

Morocco to return envoy to Spain after Madrid shifts stance on Western Sahara



MADRID: Morocco's ambassador to Spain will return to Madrid after Spain clarified that it supported Rabat's autonomy proposal for Western Sahara, a Spanish government source said on Sunday.

Ambassador Karima Benyaich was recalled to Morocco in May 2021 in protest after Madrid admitted a Western Sahara independence leader for medical treatment using Algerian documents. Morocco said it was not informed in advance.

Spain told Morocco on Friday that it regarded Rabat's autonomy proposal for Western Sahara to be "serious, credible and realistic," the Rabat government said, in a move expected to resolve the diplomatic dispute.

The language reflected a shift in Spanish policy toward the dispute in Western Sahara, a territory that Morocco considers its own but where the Polisario independence movement backed by its neighbor Algeria demands a sovereign state.

A Spanish government source said that Benyaich was now set to return to her post in Madrid.

Officials at Morocco's Foreign Ministry were not immediately available to comment.

Rabat says its 2007 proposal to offer Western Sahara autonomy within Morocco is the most it can do as a political solution to the conflict.

For years most countries including Spain had backed the idea of a referendum to resolve the issue — which was agreed as part of the 1991 ceasefire and is the solution demanded by the Polisario.

But no agreement was reached on how the referendum would be held and in recent years even the UN has ceased referring to the idea of a vote, speaking instead of seeking a realistic, mutually acceptable solution based on compromise.

On Saturday, Algeria said it would withdraw its ambassador to Madrid in protest at Spain's support for the Moroccan autonomy plan.
