

Climate Colonialism: Why Was Occupied Western Sahara Excluded from COP26 U.N. Summit in Scotland?

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Activists are criticizing the British government for excluding Western Sahara, occupied by Morocco since 1975, from the U.N. climate summit in Scotland.

Meanwhile, Morocco is counting renewable energy developments in Western Sahara toward its own climate

pledges. Sahrawi activists and the Sahrawi government in exile, known as SADR, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, have described this as climate colonialism. Negotiators from Western Sahara independently announced a plan to reduce carbon emissions outside COP26, as the climate crisis has brought extreme weather conditions, including drought, extreme heat and flooding, to the region. In an interview last week in Glasgow, Scotland, while COP26 was underway, Oubi Bouchraya Bachir, a representative of the Polisario Front for Europe and the European Union, estimated 30% of the solar energy produced by Morocco “will be produced from within the illegal context of occupation.” We also spoke with climate change consultant Nick Brooks, who has traveled to Western Sahara for decades to carry out archaeological and palaeo-environmental fieldwork and helped release the Sahrawi climate plan adjacent to the COP26. “They have been completely and systematically excluded from

international processes of climate governance and climate finance,” Brooks said of the Sahrawi.

Transcript

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AMY GOODMAN: This is *Democracy Now!* I'm Amy Goodman, with Juan González.

The British government is facing widespread criticism for excluding critical voices from negotiations at the U.N. climate summit. One group excluded was climate negotiators from Western Sahara, which has been occupied by Morocco since 1975. Last week, Western Sahara publicly revealed its plan to reduce carbon emissions, but their announcement was not made inside the U.N. summit but at the People's Summit in Glasgow because its negotiators aren't accredited by the U.N. Meanwhile, Morocco is using renewable energy developments in Western Sahara to count towards its climate pledges.

Last week, we spoke with climate change consultant Nick Brooks and Oubi Bachir, the representative of the Polisario Front for Europe and the European Union. I began by asking Oubi Bachir why Western Sahara was not represented at the U.N. summit.

OUBI BOUCHRAYA BACHIR: Unfortunately, 'til now, the Sahrawi Republic is not yet a member of the United Nations. Of course, one day, certainly, it will join the rest of the nations of the world and gain its seat in the United Nations. But pending the end of the decolonization process and the independence of Western Sahara, we are not yet admitted as a full member in the U.N. And on the basis of that condition, the Sahrawi Republic could not, unfortunately, present its NDC, nationally determined contribution, to the international climate system. And that's why we are here in Glasgow.

Unfortunately, Morocco is undertaking a huge campaign to greenwash its ugly face of military occupation of our territory and embark on this propaganda campaign that it is friendly to the environment, using its military occupation to Western Sahara to pass through this message. We know that Morocco is now executing some project, especially on the renewable energy, on the wind energy, but also on the solar share, in the occupied part of Western Sahara, using also the assistance and the partnership with some international, multinational companies, such as the Italian Enel and also the Spanish Siemens Gamesa, who are now on a major project in Western Sahara.

Just to give you some sense of the statistics that we have, that maybe by 2030 the entire wind energy that will be produced in Western Sahara, around almost 50, 47% of it, it will be illegally produced from Western Sahara. On the solar energy, around 10%, and it may reach even until 30% of the global solar energy produced or announced to be produced by Morocco, it will be produced from within a context, an illegal context, of occupation.

And unfortunately, the international climate system, the U.N. Conference on Climate Change, is receiving those data that have been submitted by Morocco, and we think it is not the right thing to do. It is illegal because this energy has been produced in a context of violation of international law. The European Court of Justice, General Court of Justice, just issued this decision last month, on September – on the 29th of September, annulling two agreements that have been passed between the European Union and the Kingdom of Morocco, because there is no legal basis of that, because the consent of the people of Western Sahara was not achieved by the European Union and Morocco in this regard. And the abuses of human rights are largely and widely denounced by all international humanitarian organizations. So this is the real ugly face of the Moroccan occupation to our territory.

JUAN GONZÁLEZ: I wanted to bring in Nick Brooks. You've been a climate consultant traveling to Western Sahara for about 20 years or so. Could you talk about the report that Oubi mentions? It notes that the World Bank puts the offshore wind power potential of Western Sahara at 169% greater than that of Morocco. And so, could you talk about the importance of Western Sahara in terms of renewable energy? And also, where is the African Union in all this? What's its stance in recent years on the continued occupation of the territory?

NICK BROOKS: OK. Thank you. I think, on the African Union question, I'll probably ultimately defer back to Oubi. He knows this issue much better than I do.

But on the importance of the report and the role of Western Sahara in combating climate change, certainly the potential for renewables is enormous there, and we're already seeing Morocco beginning to exploit that. And as Oubi mentioned, one of the key issues here is the issue of climate justice. What we're seeing is a lot of the principles that are embedded in the Paris Agreement on climate change actually being ignored or essentially abused. When we've got a situation where Morocco's performance against its own climate targets is going to be dependent on the exploitation of renewable energy from an occupied territory, then that is contrary to the Paris Agreement principles of transparency, of accuracy, of inclusion and of equity. So, that in itself is very important. So Western Sahara can play a role in combating climate change and producing clean energy, but at the moment that's happening through the mechanism of Moroccan occupation and colonialism.

