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CULTIVATING HOPE FOR WESTERN SAHARA: MOVING MY PEOPLE TOWARD SELF-SUFFICIENCY

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The occupation of Western Sahara—located in the Maghreb region of North Africa—is often forgotten, despite the longevity of the situation and the large community living in protracted displacement. In 1975, Moroccan and Mauritanian troops invaded Western Sahara in an effort to extend territorial control, forcing thousands of native Sahrawis to flee and seek refuge in the southwestern corner of the Algerian desert near the remote city of Tindouf. The occupation of Western Sahara led to an armed conflict which left the Sahrawi liberation movement (Polisario Front)² fighting on two fronts—Morocco in the north and Mauritania in the south. In 1979 Mauritania signed a peace agreement with the Polisario Front and put an end to its participation in the conflict. The armed conflict between the Polisario Front and the Moroccan army was finalized when a settlement plan and a cease-fire agreement were negotiated in 1991 after UN intervention. In 1992, a referendum was to be conducted in which the Sahrawis would be able to vote whether to become part of the Moroccan Kingdom or become an independent state.

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² The Polisario Front is a politico-military organization striving to end Moroccan control of the former Spanish territory of Western Sahara, and win independence for that region.

³ The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was created in 1991 in accordance with the settlement plan agreement between Morocco and the Polisario Front, in order to finalize the decolonization process and conduct and monitor the referendum on Western Saharan independence. Due to political blockages, the referendum has yet to take place and the mandate of MINURSO has been extended about 41 times. For more information, please visit: www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minurso.

Twenty-five years have passed since then, yet the political impasse persists and the UN is still unable to organize the referendum.³ Western Sahara thus remains the most significant territory on the UN list of non-self-governing territories—both in terms of land area and population. Morocco's ongoing forty-year occupation of Western Sahara has had severe implications for the Sahrawis,⁴ including restrictions on the use of the territory's natural resources in contravention of international law,⁵ and a prolonged refugee crisis in Algeria. An estimated 165,000 Sahrawi refugees are currently still settled in various camps near Tindouf.⁶

In the 1980s, Morocco constructed the *berm*, a wall that runs 2,700 kilometers north to south along the western border of Algeria and Mauritania. The wall is three to four meters high, with high-tech radar detection systems, a Moroccan patrolling force of 120,000 soldiers, and the largest continuous minefield in the world.⁷ In addition to the threats to return and to the safety of the Sahrawis' desert communities, this wall severely limits movement in the desert for the traditionally nomadic Sahrawi people.

These conditions make it difficult, if not impossible, for the Sahrawi people to produce their food and cover nutritional needs by themselves, leading to a total dependency on food aid programs from the international community for their survival. Food produced by countries all over the world is collected by international organizations and agencies⁸ and distributed to the Sahrawi refugees. The distributed monthly food baskets are calculated according to the minimum number of kilocalories required

- 4 For more information on the history of the occupation and a human rights analysis, please see: Lakkhal, Malainin, and Mohamed Amroun. "Western Sahara: Denial of Self-determination and Human Rights." In *Land and its People: Civil Society Voices Address the Crisis over Natural Resources in the Middle East/North Africa*, edited by Housing and Land Rights Network—Habitat International Coalition, 235-242. Cairo: HIC-HLRN, 2015. Available at: hlrn.org/img/publications/BigMasterFinal.pdf.
- 5 Housing and Land Rights Network. "Western Sahara: Exploitation through Morocco-EU Fisheries Agreement." *Right to Food and Nutrition Watch* (2013): 59. Available at: www.rtfn-watch.org/fileadmin/media/rtfn-watch.org/ENGLISH/pdf/Watch_2013/Watch_2013_PDFs/Watch_2013_eng_WEB_final.pdf#page=59.
- 6 UNHCR. *2015 UNHCR Country Operations Profile—Algeria*. Geneva: UNHCR, 2015. Available at: www.unhcr.org/pages/49e485e16.html.
- 7 Ahmed, Akbar, and Harrison Akins. "Waiting for the Arab Spring in Western Sahara." *Al Jazeera*, March 14, 2012. Available at: www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/03/2012314101516261596.html.
- 8 These include the World Food Programme (WFP), the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection Department (ECHO), the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), Medico International and Oxfam Solidarité, among others.
- 9 UNHCR. *Nutrition Survey Saharawi Refugee Camps, Tindouf, Algeria*. Geneva and Rome: UNHCR and WFP, 2012. Available at: vest-sahara.no/files/dated/2014-11-23/2012_nutrition_survey_report_final_draft_en_v2.doc.
- 10 The Framework for Action for Food Security and Nutrition in Protracted Crises (CFS-FFA), endorsed by the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in October 2015, is an important policy document that provides policy guidance for communities living in protracted crises, such as the Western Saharan refugees. The emphasis is specifically placed on community-led strategies (Principle 7) and durable, long-term solutions rather than "emergency" aid over long periods (Principle 1). Available at: www.fao.org/fileadmin/templates/cfs/Docs1415/FFA/CFS_FFA_Final_Draft_Ver2_EN.pdf.
- 11 Camel husbandry and herd recovery are also being promoted in order to provide milk and meat. For more information, please see: Volpato, Gabriele, and Patricia Howard. "The material and cultural recovery of camels and camel husbandry among Sahrawi refugees of Western Sahara." *Pastoralism: Research, Policy and Practice* 4:7 (2014). Available at: pastoralismjournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s13570-014-0007-4.
- 12 For more information on the technical development and timeline of the gardens, please visit: landtimes.landpedia.org/newsdes.php?id=pW1t&catid=ow=&edition=02s.

by the human body and mainly consist of dry foods such as cereals and pulses, sugar and oil. No dairy products, meat or fish are included. It was only over the last ten years that they started adding two to three kilograms of vegetables per month to the food basket.

Following forty years of dependency on a nutritionally unbalanced food basket, nutritional deficiencies and malnutrition are widespread, including anemia in both women and children, stunted growth in children, obesity and goiter.⁹ Despite the fact that the situation is a protracted crisis, there has been little investment in local self-sufficiency.¹⁰ The food baskets have been reduced many times and some products have been excluded permanently or temporarily. The lack of food aid and insufficient funding have repeatedly threatened Sahrawi refugees.

One of the solutions that is helping to overcome these problems in our camps is helping our people to be able to produce fresh food at their homes to cover part of their needs.¹¹ However, there are many constraints due to the shortage of water, the harsh conditions and the lack of fertile soil. Another challenge is the fact that these communities were originally nomads; it therefore takes a lot to persuade people who have no agricultural background that they can produce their own food in the same way as neighboring peoples who practice agriculture.

A great deal of training and guidance was needed, but in ten years we have been able to move from thirty gardens to around one thousand home gardens across three of our six camps.¹² Families receive training on various aspects of production, focusing mainly on agricultural practices; methods of organic agriculture such as composting, mulching, and biological control of pests; production of bio-fertilizers and preparations to control pests, weeds, etc.; the basics of permaculture; and preservation of seeds. Those who have received this valuable training are now able to produce a sizeable portion of fresh food, thus inspiring many others to participate in these projects. None of these results would have been possible without the initial support of many NGOs, international volunteers, local organizations such as the Sahrawi Union of Farmers, and active members of civil society.

As with any case of occupation, no real solution can be found for the Sahrawi refugees and other Western Sahrawis until the occupying power leaves the territory and restores the land and natural resources to their rightful owners. Our forgotten people are a long way from becoming self-sufficient but what we have achieved so far is a step in the right direction towards easing our suffering and reclaiming sovereignty over our food and our communities.