Moroccan drone strikes force Sahrawi from their homes

‘This displacement has affected all the desert liberated areas.’

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An image of a civilian vehicle allegedly destroyed by a Moroccan drone in Western Sahara in 2023 posted on a Sahrawi WhatsApp group.

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BIR MOGHREIN, Mauritania

Drone attacks by Moroccan forces in Western Sahara, ostensibly aimed at fighters of the Polisario Front, are forcing increasing numbers of people to flee the desert region for refugee camps in Algeria, or towns on the Mauritanian border.

Abdullah Lamine Hamed lost his cousin in an alleged Moroccan drone strike just over a month ago as he transported water in his Land Cruiser to relatives in the Polisario-controlled zone, a sliver of land east of a 2,700-kilometre sand wall built by Morocco to enforce its disputed claim over the entire territory.

Hamed said his cousin, al-Saleh, was driving fast with no lights through the desert – as most Sahrawi do these days – when he and his friends first heard the drone approaching from the west. “My cousin was murdered,” he told The New Humanitarian as he slid his phone over the reed mat to show a screenshot of a destroyed Land Cruiser. The others in the car survived.

The death of his cousin confirmed a decision by Hamed to move south from his family home in Mehaires, an oasis town in Western Sahara, to Bir Moghrein in Mauritania, where he now manages a family-owned shop.

“After he died, I had to get away,” said Hamed. “I am lucky my family has this shop. Many do not have places to work and sit in the [Algerian refugee] camps instead.”

The resumption of fighting in November 2020 between Polisario and Morocco, after a 29-year lull, has accelerated the depopulation of the so-called “liberated lands” – the 20% of Western Sahara controlled by Polisario to the east of the militarised sand wall known as the “berm”.

Exact numbers are hard to come by as population figures are heavily politicised by both sides. But nearly all residents of Mehaires – roughly 12,000 people – have been displaced by the renewed conflict, according to a former mayor of the town, who didn’t want to be named for security reasons.

“This displacement has affected all the desert liberated areas,” the ex-official told The New Humanitarian. “Most of the people have gone to refugee camps in Algeria.”

‘The risk from the sky’

Indiscriminate drone strikes are one powerful reason people have been forced to move.

Mohamad Mombar is a 36-year-old trader who used to transport water and mechanical supplies to the largely nomadic communities in the “liberated” lands but now worries about “the risk from the sky” – with drones making all vehicle movement dangerous.

The New Humanitarian is in possession of a series of photographs taken this year of destroyed civilian vehicles, allegedly by drone attacks, many of which are too graphic to publish as they show mangled cars and charred remains.

When Mombar visits his family in Tindouf, the southern Algerian town where an estimated 173,000 Sahrawi refugees are settled in five sprawling camps, he travels hundreds of extra kilometres via Mauritania to avoid entering Polisario territory because of the drone threat.

Several Sahrawi told The New Humanitarian they believe the Moroccan military’s goal is to depopulate Polisario-held zones. It’s not just vehicles that are hit in drone and artillery attacks, but also people’s camel herds – the basis of the local economy.

“Lots and lots [of animals have been killed],” said Abdullah, who asked that his full name not be used. The 26-year-old, now resident in Bir Moghrein, was forced to abandon his camel herd when he fled Mehaires and feels it’s still too dangerous to return to try and rescue them.

A 50-year crisis

The armed conflict began in 1975 when Spain, the former colonial power, left abruptly and abandoned the Sahrawi – the Indigenous people of Western Sahara – to the mercy of their neighbours, Mauritania and Morocco. Both countries had competing claims over the region.

Morocco sent in troops after the International Court of Justice affirmed the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination. Over the years, it has built a

series of berms gradually extending its control over the sparsely populated territory.

Heavily mined, and manned by thousands of soldiers, the metres-high sand walls have formed a near-impenetrable barrier that keeps the Polisario out and prevents the return of refugees.

The fortifications divide the territory into two sections: a resource-rich coastal zone, which includes the main cities; and the arid interior close to the Algerian and Mautinanian borders that Polisario controls.

A UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991 ended decades of fighting with the promise of a referendum overseen by a UN peacekeeping mission. Stalled by Morocco, the referendum has never materialised. Instead, Rabat has implemented a generous subsidy policy to encourage Moroccans to move south, which the Polisario alleges will skew any future referendum in favour of unification.

The Algerian government has supported the Polisario since the 1970s with weapons, welcoming refugees to the camps in Tindouf that house most of the "liberated" Sahrawi population. But what was meant to be temporary resettlement has morphed into a half-century of displacement.

"Feelings of stagnation, desperation… and hopelessness have been reported, particularly among the Sahrawi youth."

The camps are dead-ends, where refugees face extremely harsh conditions, and rely almost totally on aid to meet their basic needs – aid that is increasingly being squeezed by an international community seemingly weary of the political deadlock.

"Feelings of stagnation, desperation… and hopelessness have been reported, particularly among the Sahrawi youth," noted a 2022 report by humanitarian analysis service ACAPS. Camp conditions, it said, increase the risk of "radicalisation because of conflict, limited opportunities, and an unknown future".

/Reuters

ɔt Sahrawi refugee camp in Tindouf, Algeria, in January 2022.

