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THE STRUGGLE FOR THE WESTERN SAHARA
Part III: The Saḥrāwī People

by Barbara Harrell-Bond



The concluding *Report* in the series describes the author's visits to Saḥrāwī refugee camps in the Western Sahara and Algeria and the continuing war between the Polisario Front and Morocco.

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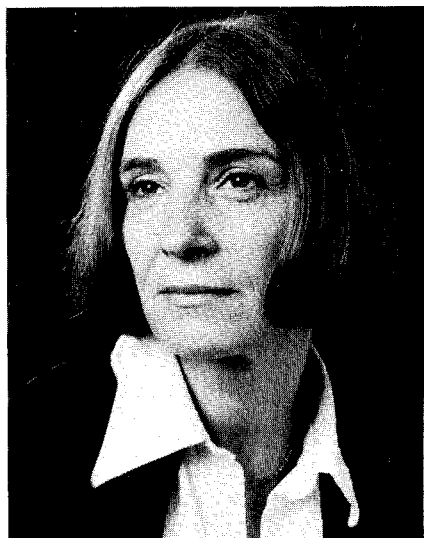
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Reports

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THE AUTHOR



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The Saḥrāwī* people include civilians living in refugee camps inside Algeria and an unknown number inside the fenced and guarded cities occupied by Moroccan armed forces on the coast. The Moroccan people, too, have been severely affected by the war, and resulting economic difficulties strain political stability there. Many have died on both sides of the war, and there are more than 1,500 Moroccan prisoners near Tindouf. Inside Morocco there are Saḥrāwī "prisoners of conscience" (Amnesty International's term): in many cases their only crime has been to proclaim their Saḥrāwī identity.

Visiting the Camps at Tindouf

The visitor to the Saḥrāwī refugee camps must first fly to Algiers and 2,000 kilometers from there to the small town of Tindouf. The military airstrip there is simply a stretch of tarmac in the desert. Stepping out of the plane into the January noonday sun, one is met by freezing temperatures and bitter winds. The name of the region, in Arabic, means "Oh it is hot! Oh, it is cold!" In January and February, oh, it is cold.

From the airstrip one is driven some 40 kilometers past Tindouf over an open sweep of the desert to a low mud-brick building, the Saḥrāwī official reception center. The flag of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) flies over the building. We—a French photographer, five Indians (three journalists, a political scientist, and the

head of India's Institute for Strategic Studies), and myself—were told that this marks the beginning of the territory which Algeria has allocated to the Saḥrāwī for the duration of the war.

Our party of four was shown into one of the rooms where the chill of the weather gave way to the warmth of Saḥrāwī hospitality. A young girl, smiling, welcomed us saying "Salām alay-kum." She set up a small gas burner on the floor and, sitting down, made the first of what was to become an endless succession of small glasses of very hot, delicious, sweet green tea.

We were given forms to fill in that asked the purpose of our mission, what we would like to see, and whom we might want to interview. After a large meal of *cous-cous* with meat and vegetables and a dessert of tinned plums (a bowl of milk was also passed around), we met Ahmed, who was to be our host for the next few days. After he traced the history of the struggle of the Saḥrāwī for independence, we were then advised to rest while our program was being arranged.

Instead we sat huddled in piles of blankets on the cold floor talking to a young Algerian who joined our party. He had been assigned, he said, to the Algiers office of the Polisario Front by the Algerian Ministry of Information and he occasionally visits the camps. As far as the Algerian government is concerned, he explained, the Saḥrāwī are already independent inside this territory and, as an outsider, he always keeps a low profile on visits. The Saḥrāwī, he pointed out, are very particular about maintaining their autonomy.

He went on to explain that inside the camps there are *no* outsiders—no Algerians, no Libyans, no Cubans, no experts of any other nationality. "Not even Peace Corps?" I asked jokingly. He laughed, "No, the Saḥrāwī are determined to do everything for themselves inside the camps. They believe in self-reliance."

About 4:00 P.M. Ahmed reappeared to tell us to prepare for the 180-kilometer ride to the Dakhla camp. We were instructed to take luggage for only three days: the rest could remain at the reception center for our return. We then began the first of many such trips across the unmarked desert, bundled in blankets against the wind and sand, riding in open Land Rovers, windshields removed to prevent the vehicles being spotted by aircraft. It was long after dark when we arrived at Dakhla, but in the moonlight we could see many tents stretched out in long, even rows. We were ushered inside a large tent near a clump of palm trees—the only palms we saw growing in this incredibly arid region.

Once again we were welcomed with warm handshakes and more tea. After eating our evening meal of *cous-cous*, meat, vegetables, the customary bowl of milk, and tinned fruit, we had another visitor, Ouaddaddi Ahmed Heiba, President of the Saḥrāwī Red Crescent. He explained something of the philosophy of the SRC: while it was a humanitarian organization, it recognized the fact of the war; while upholding human rights, it was forced to recognize the political dimension of the struggle in which Saḥrāwī society was engaged. He

*Accent marks for the term Saḥrāwī must be applied to this typeface by hand; thus they are used only on page one.

invited us to attend the opening meeting of the Dakhla Popular Assembly the next day.

The tent was much warmer than the mud-brick reception center, but still too cold for us to remove our coats. We slept on mats on the carpeted tent floor, covered by piles of blankets. In the morning before our breakfast of bread, cheese, coffee—and, yes, more glasses of tea—we were given a small amount of water, but in the freezing temperatures no one wanted to wash more than hands and face.

About ten o'clock that morning we were escorted to a large mud-brick building where the Popular Assembly was meeting and were shown to chairs at the front. Ahmed whispered a rough translation of the speeches in my ear, but I could not concentrate on what he said. It was fascinating to look over the sea of faces. I had heard that the civilian population of the camps consisted mainly of women, children, and old men. Even those sitting beside me in military uniform were women!

Suddenly I realized that all those eyes were turned on me and everyone was clapping. Ahmed explained that I had been introduced as "their sister from Oxford." Outside again in the clear cold air after the session, the women gathered around our group to shake hands and greet us—by now I could say, "Salām alay-kum, alay-kum Salām, la bās, la bās," with the best of them!

That evening we were again visited by Mr. Ouaddaddi Ahmed Heiba. As noted in Part I, I had been asked to give OXFAM (Oxford) a report on conditions in the camps and to advise how it might be of assistance. I therefore asked the SRC President to spell out the most immediate requirements.

