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Conflict **News feature** 1 February 2023

Western Sahara's 'frozen conflict' heats up, but world's attention elsewhere

'There is a war and nobody is talking about it. Everybody is talking about Ukraine, and nobody is talking about Western Sahara.'



Danielle Smith/TNH

Fatimalo Mustapha Sayed manages a community vegetable garden in El Aaiún, one of five Sahrawi refugee camps in southern Algeria.

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international community has effectively chosen to ignore.

“There were eight of them. They were just making tea – they were not in direct confrontation,” she told The New Humanitarian. “[Hamdi] heard the drone coming... then he started running, screaming, calling his friends by their names. And he got no response.”

Hamdi is lucky to be alive. According to Mohamed-Lamin, three of his comrades were killed on the spot in the November 2022 attack, and a fourth died en route to a military hospital in a Sahrawi refugee camp in southwestern Algeria.

It's in these camps that Mohamed-Lamin, her family, and over 173,000 Sahrawis live – in perpetual exile from their native land of Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony that has been under Moroccan occupation since 1975.

After a 29-year ceasefire, fighting re-erupted in November 2020 as the Polisario Front – a political-military movement that claims representation of the Sahrawi people – resumed its struggle to eject Morocco from the 80% of Western Sahara they control, and which Rabat claims as its own.

“I'm so fed up, and I'm so angry.”

As the conflict has intensified, many frustrated Sahrawis have compared the rush of Western support to Ukraine with the neglect of their fight for independence, in what has been dubbed “Africa's last colony”.

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“Why do we have to go through this as a nation?” said Mohamed-Lamin, a human rights activist living in Camp Smara – the largest of the five Sahrawi camps. “I’m so fed up, and I’m so angry. There is a war and nobody is talking about it. Everybody is talking about Ukraine, and nobody is talking about Western Sahara.”

The declaration of a “return to the armed struggle” by the Polisario followed a clash with Moroccan forces in a **buffer zone**. Morocco has since ramped up the use of drone strikes on military and civilian infrastructure along a 2,700-kilometre wall that separates the “occupied territory” from the remote desert regions controlled by Sahrawi forces.

The wall, known as “the Berm”, was constructed by Morocco to keep the Polisario out, and to prevent Sahrawi refugees from returning to their land – territory in which Morocco has resettled hundreds of thousands of its citizens.

Roots of the crisis

In 1975, on the heels of Spain’s hasty withdrawal from its former colony, Morocco illegally annexed two thirds of the resource-rich region, claiming pre-colonial ties to

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Morocco, however, has **gained support** from a growing number of Western, Arab, and African countries for its autonomy plan for Western Sahara, which would grant the Sahrawis self-governance under Moroccan sovereignty.

In 2021, the UN **relaunched** efforts to negotiate a deal over the territory. But the conflict remains largely forgotten by the international community – with recent cuts to vital humanitarian aid emblematic of that neglect.

Food aid cut by 75%

Thirty-one-year-old Fatimalo Mustapha Sayed manages a community vegetable garden in Camp El Aaiún, approximately 30 minutes' drive from Camp Smara. She has witnessed aid cuts for years, but the impact has been particularly noticeable in recent months. "It's become very hard for me to survive," she said.

The World Food Programme (WFP) announced in August that it **was cutting** monthly food rations to the camps by more than 75%. Refugees now receive less than five of the original 17 kilos per person per month. Rations include only the bare essentials like flour, lentils, oil, pasta, sugar, and rice.

"[WFP] used to give us canned sardines and vegetables, but not any more," said Sayed, who supplements her family's diet with vegetables from the community garden. "We get spaghetti once a year. They also used to give us dates before Ramadan, but that has also stopped."

At least 30% of Sahrawi refugees are "**food insecure**", according to WFP. A survey of children under-five in the camps by the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, found **acute malnutrition** had risen from 7% to almost 11% between 2019 and 2022.

"Morocco kept maintaining their forces, and they improved their technologies. So we are disadvantaged. But... we have motivated people."

Fresh fruit and vegetables, sold commercially in the camps' markets, are largely unaffordable for most refugees. Cheaper, processed food is available, but that has contributed to a "**double burden** of malnutrition", which includes obesity among women and under-nutrition in children.

Sayed's vegetable project – funded by a UK charity – sells the harvest to the Polisario, which distributes it among the camp population. It also donates a portion to local charities, including a school for children with special needs, helping to fill

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disadvantaged. But... we have motivated people.

'I am willing to die for my family'

Thirty-six-year-old Fadili Malainin was among the thousands of men to enlist in the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army (SPLA) back in November 2020 when the Polisario relaunched its armed struggle. Military service is voluntary, but many soldiers – veterans and new recruits – have been eager to join the fight.

Malainin lives in Camp Boujdour – the smallest of the five camps – in a home he shares with his wife, Fatimetu, and their toddler son, Bachir. Malainin spends several months a year working at a restaurant in Spain to earn money to send home to his family, while Fatimetu works as a music teacher for primary school children in Boujdour.

Together, they earn enough to enjoy simple luxuries like air conditioning. UNHCR supplies water, shelter, and cooking gas. The Algerian government **provides** electricity and internet connectivity to all the Sahrawi camps.

Algeria, one of Polisario's few international backers, also supplies military equipment, and Morocco claims it has helped mediate the supply of kamikaze **drones from Iran** – a claim the Polisario Front officially denies. Since the return to war, tensions with Morocco have been particularly high, culminating in Algiers **cutting diplomatic ties** with Rabat in August 2021.

SPLA soldiers serve months at a time on the front lines, returning to the camps only to receive medical treatment or to stock up on supplies.

"I know it looks like we're living here more permanently," said Malainin, gesturing around their modest living room as he prepared traditional Sahrawi tea over hot coals. "But we're just doing it to make ourselves more comfortable. It's not about staying here."

Malainin explained that, for him, the camp can never be home – returning to a free Western Sahara is the dream he is fighting for.

Malainin served three months in the SPLA in 2022 and will return to the front lines later this year. Asked if she worried about her husband's safety, Fatimetu paused as he calmly interjected: "I would give up my life for my family to be free."

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died in the war.

While the Polisario Front has reported **heavy fighting** in recent weeks, Morocco **refuses to acknowledge** the war in what it refers to as its "southern provinces".

The SPLA operates under a significant military disadvantage. Much of its equipment dates from the **1970s and 1980s**, when Libya was a major supplier. Morocco's armed forces, on the other hand, are trained in modern warfare and Western-equipped.

"It's hard for us as a society to express our feelings, so, for the children, it comes out in all sorts of ways."

Morocco has also acquired tens of millions of dollars worth of **Israeli-made drones** after normalising ties with Israel in December 2020. This was part of a deal that saw the United States, under then-president Donald Trump, become the first country in the world to **recognise** Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.

Speaking in an interview just days after her brother was nearly killed, Mohamed-Lamin, whose three other brothers and stepfather are also fighting on the front line, said she has no option but to be hopeful for the future.

"Hope doesn't guarantee if you are going to reach something, but it makes you keep going," she said.

**Name changed for security reasons.*

Reporting assistance provided by Danielle Smith of Sandblast. Edited by Obi Anyadike.

This story was amended on 13 February to include a denial by the Polisario Front that it had received drones from Iran.

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