

Factbox: Western Sahara leader's treatment in Spain angers Morocco

By Syndicated Content



May 18, 2021 | 9:56 AM

(Reuters) – Brahim Ghali, leader of the Polisario Front which wants independence for Western Sahara, is receiving medical treatment in Spain, angering Morocco which annexed the former Spanish colony decades ago.

Here are some facts about the dispute:

GHALI IN SPAIN

Spain's Foreign Minister Arancha Gonzalez Laya confirmed on April 23 that Polisario Front leader Ghali had arrived in Spain from Algeria "strictly for humanitarian reasons, for medical treatment". Spain has not said where Ghali is being treated or made information about his ailment public.

Rabat summoned the Spanish ambassador on April 25 to demand an explanation and express concern at Ghali's admittance to a Spanish hospital, adding in a statement on May 8 that it was a "premeditated act" that would have repercussions.

THE TERRITORY

The size of Britain, Western Sahara is sparsely populated, with phosphate reserves and rich fishing grounds. It was occupied and ruled by Spain from 1884-1976. Morocco says it has valid claim to the territory dating back to the colonial era. When Spain left, Morocco annexed the territory and encouraged thousands of Moroccans to settle there.

Sahrawi people formed the Polisario Front to push for independence before the end of Spanish rule, and later waged a guerrilla war against Morocco's claim to the territory, with the support of neighbouring Algeria.

The United Nations brokered a ceasefire in 1991, with Morocco controlling about four-fifths of the territory. The truce included the promise of a referendum on the territory's status, but that has not taken place due to disagreements over how it should be carried out and who would be allowed to vote.

THE SIDES' POSITIONS

Morocco says it has centuries-old rights over the territory and that since annexing it, it has poured large sums of money into improving living conditions there. It is willing to offer autonomy within Morocco but not independence.

The Polisario set up a government in 1975 in neighbouring Algeria. Its government, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, is a member of the African Union but is not recognised as a U.N. member state. It has said it is ready to negotiate with Morocco on ways to hold a referendum offering a choice between independence, integration into Morocco, and self-governance.

Algeria is Polisario's key ally, and hosts thousands of Sahrawi refugees in desert camps.

TRUMP RECOGNISES MOROCCO'S CLAIM

In December, 2020, U.S. President Donald Trump announced that the United States would recognise Morocco's claim over Western Sahara and open a consulate there, as part of a deal under which Rabat agreed to restore diplomatic relations with Israel. The U.S. decision was strongly criticised by the Polisario Front and Algeria, while Trump was given the Order of Muhammad, Morocco's highest award, by King Mohammed VI. Some 22 mostly African and Arab countries have opened consulates in Western Sahara.

(Compiled by Angus McDowall and Peter Graff; Editing by Giles Elgood)