He explained how before the invasion of the Western Sahara, the SRC had served the people as a clandestine group, but after 1975 it had been officially organized and linked with the International Red Cross. It now worked with a number of international agencies, including the UN Commission for refugees and the Algerian Red Crescent (ARC). Aid is directed through the ARC in Algiers which takes responsibility for transporting supplies



Tents do not last long in the harsh Saharan climate, but those of traditional camel hair like this one are more durable.

to Tindouf. Here the SRC takes over distribution. Needs, he said, are assessed locally then organized through the ministries of health and education of the SADR government:

First we must understand the problems of the refugees. We must understand that they live in a desert where agriculture is impossible although we have made many attempts. There are always sand storms and the year has two climatic divisions—either very cold or very hot and dry. The climate has direct effects on the health of the refugees. We have to work to prevent illness. But water for drinking is already in short supply, to say nothing of water for hygienic purposes. There are only a few camps with enough wells. In some we have only four water-tankers to supply water for six or seven thousand people. There is never enough for drinking and washing. Putting aside for the moment the question of adult literacy, we need tables, pencils, and paper for the children. These innocent children lack everything. Colonialism and revolution have changed the living conditions of our people. We are trying to improve their situation at all levels. Look at the problem of housing. How can one tent last in the sandstorms and the heat? It must be constantly repaired to guarantee even three months use. How many requests must we make [to the

international agencies] to get a few tents or clothing? We have a few sewing machines and some supplies, but to meet the needs of the people we have to get used clothing. It is always insufficient. If we had more machines and cloth, we could make our own clothes. We always try to apply the principle of self-sufficiency. We have built schools and hospitals through the popular committees, but what is lacking is equipment inside them. The energy of our people is directed towards self-sufficiency, but where is there [enough] humanitarian aid to enable us to [achieve this]. Even when an emergency is identified and the request has been forwarded to an international organization, it takes at least eight months before materials arrive in the camps.

Mr. Heiba told me that each year a conference is held in Europe where agencies and action groups sympathetic to their cause meet to discuss the Sahrawi's needs and to insure that aid is not duplicated or wasted. The SRC has contacts with human rights groups, the UN Refugee Commission, OXFAM in Quebec and Belgium, etc.

"The Sahrawi people in the occupied zones," Mr. Heiba continued, "lead a completely different existence."

We have explained this to international organizations. We have

given them precise details and names of women who have been raped, children who have been violated, and prisoners who have been tortured by the Moroccans. Our own people still living there are not free. They do not even have the right to listen to Radio Free SADR.

I am giving you this message to take to the English people. At the same time I mustn't forget to include a salute to our women, to the great role which our women play. They are in the forefront of the revolution, whether on the battlefield, in the hospitals, or in the camps. At every level they help to realize the objectives of the SADR.

Tools and raw materials are high on their list of priorities. For example, in the 27 February School (where they make sandals when leather is available) they are eager to have cobblers' tools. They asked me to suggest other suitable cottage industries. Knowing that they are always short of school supplies, I told them about a machine, simple and fairly inexpensive, for making chalk; they were most interested. They would also like to be able to make their own school exercise books; again there is simple machinery for this if paper is available. "We could do everything for ourselves if we only had the materials," was the frequent response to my queries about shortages.

In line with this policy of self-reliance, the Wilāya Popular Assemblies decided in 1979 that the refugees should begin to practice agriculture. Although the soil around Tindouf is not conducive to cultivation, today every *wilāya* has an experimental garden, irrigated from a well with a small pump. Vegetables are grown for patients in the national hospital (there is not enough for distribution to the camps) The people working in these gardens complained that their entire tomato crop this year had been destroyed by frost and that their crops suffered from pests for want of pesticides.

The spirit of self-reliance is future directed, too. Everywhere I saw old men patiently turning out mud brick and constructing new buildings to

house offices, medical facilities, and schools. I asked how they kept working when every day each man was thinking that tomorrow he might return to his homeland. The answer was, "When we return, we will know how to build."

The Organization of the Camps

For security, the refugee camps near Tindouf are dispersed over several hundred kilometers. They are divided into three large *wilāyāt* (or provinces); each *wilāya* is subdivided into several *dā'ira* (perhaps "county" is the best analogy in English). Each *dā'ira* is further divided into tent neighborhoods. Despite the great distances between each *wilāya*, the camps are near the Moroccan border and vulnerable to attack. As a precaution, a shelter has been dug in the sand under each tent.

The SRC estimates that it has to provide for 150,000 people and my own observations confirm at least that number. (The size of the Sahrawi population is, however, a matter of persistent debate—see Part I.) Each person in the camps over 16 years of age is a member of one of the 5 committees: health, education, justice, artisan, and food. These committees function at the neighborhood level of the *dā'ira* and form the base for the political structure. Each committee is headed by a "responsible," who together represent the neighborhood on a *dā'ira*-level council. Council responsables represent the *dā'ira* level at the *Wilāya* Popular Assembly which

meets at least once annually to organize the program for the year. A National Popular Assembly meets every four years. At this time, elections are held for all national offices. The next elections at national level are scheduled for 1982.

The Preventive Medicine Program

The observations of a medical officer from one of the international aid agencies who visited the camps in 1977 contrast dramatically with what one finds today. He found then that medical workers had no medicine and that there was very little food. Children were dying—as many as eight or ten a day—from a measles epidemic and there was no refrigerator in the camps to store vaccines for an immunization program. Adults as well as children were suffering from a wide variety of illnesses, especially from tuberculosis, bronchitis, and dysentery. The present level of organization in the camps is a remarkable accomplishment in only a few years.

The work of the health committee and the program of preventive medicine illustrate how the Polisario's "experiment in democracy" (as they are always careful to describe their system of government in the camps) functions.

The principle underlying the creation of all the new institutions is that knowledge must be disseminated throughout the society rather than encouraging the development of exclusive professions. This strategy appears to have been particularly successful in the area of health. The



An experimental garden in the desert.

members of the health committee at the neighborhood level are responsible for maintaining sanitation and a safe water supply each day. They also monitor the health of each individual and impart health education within their small community.

When a community member is ill, the committee sees that he or she gets attention, in the first instance from either the dispensary or clinic in each *dā'ira*. These are housed either in tents or in small mud-brick buildings. Should the illness be beyond the local competence, the patient is referred to a central hospital; there are three, one for each *wilāya*.

The central hospitals are quite large buildings, again hand-built, furnished like tents, with mats on the floor. There is one national hospital, some distance from the camps, where a paramedical training program provides the personnel for the local institutions. The trained paramedics are rotated among the *wilāyāt*.

