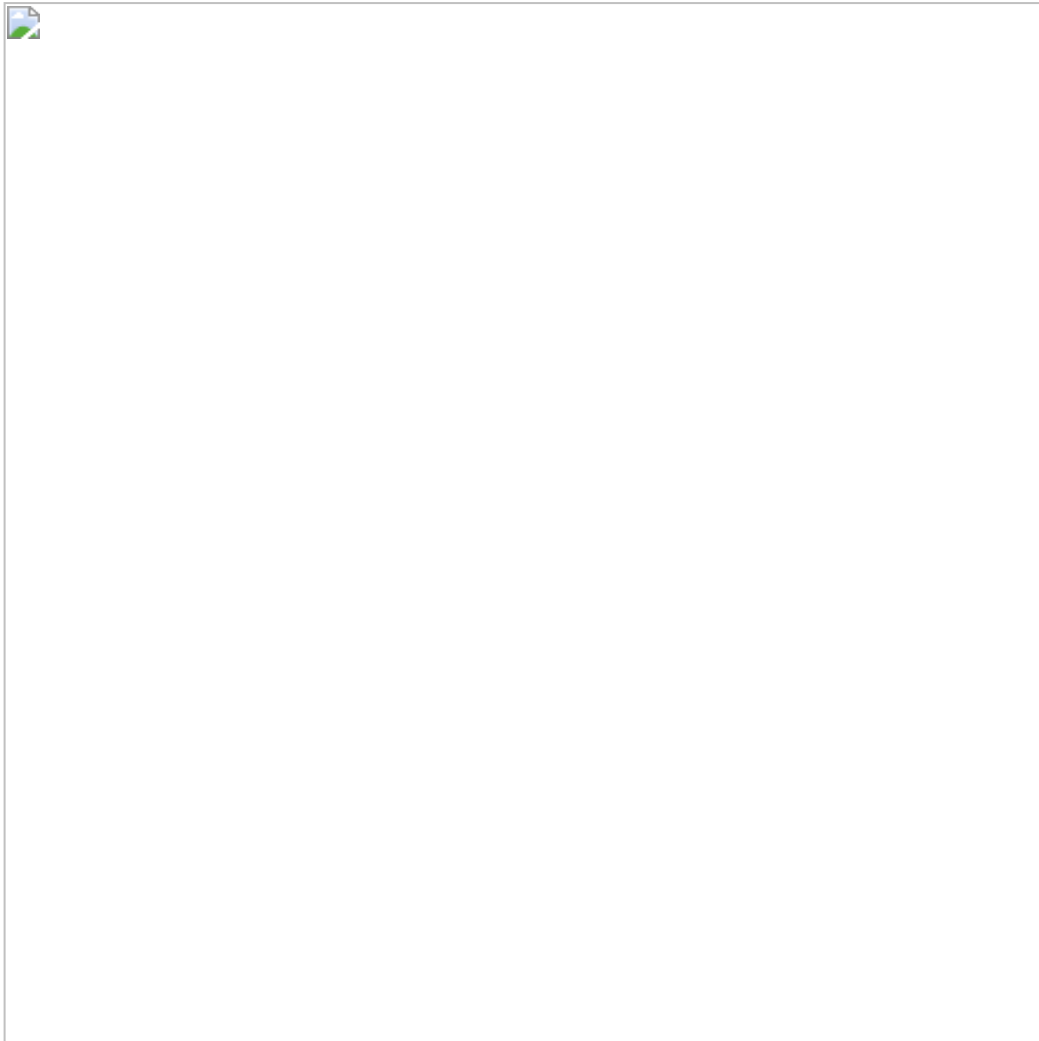


HEADING TOWARDS WAR?

Algeria accuses Morocco of 'murdering' three Algerian civilians

By **Jeune Afrique**

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Relations between the two neighbours have become increasingly tense over the past year and since the Guerguerate operation.

RYAD KRAMDI/AFP

A war is brewing between Algeria and Morocco. After a year of inflammatory statements from both sides, Algiers accuses Rabat of bombing three Algerian civilian trucks on 1 November.

On 3 November, Algeria's presidency – via a statement – denounced “the murder of three Algerian nationals” who, according to it, had been victims of a bombing attack on 1 November “while travelling between Nouakchott and Ouargla,” aboard their trucks.

