignty; a stand confirmed by the Security Council’s recent decision which considered Morocco’s proposal serious and credible.

Furthermore, on April 21, 2008, after a series of direct negotiations rounds, between 2007 and 2008, the former envoy of Secretary-General of the United Nations, Peter van Walsum, stated before the Security Council, that “the independence of Western Sahara is not a realistic option”, calling on the 15 member states in the Council to recommend the continuation of the negotiations, taking into account, both the political reality and international legality.

In conclusion, the [article](#) included false judgments and misleading opinions lacking in accuracy, and contrary to the reality of the long lasting conflict,

which finds its roots, and cause of survival in the Algerian position of rejecting the notion of the territorial integrity of Morocco.

Mustapha El-Khalfi is Morocco's minister of communications and government spokesperson.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial policy.



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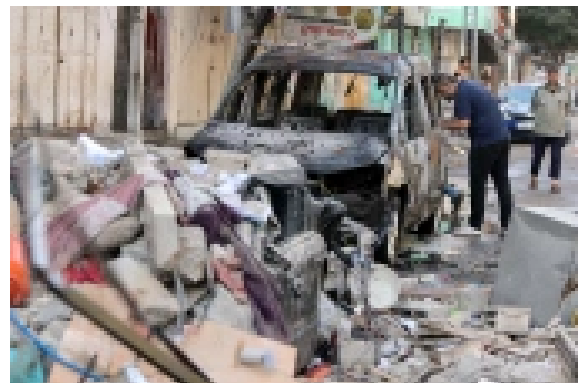
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