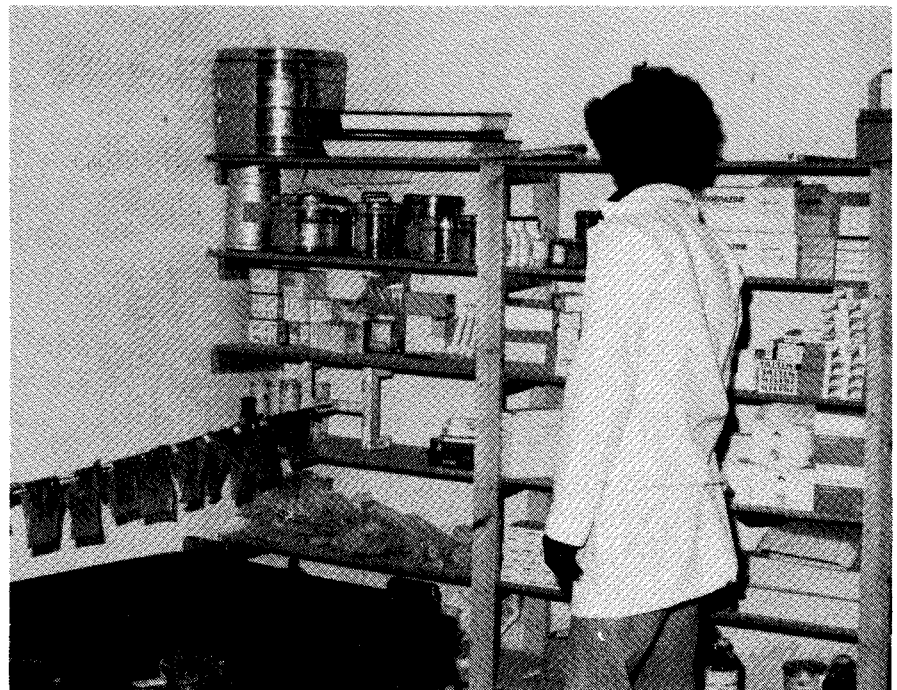
The hospital director is a Spanish-trained Sahrawian who, like some of the nurses, was trained before the war. The hospital has beds for patients, but is otherwise modestly equipped for its work. There are two laboratories and an X-ray machine, powered by a generator.

One laboratory, as the young "responsible" explained, is for emergency analyses and the other for "research." Asked what kind of research, the responsible reminded me of a slogan I had seen over one dispensary: "We remember our traditions in our revolution." One of the highly valued traditions is the indigenous knowledge of medicine. In this laboratory, traditional medicine is being tested and standardized. Traditional medical specialists have also been incorporated into the overall program: I was reminded that during the first two years in the camps the people had been totally dependent on the knowledge of these people; even now, despite modern training, they could not afford to bypass this valuable source of knowledge and expertise.

While imported medicines are needed and are being used, there is skepticism about the value of many pharmaceuticals and the preventive health program stresses sanitation



*Women line up for treatment at a *dā'ira* dispensary, which has a limited supply of medicine, shown below.*



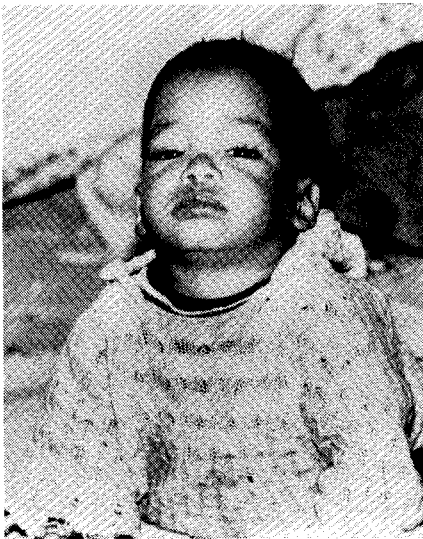
and nourishing food rather than reliance on medicines.

The most impressive Sahrawian innovation is a system of "protection centers" for children. Outside each *wilāya* is a small camp where mothers come with children who are suffering from malnutrition or recovering from serious disease. In this environment they are protected from infections which spread more

easily in the camps. "Here," one responsible explained, "we have the best chance of convincing mothers of the value of a balanced diet in maintaining health." The children are fed a special supplementary diet and are examined and weighed each day: "Thus the mother is able to see before her own eyes a demonstration of the value of good food rather than medicine." Women remain in these centers until the child has



The National Hospital in Tindouf, where this mother and her child rest, is the best-equipped medical facility. Below, a malnourished child awaits attention in a "protection center."



gained sufficient weight to withstand the conditions of the main camps.

Pregnant women are also given special care. Once a woman knows she is pregnant, she is relieved of arduous work and her health is monitored by the clinic in the *dā'ira*. There are special literacy classes for pregnant women to enable them to

spend their time profitably. At eight months the expectant mother is moved into the hospital—either a central hospital or the national hospital, depending on whether complications are expected. This precaution is taken because of the difficulties of traveling in an open Land Rover over the rough terrain. All women are encouraged to breast-feed their infants and I was given more than one lecture by Sahrawi women on "breast is best."

A full immunization program has been carried out and every Sahrawi carries an immunization *carnet*. Detailed medical records are kept by medical institutions at each level. Realizing what a gold mine of data this would be for some future epidemiologist studying the health of a refugee population, I congratulated the responsible for his dedication to this task. He modestly replied, "Keeping good medical records is

simply part of the discipline of the revolution."

The diseases that persist are chiefly those associated with the climate: bronchitis in the winter and intestinal problems in the hot season. The extremes of temperature are not the only health hazard. Flies, even in the coldest weather, are a perpetual problem, and the shortage of water makes efforts to promote personal cleanliness very difficult. The health committee aims to provide enough water for each person to have a weekly bath, but my experience suggests supplies are inadequate for that, to say nothing of laundry requirements. The schools cooperate with the health committee in stressing personal hygiene and require that children arrive at school with hair combed and hands and faces clean.

There are no toilet facilities as such; people used the sand outside the stone boundaries of the camps. Goats and sheep are also kept outside this stone boundary because of the flies they attract. Even this practice marks an enormous change in the customs of these nomadic people who were traditionally accustomed to living in proximity to their animals.

The result of this comprehensive health program with its stress on sanitation, nutrition, prevention (they have even launched an antismoking campaign), and education is a population which is remarkably healthy despite the conditions under which they live. Hospitals had very few patients in care during my visit.

The national hospital has no operating theater and there are no trained surgeons among the Sahrawi. Patients who require operations are taken to an Algerian hospital near Tindouf. One Sahrawi is now abroad studying to be a surgeon. When he returns, they hope to be able to equip the hospital for his work and they expect him to train others.

While the aim is to spread all new knowledge among the population, it is necessary to send students abroad to study specialized fields. We discussed the problem—common elsewhere in Africa—that such students are sometimes reluctant to return home to put their skills to the

service of the community. The Polisario make a special effort to keep such students in close touch with the conditions in the camps through regular home visits. Sometimes the students go to the battlefield during long vacations. While abroad, they have special responsibilities in promoting the Sahrawian cause at the diplomatic level.

Education in the Camps

Education is organized as efficiently as health care in the refugee camps. There are schools for children from five to eight years old in each *dā'ira*. Often, I observed very old men teaching reading and writing to the youngest pupils: the old men were sitting crosslegged and smiling as the little children were shouting out the Arabic alphabet. Other younger teachers tell stories to the smallest children and teach them songs. The large numbers of children make it necessary to run two daily shifts. (Some of these "palace of children" schools, as they are called, taught as many as 2,500 kids each day.) Each school is equipped with a small first-aid center and a canteen. When there are sufficient food supplies the children are given a supplementary meal at school.