“Several factors indicate that the Moroccan occupation forces in the Western Sahara carried out this cowardly assassination with sophisticated weaponry through this new manifestation of brutal aggression which is characteristic of a known policy of territorial expansion and terror,” El Mouradia said in the statement.

Algerian journalist Akram Kharief's popular website, menadefense.net, was the first to report on this event on 2 November. “The incident took place between Ain Bentili and Bir Lahlou [i.e. in the Polisario-controlled area] where the road between Algeria and Mauritania passes,” the *menadefense* article says.

According to the journalist, the three trucks were returning from Nouakchott (Mauritania), where they had delivered loads of cement before setting off on their return journey – empty. In fact, the road

was unpaved.

Potential casus belli

Khariief maintains that the plates of the three trucks were Algerian, and that one of the vehicles broke down, forcing the other two to stop and help. It was then at that moment, at around 1pm on 1 November, that the trucks were targeted, resulting in the deaths of the truckers, all three Algerians – one from Laghouat, the other two from Ouargla.

“The two trucks were at a standstill when they were hit by artillery fire from the Moroccan separation wall located more than 25km away from the scene,” the article says. The journalist is not sure what type of weaponry was used – artillery, Mirage fighter, F-16 or a Hermes drone.

Media outlets close to the Polisario, which have published unauthenticated videos of burnt trucks, claim that the attack took place on Mauritanian soil. However, Mauritania’s general staff have denied this assertion, saying: “In order to enlighten public opinion and correct the information disseminated, the *Direction de la Communication et des Relations Publiques de l’Etat-Major Général des Armées* denies being involved in any attack on national territory.”

Mauritania disputes the location of the attack, but not the attack itself. The authorities did not wish to comment further, and for the moment, Rabat has not officially reacted to this press release. *Agence France Presse (AFP)* reported what an informed Moroccan source, who denies the Algerian presidency's 'gratuitous' accusations, said: "If Algeria wants war, Morocco doesn't. Morocco will never be drawn into a spiral of violence and regional destabilisation. If Algeria wants to drag the region into war, through provocations and threats, Morocco will not follow. Morocco has never targeted and will never target Algerian citizens, regardless of the circumstances and provocations."

Repeated accusations

A former member of the Polisario tells us that he believes "there is too much contradictory information in circulation" right now and suggests that perhaps the "trucks were set on fire voluntarily."

This is not the first time that the Kingdom has faced such accusations. On 19 August, the Polisario claimed that the Moroccan army had "launched raids on unarmed Saharawi civilians in the liberated Saharawi territories."

We are facing a possible war and we must recognise that the risks of escalation are serious.

Bombings were said to have targeted a truck and utility vehicle. On social media, several accounts shared photos and videos of a burning truck in the desert. At the time, a former member of the Polisario had said that perhaps the Sahrawi organisation itself had initiated the fire to terrorise the camps' inhabitants and stir up tensions with Morocco.

Relations between the two neighbours have become increasingly tense over the past year. For instance, the Moroccan army carried out the Guergeuerate operation in November 2020 against Polisario fighters, who were blocking the crossing point between Morocco and Mauritania.

One month later, America's recognition of Morocco's claim to the Western Sahara, the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Kingdom and Israel and the Pegasus affair, provoked a year-

long series of weapon exchanges and inflammatory statements between the two countries' officials, which lasted until the Algerian ambassador to Rabat was recalled on 18 July.

“Serious” risks of escalation

“We are facing a possible war and we must recognise that the risks of escalation are serious,” Amar Belani, Algeria’s special envoy for the Maghreb and Western Sahara, said on 22 October.

Algeria’s presidency, which has opened an investigation into this “ignoble act in order to clarify the circumstances”, already seems convinced of Morocco’s guilt and promises that “this assassination [of the three truck drivers] will not go unpunished.”

The two neighbours already went head to head on the Sahara issue during the Sand War (between 1963 and 1964). In force since 1991, the ceasefire between the Kingdom and the Polisario ended after the Guerguerate operation. In the aftermath, journalists close to the pro-independence group reported weekly attacks on the Moroccan defence wall, the truthfulness of which was never formally confirmed.