

UN renews peacekeeping mission in Western Sahara, calls for talks

The United Nations Security Council resolution expresses concern over the breakdown of the ceasefire between Morocco and the pro-independence Polisario Front.

Morocco has proposed wide-ranging autonomy for Western Sahara, but the Polisario Front insists the local population has the right to a referendum on independence [File: Fadel Senna/AFP]

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The United Nations Security Council has extended the UN peacekeeping mission in the disputed Western Sahara for a year, expressing concern at the [breakdown](#) of the 1991 ceasefire between Morocco and the pro-independence Polisario Front and calling for a revival of UN-led negotiations.

The vote on Friday was 13-0 with Russia and Tunisia abstaining.

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The resolution was spearheaded by the United States, which under former President Donald Trump broke with the world to recognise Morocco's claim to the territory as it persuaded the kingdom to [normalise relations](#) with Israel.

Weeks after the appointment of a new UN envoy on Western Sahara, veteran diplomat Staffan de Mistura, the resolution called for "the parties" to resume

negotiations “without preconditions and in good faith” in search of a “just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution”.

The resolution calls for a goal of “self-determination of the people of Western Sahara”, a phrase that diplomats said was added by the US at the behest of Russia, which could have vetoed the text.

The resolution also “reaffirms the need for full respect” of a ceasefire that collapsed last year.

Morocco has proposed wide-ranging autonomy for Western Sahara. But the Polisario Front insists the local population, which it estimates at 350,000 to 500,000, has the right to a referendum.

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Algeria backs the independence-seeking Polisario Front and in August broke off relations with Morocco, which controls nearly 80 percent of the arid and sparsely populated territory controlled by Spain until 1975.

Roundtable talks were last held in early 2019 that brought together the Polisario Front as well as Morocco.

Algeria has opposed a resumption of the talks, with the Polisario seeing itself as a liberation movement that should negotiate directly with Rabat.

‘Limiting escalation’

France’s UN envoy, Nicolas de Riviere, said that the UN peacekeeping effort, known as the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), remained vital in uncertain security conditions.

“More than ever since the breaking of the ceasefire, this operation plays an essential role in limiting the risks of an escalation and in bringing stability in the region,” he said.

The US mission to the UN commended the mandate renewal, saying its priority was “restarting a credible political process leading to an enduring, dignified and internationally supported solution”.

Kenya, the current president of the Security Council, voiced hope that the UN mission could eventually organise a referendum, saying it was the right of every nation that was formerly colonised.

“We must be honest and admit that this goal is being obscured and frustrated,” the Kenyan mission said in a statement.

MINURSO was established by the Security Council in 1991 with an aim of establishing a referendum between independence and joining Morocco.

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