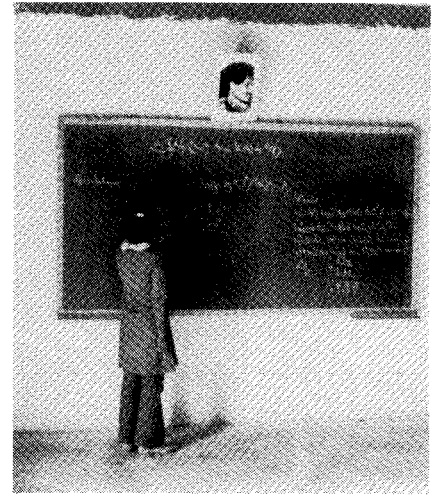
Arabic is to be the first language of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic; the second language is Spanish. As one Sahrawi put it, "we are not ashamed that we are teaching a colonial language. We do not want to be enemies of any nation and we have had long contact with Spain. Many of our people have even married into their families." But colonial connection is not otherwise promoted in the educational program.

There is a set program of study for all the schools. Children must pass at each point before going on to a more advanced level. The Ministry of Education has prepared a set of core course books, mimeographed for the teachers' use; there is not enough paper to make books for the children. The syllabus includes a standard array of subjects—mathematics, language, speech, geography, and sciences—but in contrast to many other educational programs in Africa, the children learn first about their own society—they are taught *Sahrawi* history and *Sahrawi* literature.

There are shortages of everything in these schools—from pencils, pens, notebooks, and chalk, to desks and chairs. The children are very poorly clothed and the classrooms were bitterly cold. Nevertheless, in each one I visited, the children appeared to be eagerly involved in their studies.

In addition to the schools in the *wilāyāt* there is a boarding school for children up to 16 years of age. It has a capacity for 2,000 children and is completely filled. This school caters to children who have completed *wilāya*-level instruction. It is better equipped, too, than the camp schools because international agencies, particularly OXFAM Belgique, have treated it as a special project.

Although I did not visit them, there are two other boarding schools for



Above, a child answers a mathematical problem at the 7 June Boarding School. Conditions are crowded and materials rudimentary at other Sahrawi schools (below) but the children remain active.



The buildings of the 27 February School, like others in the camps, are constructed from locally made mud bricks. The students are women, ranging in age from 16-70. Below, they learn the functions of the heart.

children sixteen and over. One offers military training for those, as the responsible put it, "who want to fight," then he added, "we are *all* combatants and *every* duty is the same as fighting." The other boarding school runs a two-year teacher training course to supply staff for the camp schools.

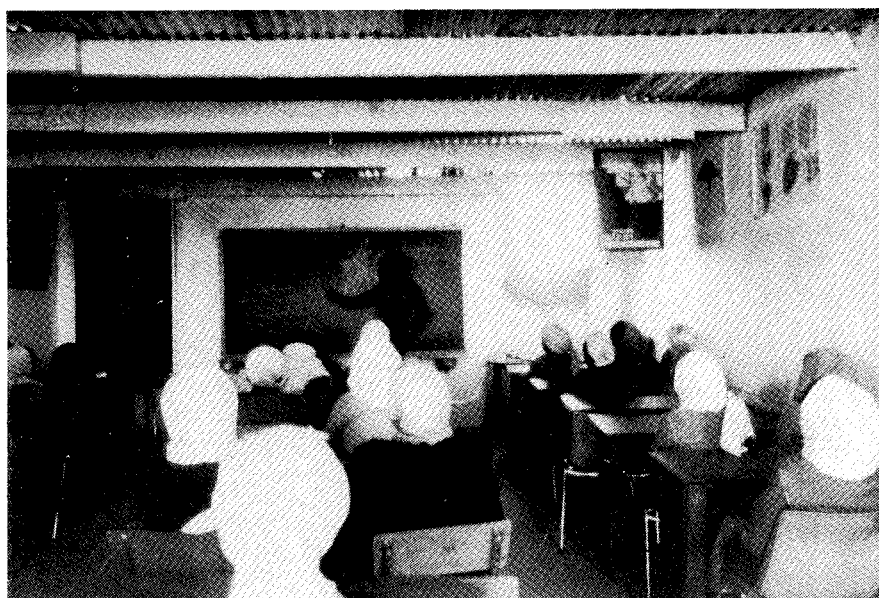
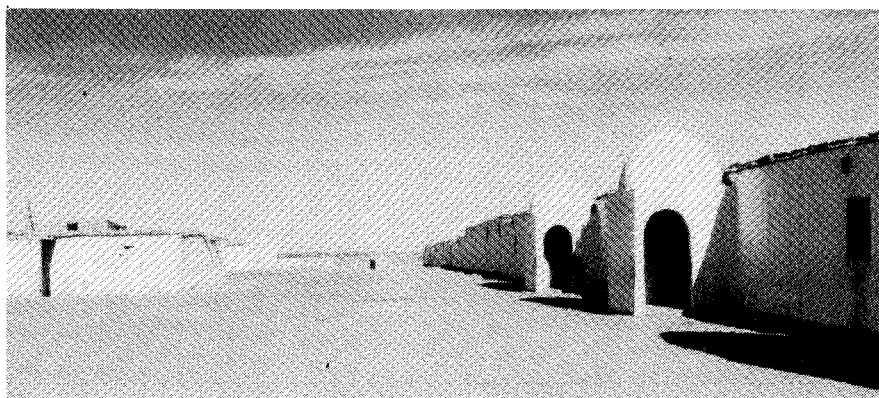
The 27 February School

The name of this school commemorates the declaration of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic. It is a school for women from 16 to 70 years old. Welcoming our group, the "responsible" explained the school's mission:

This school is the center of cultural, professional, and military training for women. The school guarantees the total social milieu of the woman. She may come with her small children, with her weak and old mother and father. Her husband may visit her when he is back from the front. There is a children's educational center with staff to teach the children. Infants and small children are cared for during the day in nurseries. Women eat their mid-day meal in the canteen and return to their tents at night to cook for their families.

The course of study in the 27 February School runs for one year and 700 women are enrolled. The curriculum includes reading and writing for those who are illiterate. (Sahrawi often stress in conversation that women's education was neglected under colonial rule.) It includes a range of academic subjects, including French. I visited a biology class and another in geography. A wide variety of manual skills are taught and there is military training—theoretical and practical. Every woman learns to drive. Although women may specialize according to their ability, everyone goes through the entire course and there are examinations.

