

# UN extends mission in Western Sahara

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In a split vote, the United Nations Security Council has extended its peacekeeping mission in disputed Western Sahara for a year. It has also demanded its staff, expelled by Morocco last month, be allowed to return.

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*Image: Getty Images/AFP/A. Senna*

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Ten nations voted in favor of the resolution, citing an "urgent need" to avoid hostilities in Western Sahara. There were two "no" votes and three abstentions.

The resolution calls for the UN mission, known as MINURSO, to be restored to "full functionality" within 90 days, and extends its mandate to April 30, 2017.

Morocco last month **expelled** most of the UN mission's international civilian staff after UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called Morocco's 1975 annexation of Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony, an "occupation." Ban made the comments during a visit to a refugee camp for Sahrawi people in Algeria.

The ensuing controversy **created the worst dispute** between Morocco and the UN since 1991, when MINURSO was established to end the conflict between Rabat and local rebels fighting for independence.

The US-drafted resolution calls on Ban to report back in three months on whether functionality has been restored, and if not "to consider how best to facilitate achievement of this goal."



### 'Challenging and contentious'

Some council members voiced concern that the resolution didn't go far enough in condemning Morocco's actions and demanding the restoration of

MINURSO's full strength. Venezuela and Uruguay opposed it, while Russia, New Zealand and Angola abstained.

"It should not have been like this," New Zealand's UN Ambassador Gerard van Bohemen told the 15-nation council. "The resolution should have stated the reality, that the expulsion of the civilian component has seriously compromised the mission and its ability to discharge its mandate."

Mission mandates are usually approved unanimously, but this year's split vote **reflected the significant divisions** between council members. US Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power said there had been weeks of haggling over the wording of the resolution.

"This year's mandate renewal was challenging and contentious," she said. "That is an understatement."



ented the lack of progress towards a solution in Western Sahara during a recent visit to a camp in Algeria

*Image: picture-alliance/dpa/adel Sehrei/Wostok Press*

## Referendum on independence?

Moroccan UN Ambassador Omar Hilale said his country would study the resolution, but did not comment on whether Rabat would allow the return of

## UN civilian staff.

"The important thing for us is that the military component should work well and we have already committed ourselves to provide them with all their needs," he said.

Meanwhile, the Sahrawi people's resistance movement, the Polisario Front, has demanded a referendum on the idea of an independent Western Sahara. While the resolution does not explicitly back this proposal, it "reaffirms" previous resolutions calling for a plebiscite.

Polisario's UN representative Ahmed Boukhari said the resolution was a "step in the right direction, but it is not enough."

nm/jm (AP, Reuters, dpa)