

# UN envoy pushes peace in Sahara

AP, ALGIERS



The UN envoy for the disputed Western Sahara on Saturday visited refugee camps in Algeria housing those displaced by fighting decades ago, in a renewed effort to find a diplomatic solution for the territory.

Staffan de Mistura's visit to camps in Smara, shown on Algerian state television, was met with skepticism by supporters of the Polisario Front, which seeks independence for Western Sahara. Morocco annexed the former Spanish colony in 1975.

Sahrawi independence advocates are increasingly frustrated after decades of diplomatic deadlock, and some young people are taking up arms against the Moroccan forces they see as occupiers.



**UN envoy Staffan De Mistura, second right, talks with Moroccan Foreign Affairs Minister Nasser Bourita, second left, and others on Thursday.**

Photo: AP

The envoy started his first trip to the region last week in Morocco, and travels next week to the Algerian capital of Algiers before visiting Mauritania.

Algeria backs the Polisario, and severed diplomatic relations with Morocco in August last year in a dispute linked to the Western Sahara conflict.

After talking with de Mistura, Moroccan officials reiterated the country's "commitment to the resumption of the political process conducted under the exclusive auspices of the UN."

Morocco has proposed granting Western Sahara greater autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty, but the Polisario Front wants a referendum for self-determination under the supervision of the UN.

"The Sahrawis are not asking for the impossible," said Azza Ibrahim Babi, leader of the Boujdour refugee settlement. "We are only asking for the organization of a referendum."

She expressed doubt that De Mistura, an Italian diplomat and former UN envoy for Syria, could find the long-elusive solution.

"We will continue the armed struggle," she said.

The Polisario in 2020 ended a 29-year ceasefire with Morocco after a border confrontation with the Moroccan army, a decision fueled by impatience among younger Sahrawi who have spent their lives waiting for the UN-promised referendum.

Morocco won a major diplomatic victory when former US president Donald Trump recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in 2020 in exchange for Morocco normalizing ties with Israel.

Morocco's government has been trying to persuade other countries, especially those in Europe, to follow suit.