

Envoy wants Western Sahara parties to meet in 2018: Britain



- The Polisario Front insists on self-determination through a referendum for the local population
- Morocco annexed Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony

UNITED NATIONS: Former German President Horst Koehler is trying to bring Morocco and the Polisario Front independence movement together by the end of the year to work on a solution to the 42-year conflict over the Western Sahara, Britain's deputy UN ambassador said Wednesday.

Koehler, the secretary-general's personal envoy for Western Sahara, briefed the Security Council behind closed doors, and British envoy Jonathan Allen told several reporters afterward that all 15 members "stressed the importance of consultations with everybody."

"The president got a lot of support from the council for his approach and for his proposal to try and see if he can bring the parties together by the end of the year," said Allen, who chaired the meeting as part of Britain's council

presidency this month.

A UN diplomat said Koehler told members that he would be sending invitations to the parties in September.

Morocco annexed Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony, in 1975 and fought the Polisario Front. The UN brokered a cease-fire in 1991 and established a peacekeeping mission to monitor it and help prepare a referendum on the territory's future that has never taken place.

Morocco considers the mineral-rich Western Sahara its "southern provinces" and has proposed giving the territory wide-ranging autonomy. The Polisario Front insists on self-determination through a referendum for the local population, which it estimates at between 350,000 and 500,000.

Sidi Omar, the Polisario Front's UN representative, said bringing the parties together by the end of the year "would be a positive step in the process, definitely."

"We're very willing and ready to accept an invitation should that be addressed to us, to engage in this process in the framework of the United Nations ... to find a lasting and peaceful solution to this longstanding conflict," Omar said.

Morocco's UN Mission did not have any immediate comment on the meeting.
