

Algeria blames Morocco for bombing of three truck drivers: state media



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- Morocco did not immediately comment on the accusations

ALGIERS: Algeria has accused its arch-rival Morocco of killing three Algerians on a desert highway, as tensions escalate between the neighbors over the contested Western Sahara.

"Three Algerians were assassinated... in a barbaric strike on their trucks," Algeria's presidency said, in a statement quoted by the APS state news agency.

It reported they had been traveling between the Mauritanian capital Nouakchott northeast to the Algerian city of Ouargla.

“Several factors indicate that the Moroccan occupation forces in the Western Sahara carried out this cowardly assassination with a sophisticated weapon,” the statement added. “Their killings will not go unpunished.”

Morocco did not immediately comment on the accusations.

The Western Sahara is 80 percent controlled by Morocco, which sees the former Spanish colony, rich in phosphates and adjacent to bountiful Atlantic fishing waters, as an integral part of its own territory.

Algeria has long hosted and supported the Polisario Front, which seeks full independence there and has demanded a referendum as provided for in a 1991 cease-fire deal.

But the Polisario in November declared the truce “null and void” after Moroccan forces broke up a blockade of a highway into Mauritania, that the independence movement said was built in violation of the cease-fire.

In August, Algeria broke off diplomatic ties with Morocco citing “hostile actions” — charges Rabat dismissed.

The reported killings took place on Monday, but few details had emerged and there had been no immediate comment from Algiers or Rabat.

The Algerian statement did not specify the location of the strike.

But Akram Khariief, editor of Algerian website Mena Defense, said that “the Algerian truckers were killed in Bir Lahlou,” along a 3,500-kilometer (2,200-mile) highway that passes through part of the Western Sahara controlled by the Polisario.

Mauritania has said the deaths did not take place on its territory.

The Algerian statement did not say what weapons were used, but Morocco in September took delivery of Turkish-made Bayraktar combat drones, according to Far-Maroc, a private military news website.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has warned that the situation in Western Sahara has “significantly deteriorated” over the past year.

On Friday, the UN Security Council called for renewed peace talks, in a resolution Algeria slammed as “fundamentally unbalanced.”

Former US president Donald Trump broke with long-held diplomatic norms in 2020 to recognize Morocco's claim to the territory, as part of a quid pro quo for Rabat's normalization of ties with Israel.

His successor Joe Biden's administration has not yet confirmed or rescinded the decision.

Algiers has rejected a return to roundtable talks last held in 2019 with top officials from Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania and the Polisario.

It argues that by avoiding bilateral talks with the Polisario, Rabat was trying to portray the conflict as a "regional, artificial" one rather than one of "decolonization."