It is in this school that clothing is sewn for the camps and where the donated, used clothing is sorted, mended, and distributed. When there are enough supplies, the



women make sandals. There is also a workshop where knives, spoons, and cooking pots are pounded out of salvaged war materials. I saw some men at work mending military boots. The Sahrawi are famous for their leatherware and the women make various miniature items for cultural programs organized by Polisario representatives in other countries. What are their needs? The responsible replied:

If I told you that we did not lack things it would be a lie. If we had more materials, we would make more of the things that our people need. But we are in a country that is not our own, so it is natural that many things are lacking. For instance, the wool we receive [for knitting and weaving carpets] is white and we have had many difficulties with dyeing. We don't have enough anyway. We don't only use wool to make carpets or sweaters;

we do a lot of things with it. We also need leather. We have a lot of ideas, but we don't have the materials and we need other tools. For example, we could make our own shoes if we could buy the cow skins. It would be cheaper.

Asked where she hoped her school would be located after the war, she replied: "We would like to make our entire territory into a school for women—right into the remotest bush."

I noticed that many of the teachers were young men and asked her why. Some of her colleagues, she explained, had been among the first graduates of this school: "It takes a long time to train enough teachers. Look at our military education. We were taught by men, but now all the instructors are women." She stressed the importance of training for women: "We will be able to take

part [in the war] ourselves if it becomes necessary, and some of us already work as nurses in the battlefield." The women also learn some mechanical skills in this school.

Not only in this school, but everywhere I went, Sahrawi women asked me repeatedly what the women in my society know about them. My response was to ask them what they would like my friends back home to know. One young woman replied:

The woman of the Sahara—yesterday's and today's Sahrawi woman—each contributed to the work of the men. The difference today is that she is politicized.... As you know, women now participate in all national organizations. The Sahrawi woman today has two roles—her productive role and her [role in] child care.... She also works at the national level and she has her duties in all institutions.... In general, then, the mission of woman is not limited. She has the same mission as the Sahrawi man. The most important thing is to achieve our national objective—to gain independence. Sahrawi women hope to establish contact with English women. We are not yesterday's society. Today our society is based on equality between the sexes. Our main problem is independence.

I asked about the psychological effects of war on children and found that the women were highly concerned. On the one hand, they explained, it is necessary to instill patriotism and, by explaining the reasons for living in the camps, they hope to give the children the courage needed to endure the difficult conditions. On the other hand, they try to keep their lives "as normal as possible."

The very austerity of camp life makes this difficult and there are no toys or sports equipment (with the exception of those at the boarding school) which might help divert them. The President of the Red Crescent said he was worried, realizing the children were only playing war games. "My dream," said Mr. Heiba, "is to give each child a toy on 27 February when we celebrate the declaration of the Republic.... We could make toys for the children or allow them to make their own, but we have no materials."

While I observed some children caring for the goats and sheep, it appears that most domestic work is managed by adults. The only play I saw was three or four small children using old belts and some string for skipping and, in one protection center, two youngsters were being reprimanded for playing too roughly with a cat. While playthings may be the very last kind of aid sent to refugees (and as Mr. Heiba pointed out, "We can never ask aid agencies for toys"), the problems of children who are doomed to spend their growing years in such circumstances have been seriously neglected.

Continuity and Change

The Sahrawi have some very important inherited cultural advantages, the *esprit de corps* and pragmatic attitude developed by the SADR. They are a highly literate people with a high regard for learning and literature. (Sahrawi women were especially famous for their poetry.) The society was also remarkably egalitarian, according to a contemporary Sahrawi's account, as regards relationships between men and women and between black and white:

In Mauritania or Morocco you would find Emirates who had slaves, veiled women who did not work. But here it was totally the opposite. It is not we, the younger people, who have brought this equality to our society. It is not a theory. The situation was the same before colonization and colonization was not able to destroy it.

The SADR constitution has rejected any discrimination against individuals or groups and references to old divisions such as "tribes" are explicitly banned. In terms of skin color, the population is very mixed. I could see no evidence of discrimination and dark-skinned Sahrawians appeared to be represented in every group including the highest political offices. Moreover, I saw considerable evidence of mixed marriages in the camps.

Polygamy, if practiced at all, was rare among the Sahrawi. The women I talked to maintained that it had never been a custom among them and they were horrified when I told them of my friend, a chief in Sierra Leone, who has 54 wives. They

exclaimed, "In such a society a woman must only be an object." They went on to explain very patiently that the Prophet Muhammad never intended any man to have more than one wife. He was simply posing a riddle when he said, "'All right, you may have four wives, but you must love them all equally.' Everyone knows it is impossible for a man to love more than one woman."

Since the establishment of the camp society, however, many changes have been introduced into the traditional system of marriage. A couple wishing to wed must now appear before the justice committee to demonstrate that they understand what they are undertaking. (Members of this committee include 16-year-olds, and the most thorough explanations of family law came from discussions with some of these very young people.) One explained the traditions and some of the changes.

Long ago it was the parents of both the bride and the groom who decided about marriage in consultation with the husband. But for a long time, even during colonialism, this attitude has not prevailed. Now, we believe that the most important thing is for both partners to agree. The family must know about it, but it is the couple that must agree.

The SADR has also fixed a minimum age for marriage—16 for women, 18 for men. Realizing that this constitutes a considerable departure from the customs of other African societies, Islamic or not, I asked how it had been possible to convince the "old men" of the necessity of such a change. Two 16-year-olds explained how it had been discussed in the Popular Assemblies. The arguments in favor of the change included the importance of women being educated and the fact that girls are not physically mature enough to bear children before this age. One of the two girls involved in this discussion had been introduced earlier as a widow. The other explained, "You are going to ask me why my friend who is 16 is a widow. Well, she got married in 1977 before we had this rule. Now no one gets married before they are 16."

The SADR is explicitly a religious society, but the only evidence I

could find of an "extreme" position was their stand against the drinking of alcohol. In all other respects they appeared to be tolerant and pragmatic. For example, when asked about the death penalty for crimes proscribed by the *Koran* they explained this had never been practiced. Expulsion from a group was the most severe form of punishment.

Our society is an historic one from the Koran. What we have is Islamic socialism. We are not going to dissolve our customs because these are what kept us alive for centuries. Colonialism tried in all ways to destroy our society. It did not succeed. So we do not forget our traditions. Our changes will be natural, logical. Everyone is involved in this experience. We respect old people. Our evolution is going to be logical. Progress is logical. Progress does not mean we throw out our customs. We are sharpening them through this evolution and this experience.

Traditionally the Sahrawi have always engaged in private commerce and in the camps the goats and sheep are owned by individuals, although all other material supplies are distributed on a strictly egalitarian basis. Ahmed, our first guide, explained how differences of wealth were not apparent in nomadic society: "If you came into a camp, you could not tell who is rich and who is poor." This is because of the system of patron and client relationships, found in many African societies, whereby wealthy people lent their camels and cattle to the poorer members of the group. Islam also places great responsibility on the wealthy to support those less fortunate. There is nothing to suggest the Sahrawi will not continue to permit private enterprise among their people in the future.

