

Blasts Hit Western Sahara in Reminder of Morocco's Forgotten War

Souhail Karam, Bloomberg News

(Bloomberg) -- Explosions struck a city in a Moroccan-controlled part of the Western Sahara, killing at least one person and signaling a potential flare-up in one of Africa's most protracted territorial disputes.

Two other people are in critical condition after a series of "projectiles" hit Smara late Saturday, Morocco's state-run MAP news agency reported. The city is the nearest major one to Algeria, the rear-base of the Polisario Front group that's sought independence for the former Spanish colony for almost half a century.

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There was no official claim of responsibility after Saturday's rare event. The Sahrawi news agency SPS reported before the blasts that Smara was among the Moroccan-controlled areas that Polisario fighters were focusing on. Morocco opened a judicial investigation to identify the projectiles and their origin, MAP said.

A mineral-rich stretch of Atlantic coast and desert, the Western Sahara is larger than the UK and has been bitterly contested since its 1975 annexation by Morocco. Fighting between Morocco and Polisario left about 9,000 people dead until a 1991 ceasefire. Low-level hostilities resumed in late 2020.

The United Nations is due to vote Monday on extending the mandate of the UN mission to the territory. A renewal would further delay a referendum on Western Sahara's status — a vote that's a long-standing Polisario demand.

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