The UN describes Western Sahara as a “non-self-governing territory”, with Polisario the international representative of the Sahrawi people. But for Morocco, the solution to one of the world’s longest-running crises is self-governance for the Sahrawi under Moroccan sovereignty.

The plan has been pushed hard by Rabat diplomatically, and has increasingly won international support from a number of Western, Arab, and African governments. In December 2020, the United States under then-president Donald Trump recognised Rabat’s claims over Western Sahara in exchange for Morocco normalising relations with Israel.

A new form of warfare

The issue of drones is on the minds of nearly all Sahrawi The New Humanitarian met in Bir Moghrein, a town of under 3,000 people where most

cars carry licence plates from the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic – Polisario's preferred official name for Western Sahara.

During the initial Moroccan offensive in the '70s and '80s, Polisario had the advantage of being on home turf, mounting sudden surprise attacks on Moroccan positions. However, since the resumption of hostilities in 2020, that advantage has been negated by the superior technology of Morocco's Air Control and Reconnaissance System, known as SACR.

Based in the large Moroccan-controlled towns of Laayoune and Smara, this branch of the Moroccan military is responsible for overseeing the fleet of drones Morocco has acquired in recent years. That includes 150 Israeli surveillance UAVs last year – and a recent deal to jointly produce Israeli attack drones in Morocco – as well as the purchase of dozens of Chinese Wing Loong and Turkish Bayraktar TB2 attack drones.

These long-range remote-controlled weapons have given Morocco a distinct military advantage against Polisatio and its Cold War-era equipment. "The Moroccan soldier did not go an inch beyond the wall, but [east of the wall] is controlled by drones," said the former mayor of Mehaires.

The fear of drone strikes has led thousands to flee to the camps in Algeria and more recently to Mauritania in the hopes of better security and economic opportunity. In Hamed's case that means working retail in a small border town far away from family and friends for the foreseeable future.

The illicit economy

Others, who requested their names be withheld, have been tempted by options for employment that are less legal. As West African migrants continue to attempt the dangerous journey north to Europe in search of jobs, an opportunity has opened up for young Sahrawi men who know the desert supremely well to transport them.

Lines of young Senegalese and Malian men sit outside the one restaurant in Bir Moghrein. Under cover of darkness – and the studied indifference of the

local police who allegedly control the whole operation – young Sahrawis drive their dilapidated Land Cruisers up and load in a dozen men at a time.

The destination is Tindouf, where further transport north can be arranged with relatives the young men have in the refugee camps.

“If the leaders told the boys to stop, we would only have problems.”

Illicit goods are also smuggled north. The main road from Bir Moghrein to Algeria runs parallel to another “clandestine” road filled with heavy trucks that carry fuel, cigarettes, and occasionally drugs from West African ports to North Africa, where they often continue on to Europe.

Sahelian Islamist extremism is another competing pull, with some young Sahrawi men travelling to Mali and Burkina Faso to fight with so-called Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel).

According to Saidi, a former member of the Polisario’s military, the economic opportunities provided by drugs and the migrant business are attractive to desperately poor refugees. “If the leaders told the boys to stop, we would only have problems,” Saidi, who asked for his full name to be withheld, told The New Humanitarian.

As for the pull of Islamist extremism to the south, Mombar – the man with the transport business and family in Tindouf – was more scathing.

He fully accepted that jihad against Moroccans soldiers is acceptable, as “jihad is about the homeland, about honour, and not about money”. However, he went on to say that the Sahrawi men fighting in the Sahel were “criminals” who “will be punished” when they return because they abandoned the Polisario cause for another country’s war.

Despite Mombar’s objections, much of the senior leadership of IS Sahel was originally from Western Sahara and had been trained as members of the Polisario before defecting to start the insurgency in the Sahel.

Yet for the Sahrawi men in Bir Moghrein, their focus is on the war in their homeland. Sitting around a coal brazier making green tea with mint, the

conversation between Hamed and Mombar revolved around the certainty of Polisario's eventual victory.

While the Sahrawi soldier "believes in his just cause, the Moroccan soldier is on the wall just because he wants to get his monthly salary", said Mombar. "In the end, what was taken by force can only be answered by it."

Edited by Obi Anyadike.

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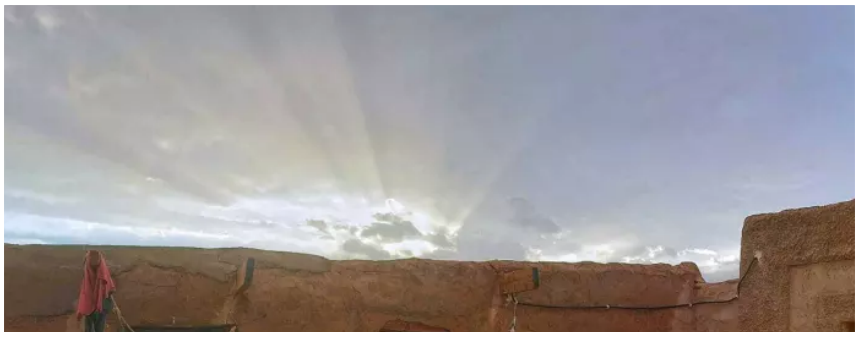

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