Leadership

This acknowledgment of differences in the abilities of individuals is also reflected in their present social and political organization. Leadership in nomadic society rests on such qualities as courage, generosity, and eloquence. One Sahrawi combatant commented on their military organization and leadership:

Well, one of the things I know is that responsibility is not an honor for us.

It is a mission. The man in charge of others is a man who has to work more than everyone else. He must really be an example to everyone. If he is charged with responsibility, he is given more work and he becomes stronger through work. Every combatant is aware that if a responsible gives a direction, it must be carried out, since he knows it is in the interests of everyone. We are not anarchists. Our army gets its instruction on the battlefield.

We know the responsables very well; we know them personally because every day they sit with us. He is the first to start shooting the enemy... Thus a man may be a responsible, but he is with the combatants—sleeping, drinking, eating, doing everything together. That's normal.

I also asked about freedom of movement within the camps because some reports indicated that the population in each wilāya or dā'ira was composed of people who came from specific places in the Western Sahara and that they were being kept together for their eventual return to their own home area. I was told that people are free to live where they like. If someone wants to move he works through the dā'ira council. I asked if there was a lot of such movement.

Yes, it happens all the time. It often happens in the case of old people who have children scattered in different camps. Women, especially, want to be near their old parents in order to care for them. There is constant communication between the camps and each dā'ira. If, today for example, I wanted permission to go to Dakhla because I have something to do there and I don't have any work at the time, I would be allowed to go without hindrance. It is like any other state.

I reminded him I had asked another person, Omar, the day before if anyone ever tried to leave the camps to go to Algiers to find a job.

That is very silly. If we wanted to work, Morocco was ready to give us all the work we wanted. We know that kind of propaganda. Morocco says, "Here you are, you have a house, money, cars, women, the good life, anything you want"—as if such propaganda could take anyone in. Propaganda is very good to listen to, but reality is very difficult. Thus

you see we have chosen this difficult reality because we are conscious.

I also asked about the system of registration of births and deaths and I learned that not only is this being carefully maintained, but that there is also a postal system in all the camps. "We are an organized state with all of its institutions, with all of its archives. It is normal."

Leadership and the membership of the camp committees are also based on merit and experience. All local or neighborhood committees are appointed for one year.

But they can last longer. You must have seen that we met some people who have been members of the health committee since 1977. If I belong to the health committee I gain some kind of specialization so I am likely to continue doing that work for some time. I have never been a member of a neighborhood committee [the speaker here was a guide], but that is my own decision.

We talked about the Sahrawi application of the principles of criticism and self-criticism.

The people are conscious of their duty. The responsible who doesn't work, doesn't set a good example to the people, he is the one who loses. In other words, criticism is positive, not destructive. If the people see that a responsible is really responsible and does his work well, he may remain in that position for three or four years or even more. He can be re-elected every time. On the other hand, if you see that someone is not capable, it is the people who have put him there and it is the people who will remove him.

* * * * *

At the national level there is a 21-member Political Bureau which includes the governors of each wilāya and the "responsibles" of the women's and youth organizations. These people are also members of the Sahrawi National Council which is made up of 41 people, all of whom were elected in 1978. All official SADR statements concerning its political stance are that it is nonaligned. There is reason to expect that an independent SADR would follow a middle-of-the-road nonaligned path in order to attract

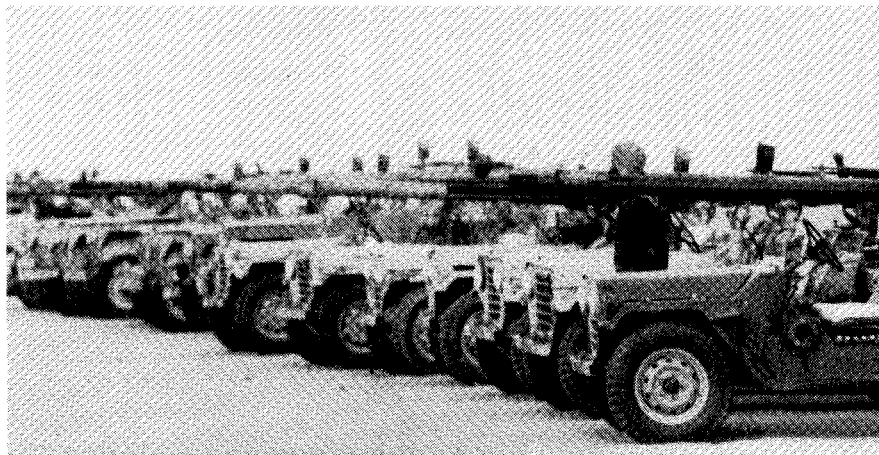
investment from both West and East.

The War Inside Morocco

The Western Sahara conflict has given King Hassan II a means of rallying Moroccans and providing a focus of attention for his military forces, among whom there were, in the early 1970s, serious signs of disaffection. The Madrid agreement laid the basis for some reconciliation between the King and domestic opposition groups that shared Hassan's economic interests in the area. The years 1974-1976 saw a series of trials, amnesties, and the release of political prisoners, including party members and left-wing students. Elections for municipal governments were held in 1976 and in 1977 there was a general election. The ISTIQLAL and the USPF (The Socialist Union of the Popular Forces, formed in 1974 from a dominant branch of the UNFP), were the dominant parties in opposition. Still, the elections bore familiar signs of government control: several opposition leaders were arrested and others were intimidated.¹

An increasing number of the King's opponents, moreover, did not belong to established political parties. New radical groups had formed during the 1970s—the Frontistes and the Marxist-Leninists, which aimed to create a new socialist republic in Morocco. These groups were based mainly among the university communities, but they also sought to involve the working-class and trade unions. All advocated self-determination for the Western Sahara. In 1974-1976 there were widespread arrests of the Frontistes and the heavy sentences they received showed that the King's efforts at political reconciliation were not to include radical groups.

During the same years, the number of Moroccan forces deployed to the Western Sahara increased dramatically and the Polisario occupation of parts of southern Morocco required more troops there as well. Senior officers in the Moroccan Army claim their inability to contain the Polisario is due in part to the King's refusal to



Captured military equipment displayed at the Tindouf camp.

hand over full control to them. Hassan, on the other hand, fears his military might initiate an attack on Algeria to reclaim Tindouf (the region has been in dispute since independence), or the more immediate danger of an attempt to oust him from the throne.

In 1980 conscription was extended to include students who leave the university (among whom draft-dodging is common), and there is common disaffection among the peasants who constitute the cannon-fodder for the war. One prisoner of war being held by the Polisario told me in Morocco, "We are forced into the military at the point of a gun." For others, military service was reportedly the only means to earn a living; there is high unemployment in Morocco. (Declining morale among the lower ranks of the armed forces may account in part for the Polisario's success in capturing arms and prisoners.)

