

# Western Sahara: US' Africom says no drills will take place in disputed Western Sahara

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The US military on Tuesday denied a tweet by Morocco's prime minister that US-led African military exercises this month would take place in the disputed region of Western Sahara. Prime Minister Saad-Eddine El Othmani said last week on Twitter that the training "marks the consecration of American recognition of the Moroccan Sahara". His tweet

has now been removed. The US African Command (Africom), which will lead the nine-nation, 7,000-participant exercises, said in a statement that they are limited to the territory of Morocco.

“Exercise locations are spread mainly across Morocco, from Kenitra Air Base in the north to Tan Tan and Guerir Labouhi training complex in the south,” the statement said. Africom said that US and Moroccan planners decided “to use the sites proposed at the beginning of the planning cycle in summer of 2020” — months before then US president Donald Trump’s December 2020 announcement recognizing Morocco’s possession of Western Sahara.

Last year, after Rabat normalised relations with Israel, Trump recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, sparking an angry response from the separatist Polisario Front, which denies Morocco’s claim to the territory. Morocco laid claim to the former Spanish colony with rich phosphate resources and offshore fisheries after Spain withdrew in 1975.

## **‘COMPLETELY FALSE RUMOUR’**

The Polisario Front took up arms to demand independence, proclaiming the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in 1976 and fighting a 16-year war with Morocco. Morocco now controls 80 percent of the territory, while the rest is run by the

Polisario Front. Rabat has offered Western Sahara autonomy, but maintains that the territory is a sovereign part of the kingdom.

Othmani had said in his tweet that the exercises would take place at two sites in Western Sahara, including the eastern Mahbes region, where Polisario regularly claim conflict in recent months, and Dakhla, where Rabat plans to develop a large Atlantic port.

Sahrawi foreign minister Mohamed Salem Ould Salek dismissed the original tweet as a “completely false rumour”. “There will be no joint manoeuvres in Western Sahara as part of ‘African Lion 2021’ in which US forces will participate,” Salek told AFP. “They will take place in the south of Moroccan territory, and within the internationally recognised borders of Morocco.”

Spain is understood not to be taking part in the exercises. Madrid has angered Rabat after Polisario Front leader Brahim Ghali was treated in a Spanish hospital for Covid-19 in April. Last month, Spain was caught off guard when as many as 10,000 people surged into its tiny North African enclave of Ceuta as Moroccan border guards looked the other way, in what was widely seen as a punitive political gesture.

AFP