

Unresolved conflict

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Four Euro MPs heading for a part of Western Sahara annexed by Morocco in 1975, were turned back at the border on Wednesday (06.03.2013). This is a reminder of a conflict that has been smoldering for decades.

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In northwest Africa, Morocco, which occupies 80 percent of Western Sahara, faces off against the Polisario Front, a Sahrawi national liberation movement.

The two sides were once at war, but a ceasefire monitored by the United Nations Mission for the Organization of a Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) has been in force since 1991.

As the name of the UN mission suggests, the Polisario Front had agreed to the ceasefire on the condition that a referendum would be held in which the Sahrawi people would be offered independence. That referendum has never taken place.

Wolfgang Weisbrod Weber, director of MINURSO, puts this down to unresolved questions of status which "hang like a heavy cloud and refuse to go away."

Critics accuse the Moroccan government of blocking the referendum, charges it denies. However, when Deutsche Welle asked the Moroccan embassy in Germany to elaborate, it declined to comment.

Morocco's position on Western Sahara appears unequivocal. It would permit Western Sahara autonomy within a Moroccan state, but would go no further. That could be put to the people in a referendum. The Polisario Front, which is fighting for independence, considers this unacceptable.



The dispute over Western Sahara is deadlocked, some refer to it as Africa's longest conflict.

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Diplomatic recognition

Algeria, Morocco's neighbor and rival, has a key role in this affair. Around 100,000 refugees from Western Sahara have been living in camps in Algeria for decades. Algeria has been actively supporting the Polisario Front since 1976 and was the first country to recognize the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) which was proclaimed by Polisario in February of that year.

Some 50 countries now recognize the SADR, many of which are African. Nations generally align their policy towards the SADR in accordance with their relations with Algeria or Morocco. Riadh Sidaoui, director of the Arab Center for Research and Political and Social Analysis in Geneva, says economic interests generally play a huge role. "Countries may think twice about upsetting Algeria because it has oil and gas, or they may seek to stay

on good terms with Morocco because it buys weapons from EU states," he said.



African nations are far from unanimous in their stance on the Western Saharan conflict. The Organization of African Unity (OAU), which preceded the African Union, accepted the SADR as full member in 1982, whereupon Morocco left the organization and remains to this day the only African country that is not a member of the AU.

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Only 36 out of 54 African countries officially recognize the SADR. South Africa, one of the

continent's diplomatic heavyweights, only granted the SADR recognition in 2004. In accordance with the internal logic of this conflict, economic ties between South Africa and Algeria, with its oil and gas reserves, have improved dramatically in the meantime.

European divisions

The European Union is also divided over Western Sahara. France and Spain tend to lead the debate and have very different agendas. France is seen an ally of Morocco. The country supports the French military intervention in Mali and has granted the French air force fly-over rights. France and Morocco also have close economic ties. France's relations with Algeria on the other hand are tainted by memories of the bloodshed during the war of independence in the 1960s. Spain is somewhat closer to Algeria and as the former colonial power in Western Sahara supports the Sahrawi bid for independence.

Portuguese member of the European Parliament Ana Gomes fears that Europe's confused stance on Western Sahara will fuel radicalization in the region. The conflict is creating a fertile recruiting ground for extremists. "They are looking for people who are dissatisfied and want to rebel in order to improve their lives," she said.

This conflict is likely to remain deadlocked. Every now and again negotiations take place at the UN Security Council between Morocco and the Polisario

Front but a breakthrough never occurs because neither side is prepared to deviate from its respective position.