The general war-weariness in Morocco underlies rising labor unrest: in 1978-1979 there were strikes by postal workers, airline employees, bank clerks, teachers, and health service workers, all suppressed and labeled treasonable.

The soaring external debt (one source reports the war is costing \$3 million per day) has resulted in a decline in business confidence. In 1980 Morocco received IMF assistance (this standby credit said to be the second largest ever granted to a Third World country) and Saudi Arabia supports the economy to the tune of \$1 billion annually. Iraq is

another source of help: in 1980 it provided a large loan on concessionary terms and is selling Morocco oil at reduced prices. Recently, however, the World Bank has put pressure on Hassan's government to settle the war which is draining the economy. With phosphate earnings less than the oil import bill, the cost of imported food staples for domestic consumption is now higher than the earnings from agricultural exports. It is obvious why many observers see a distinct parallel between the experiences of the Shah in Iran and the developing situation in Morocco with a similar outcome becoming more likely as time passes.

The Polisario's "Liberated Zones"

My visit among the Sahrawi included a trip into Polisario-controlled areas of the Western Sahara and another into Southern Morocco. (Before leaving London I was warned by a journalist that he had heard the Polisario simply drive you in circles and then tell you where you have been. I went, therefore, armed with a compass and map, and our party carefully kept track of the directions and distances traveled.)

We traveled in open Land Rovers—three for our party and our guides, and two escort Land Rovers which contained supplies and eight armed combatants. Each night we camped in the open, the combatants preparing our meals on an open fire.

Except for the El Aaiun-Smara-Bu Craa triangle and Dakhla, visitors are able to travel in the whole of the Western Sahara under the SADR aegis. A journalist who was traveling

1. The overview of internal political developments in Morocco is drawn from *Amnesty International Briefing: Morocco*, October 1977.

at the same time with another group told me that while he was camping some 200 kilometers inside Morocco one night, he heard a government radio broadcast announcing that on the spot where he was sleeping there were 15,000 Moroccan troops in control.

Our group was served fresh vegetables with nearly every meal on the trip and we saw one large area under cultivation near a well where we stopped to refresh ourselves. Such evidence supports Polisario assertions that they control most of the Western Sahara.

Although we did not visit the battlefield (causing some frustration among the group), we did visit numerous battle sites where there was ample verification of the capacity of the Polisario to deal with the Moroccan Army, despite the latter's superior arms. Some distance inside Morocco we were shown 54 tanks which had been destroyed: most of these were

frozen in various positions of retreat, and the military "experts" in our groups examined 8 to ascertain just how they had been destroyed. The insides were completely melted, but the absence of any exterior damage suggested that they must have been put out of action by Molotov cocktails, or destroyed after the Moroccans had fled the scene. (This latter explanation seems unlikely, since the Polisario depend largely on captured arms.)

That the area through which we traveled was firmly in the hands of the Sahrawi was also evidenced by the availability of petrol and maintenance services. We were never shown these installations—vehicles would leave campsites at night and return—but once, after the sixth puncture on the same wheel, we were deposited under a tree while combatants went off to get it repaired. (It was at this point that we heard a Moroccan plane and were asked to take cover.)

One of the last events of my visit was the rather theatrical display— assembled for the benefit of our group and others—of captured arms, documents taken from Moroccan soldiers killed by the Polisario, and three groups of prisoners of war. Information collected from interviews with prisoners when their captors are present is hardly reliable

Left, a Moroccan pilot captured by the Polisario.

Below, Polisario examine a tank destroyed inside Southern Morocco.

data. Yet we were given considerable freedom to ask questions.²

2. It is not known just how many Sahrawi prisoners the Moroccans are holding. The Comité de Defense des Sahraouis au Maroc et au Sahara occupé, a Paris-based group, has for the past several years been attempting to investigate conditions. With the permission of the Moroccan authorities, this group in early 1980 organized a delegation, which included doctors, to visit Sahrawi in Moroccan prisons after a previous visit by a Professor Minkowski. Their visit lasted only 24 hours: the Minister of Justice, M. Fehri Fassiferi, the only person authorized to accompany them to the prisons, was absent on their arrival in Morocco.

After this abortive trip, Professor Minkowski gave a press conference on April 17, 1980 in which he described his previous experiences in Morocco. He had earlier decided not to make this information public as it could jeopardize future visits by delegations. His descriptions of appalling prison conditions and tortures inflicted on men, women and schoolchildren have been echoed by members of the Movement of Catholic Lawyers, some of whom have served as counsel to prisoners.

The Comité de Defense des Sahraouis has also compiled compelling evidence of the mistreatment of Sahrawi in Moroccan occupied zones. Their February 1981 report contains an interview with French journalist Jean-Francois Boyer who lived for some time in El Aaiun as a tourist in 1980. He describes persistent persecution and progressive impoverishment of the Sahrawi there.



A group of seven men had been captured only six days earlier. One had a slight wound on his hand and was shaking with cold. We asked this small group to sit down (all the prisoners has been standing in rows). Our guides did not object to this or to journalists handing out cigarettes. All the prisoners to whom I spoke offered the information that they had been allowed to write home to their families but had learned that the Moroccan Red Crescent had refused to deliver the letters. The Radio SADR also allows prisoners to send messages informing their relatives of their safety and whereabouts. (Of course, it is forbidden in the occupied territory or in Morocco to listen to these broadcasts.)

Most of the prisoners did not speak French, which suggests that they were peasants. One of the captured pilots spoke English and, recognizing my accent, said, "If you are a friend of King Hassan, why don't you tell him to end this war?" Others asked whether, if we were planning to visit Morocco, we would be kind enough to take messages to relatives. Several journalists took down names and addresses. One visitor asked them about the food they were given in prison. One replied: "We are all Muslim and it is not polite for a guest to talk about the hospitality of his host." Another

laughed and said he could tell us that they were eating better now than when they were fighting in Morocco. Several were asked if they had known just what this war was about before joining the army. Most said they had not.

* * * * *

The information for these *Reports* was assembled in May and June 1981, just before the June meeting of the Organization of African Unity in Nairobi where the question of granting membership to the SADR was again debated. At the Nairobi summit, King Hassan accepted proposals for a "controlled referendum" to determine the Western Sahara's future. The OAU also passed a resolution, endorsed by the Moroccan king, asking that a joint UN-OAU peace-keeping force be sent to the territory to enforce an immediate cease-fire. A committee of African heads of state—from Guinea, Mali, Nigeria, Sudan, Tanzania, Sierra Leone, and Kenya (chair)—was appointed to consider how to conduct the referendum.