So, one of the roles of the report is to try and highlight this issue and to try and amplify, give the Sahrawi a voice, because, as Oubi said, they have been completely and systematically excluded from international processes of

climate governance and climate finance. If we take the finance, for example, we can look at the amount of finance going to neighboring countries in 2019. Just in terms of formal multilateral climate finance to Morocco, we're looking at about \$300 million. If we look at Mauritania, it's about \$17 million, a little less for Algeria – sorry, \$75 million for Mauritania and about \$17 million for Algeria. Western Sahara received nothing. So, this is public money from donor countries to climate funds, formal climate funds, that gets channeled to help developing countries address the impacts of climate change and develop low-carbon societies and economies.

So, again, Western Sahara is completely excluded from this, and so they're denied the resources with which they could adapt and with which they could – and I think we're emphasizing mitigation here, but – mitigation being reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and, you know, transitions to clean energy, but adaptation is also hugely important.

Most of the Sahrawi live as refugees in the Algerian desert, in the refugee camps, and these are areas that are already really, really harsh and will suffer some of the worst impacts of climate change. We're talking about a big increase in the number of days where the temperature exceeds 50 degrees Celsius, for example. That zone, in a recent report, was classified as being at the edge of a region of extreme risk from heat extremes with real consequences for sort of human welfare, human mortality and morbidity.

We talked about the floods, as well. The Sahrawi refugee camps, while we're looking at a general reduction in water availability and increased heat, what rainfall that is coming is coming in more intense and more extreme bursts, and so this is causing devastating floods. And one of the robust findings about the impacts of climate change is that we

expect more of these intense rainfall events increasing flood risk.

OUBI BOUCHRAYA BACHIR: Let me respond to the question on the African Union. As you know, the Sahrawi Republic is a member of the Organization of the African Unity since 1984, and Morocco withdrew as a sign to – as a position to protest against our admission. But then Morocco tried from outside to influence on our position and failed because of the commitment of all African countries behind the cause of the Sahrawi people, the cause of the people that are struggling in what is known inside the African Union as Africa's last colony, which is Western Sahara.

And in 2017, Morocco decided to submit a petition to be admitted in the African Union and now is sitting side by side to the Sahrawi Republic. We thought that we are, by then, in 2017, in a similar scenario like the one that Morocco was doing with Mauritania by the end of the '60s and the beginning of the '70s, where it started contesting the membership of Mauritania in the Organization of the African Union but ended up accepting it. We thought that after the era of contestation, Morocco would have been now in the era of wisdom.

But, unfortunately, that was not the case, and Morocco is still in the same policy of not only occupying Western Sahara, military occupying, abusing the human rights of the people, plundering the natural resources of the territory, but at the same time defying any international attempt to decolonize the territory and to organize the referendum of self-determination that has been promised to the Sahrawi people and constitutes until now the only way to settle the conflict in conformity with the international law.

The African Union in March this year, after the resumption of the armed struggle in Western Sahara as a result of the Moroccan violation of the terms of the ceasefire – in

November last year, the African Union, the Peace and Security, at the summit conference passed a resolution asking the two member states, the Sahrawi Republic and the Kingdom of Morocco, to engage in direct negotiations and maybe looking for a new ceasefire between them. But the settlement should be on the basis of the African Union charter, and especially the Article number 4, that insists on the necessity to fully respect the inherited boundaries from the colonial era, which means Morocco in its internationally recognized boundaries and Western Sahara on its own. The next day, the Moroccan government declared that it is not concerned with this and it will never accept it. So, the African Union is very clear. It's behind the Sahrawi Republic as a founding member of it. And now we are really expecting, within the U.N. system, within the Security Council, that the voice of the Africans will be heard. Now, on your question.

AMY GOODMAN: We only have a minute, Oubi Bachir.

OUBI BOUCHRAYA BACHIR: Of course, with this plan, the Sahrawi Republic has —

AMY GOODMAN: We only have a minute, Oubi Bachir, but just let me ask —

OUBI BOUCHRAYA BACHIR: Yeah.

AMY GOODMAN: Is the U.N. accepting the Moroccan climate commitments that include the occupied Western Sahara? And are you calling on these commitments, the U.N. to stop accepting these?

OUBI BOUCHRAYA BACHIR: Exactly. That is one of the major calls that we are making here, that the United Nations Conference on Climate Change should exclude and refuse to give credit to any data, any projects that are generated in Western Sahara, because they are generated within a context of a military occupation that the U.N. has refused to endorse.

That's the position of the international community. That's the position of the U.N. And that is what the international legality is saying. So the international climate system shouldn't operate in a different way from the international system. Justice is indivisible. It goes for the political settlement of the conflict, but also it goes for the legal status of the territory. And we are asking for climate justice. Climate justice will involve that Western Sahara – the data on Western Sahara should be excluded from the Moroccan reports, because Western Sahara has never been part of Morocco. That's the U.N. stand.

AMY GOODMAN: That's Oubi Bachir, the Polisario Front's Europe representative, and climate change consultant Nick Brooks, who has worked with Western Sahara on its climate plan. We spoke to them at the U.N. climate summit last week.

That does it for our show. If you want to see our [documentary](#) *Four Days in Occupied Western Sahara: A Rare Look Inside Africa's Last Colony*, go to democracynow.org. I'm Amy Goodman, with Juan González.

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