Polisario's acceptance of the "principle" of a referendum was announced in mid-July, along with a statement setting out conditions for agreement to the vote. They include: withdrawal of all Moroccan forces and administration from the

Sahara to 90 miles inside Morocco; the repatriation of all Saharan peoples to the territory and a three-month period prior to the vote to create a proper climate; installation of a provisional international administration created by the UN and OAU; and liberation of all Saharan detainees held in Moroccan prisons.³

King Hassan has subsequently qualified his commitment to the referendum and long delays seem certain over the matter of determining who is eligible to vote. Will it include only the 75,000 Sahrawi reported in the 1974 Spanish census, which Morocco accepts, or a population in excess of 750,000 and include refugees in Algeria, as the Polisario demands?

Many believe that Hassan used the OAU meeting merely to buy time to try to consolidate his position militarily and to block action—as indeed he did—on SADR membership. Morocco reportedly now has 80,000 of its 115,000 troops involved in action against an estimated 15,000 SADR combatants. Still, one can only expect that the struggle will continue, perhaps down to the last man, woman, and child.

(August 1981)

3. *Africa Report*, September-October 1981, p. 36.

(Part III completes the series "The Struggle for the Western Sahara")

APPENDIX

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE SAHARAN ARAB DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

Preamble

The Saharan Arab Democratic Republic is the fruit of the heroic and historic struggle of the Sahrawi to safeguard their national independence and territorial integrity. The Republic is the visible expression of its own will to live in dignity and freedom, in accordance with the decisions of international authorities, whose charters the SADR undertakes to respect, which recognize its inalienable right to self-determination and independence.

The Sahrawis are an Arab, African, and Muslim people. They stand for policies of nonalignment, the struggle for the unity of the Arab people, and for the unity of the African continent, and they

believe in the militant solidarity of the peoples of the world to impose an equitable and just world order which will contribute to the creation of a human condition where justice reigns and where all nations are united in a relationship of equality and mutual respect.

Chapter I: Fundamental Principles

Article 1: Saguia El Hamra and Rio de Oro, within their historical boundaries, form an Arab Democratic Republic. The republican political system undertakes to respect the open unionist program.

Article 2: The SADR belongs to the Arab world, the African family, and to the community of the people of the Third World.

Article 3: Islam is the state religion and the basis for law. Arabic is the national and official language.

Article 4: The quest for the unity of the people of the Arab Maghreb constitutes a step toward African and Arab unity. The defense of the homeland and of freedom is a sacred duty. The implementation of socialism and the application of social justice are one of the objectives of the State.

Article 5: The family, which is the basis of society, is founded on morality and religion.

Article 6: All citizens are equal before the law; they have the same rights and duties.

Article 7: Freedom of speech is guaranteed within the limits of the law and the interests of the people. Education, and health and social services, are guaranteed rights of all citizens.

Article 8: Public property belongs to the people; private property is protected as long as it does not lead to exploitation.

Article 9: The payment of taxes and duties is compulsory under the law.

Article 10: The right to political asylum is guaranteed.

Article 11: The national flag and the coat of arms of the State are defined by law.

Chapter II: Government System

A. Revolutionary Command Council

Article 12: The Revolutionary Command Council is the supreme body of executive power of the SADR. It holds responsibility for all matters concerning sovereignty and legislation. It determines the general policy of the State.

Article 13: The Revolutionary Command Council is presided over by the General Secretary of the Polisario Front.

Article 14: The Revolutionary Command Council designates a Council of Ministers comprising a President, ministers and general secretaries of ministries.

Article 15: The Revolutionary Command Council has the power to declare war, sign treaties, nominate political representatives, and to accredit foreign political representatives.

B. Council of Ministers

Article 16: The Council of Ministers is composed of a President, ministers, and general secretaries of ministries.

Article 17: It is presided over by a member of the Revolutionary Command Council.

Article 18: It deals with all executive matters from directives laid down by the Command Council.

Article 19: The general budget is promulgated by law.

Article 20: The Sahrawi Popular National Army is at the service of the people. It protects the unity and territorial integrity of the homeland and participates in the economic and social activities of the country. Its organization is defined by law.

Chapter III: Legislative Power

Article 21: The Sahrawi National Council is a legislative and consultative authority. It comprises 41 members.

Article 22: It ratifies the conventions.

Chapter IV: Judiciary Powers

Article 23: The judiciary is independent. Judges are obliged to dispense justice. Judgments are given and carried out in the name of the people.

A. Judiciary Council

Article 24: It is composed of Presidents of Tribunals and presided over by the Minister of Justice.

Article 25: It nominates judges, and dismisses them after consultation with experts.

Article 26: It defines its own internal regulations.

Article 27: It puts forward the laws for the organization of tribunals and their competence to the Council of Ministers.

B. The Tribunals

Article 28: The tribunals are made up of primary tribunals, a Court of Appeal, and a Supreme Court of the people.

Article 29: The Court for State Security is a special tribunal. Its members are designated by the Revolutionary Command Council and its function is defined by law.

Chapter V: General Transition Procedures

Article 30: The name of the Popular Liberation Army will remain in force until the Sahrawi Arab people regain sovereignty over the whole of their homeland.

Article 31: The Executive Committee of the Popular Front will fulfill the functions of the Revolutionary Command Council until the time of the first popular general assembly after regaining sovereignty.

Political Organizations

The Polisario Front is the Political and Military body of the SADR. The Sahrawi Popular Liberation Army being its military branch.

I. The General Popular Assembly

It is held every four years and brings together the delegates elected by the local popular assemblies. During this assembly, the important political decisions are taken and the Executive Committee and the Political Bureau of the Polisario Front are elected.

The General Popular Assembly:

Establishes a program of national action.

Defines status of the Polisario Front

Establishes constitution of the SADR

Elects officers of the Polisario Front

II. The Executive Committee

Elected by the General Popular Assembly and also called the Revolutionary Command Council, the Executive Committee is composed of 9 members.

The Executive Committee, the supreme authority, sees to the implementation of the political trends decided upon during the course of the General Popular Assembly. The General Secretary of the Polisario Front is elected by Assembly (since the Third Congress, brother Mohamed Abdelaziz has fulfilled this function, thus replacing the heroic martyr El Ouali Mustapha Sayed, who was killed in action in June 1976), and the President of the Council of Ministers.

III. The Political Bureau

The Political Bureau is elected by Assembly. It is composed of 21 members whose task is to undertake the political education of the people.

The general secretaries of the grassroots organizations and the Wali (governors of Wilāya) are part of the Political Bureau. A permanent secretariat has been set up. The Political Bureau is part of the National Sahrawi Council.

IV. People's Organizations

Women, workers and students are organized into the National Union of Sahrawi Women, the General Union of Sahrawi Workers, and the General Union of the Students of the Saguia El Hamra and Rio de Oro respectively.

(Bibliography is appended in Part I.)