

**T**HIS LAND, WHICH AT VARIOUS times has been called Spanish Sahara, Western Sahara and the Saharan Democratic Republic, remains virtually unknown to most Canadians. However, some seven hundred Canadian soldiers will find themselves there soon, under United Nations command, working in conjunction with the Organization of African Unity (OAU) towards holding a referendum that will determine that country's future.

### Historical Background

During the fifteenth century, Spain colonized the coast of Northwest Africa. Western Sahara officially became a Spanish protectorate in 1884, but the region did not come completely under Spanish control until 1934. Spain negotiated some boundary changes with Morocco following the latter's independence in 1956. In 1957 and 1958, there were uprisings against the Spanish colonial authorities, who (with the help of France) repressed them, and in 1958 Western Sahara became an overseas province of Spain.

In 1963, the UN included the region on a list of colonies entitled to independence. In 1975, Spain accepted the principle of a referendum on Western Sahara's future, but neighbouring Morocco and Mauritania immediately claimed sovereignty over the area. Then in October 1975, the International Court of Justice ruled that Western Sahara had a right to self-determination – the referendum never materialized.

After the so-called "green march" orchestrated by the King of Morocco – 350,000 Moroccan civilians walking into Western Sahara brandishing their national flag and carrying the Koran – and following a tripartite agreement between Spain, Morocco and Mauritania, the Spanish authorities withdrew in February 1976. The region was subsequently divided in two, with Morocco's troops taking control of the northern two-thirds and the Mauritanian army occupying the south. European colonialism was supplanted by regional expansionism.

On the very day the Spanish left, the *Polisario* front (*Frente Popular para la Liberación de Sanguia el Hamra y Río de Oro*), which since its creation in 1973 had been fighting a guerilla war against the Spanish, announced the creation of the independent and sovereign state of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), with its own government. Mohammed Abdelazziz was appointed Secretary-General of *Polisario* and President of the new republic. Together with Algeria, which at the time was encouraging a number of national liberation movements, *Polisario* denounced the occupation by Morocco and Mauritania. The result was war between Moslem "brothers."

In August 1979, financially drained by the war with the *Polisario* which was consuming sixty per cent of the national budget, Mauritania abandoned all claims to the Western Sahara. Its slice was immediately occupied by Morocco, and during the 1980s, the Moroccan army became enmeshed in a drawn-out campaign against *Polisario*. In an effort to gain the upper hand, Morocco erected an enormous wall of stone and sand 1,600 kilometres in length along the western edge of the region.

Since 1989, fighting has virtually stopped, partly as a result of the weariness felt by both sides, and because of new political developments in the region, especially the creation in 1989 of the Arab Maghreb Union – an economic and trade pact between Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritania. However, control of the former Spanish Sahara is still a matter of prestige for Morocco's King Hassan, and ceding ground on this issue makes him vulnerable to attacks from his domestic opposition.

### The UN's Task

In 1988, the UN Security Council passed a resolution asking the Secretary-

# WESTERN SAHARA A SETTLEMENT IN SIGHT

*The people of Western Sahara will soon have the opportunity to vote on whether their territory should become an independent state or be absorbed into Morocco.*

General to prepare, in cooperation with the OAU, a report on the holding of a referendum on self-determination by the people of Western Sahara. In June 1990, the parties directly concerned agreed to base the referendum on the 1974 Spanish census of Saharans. A further resolution was adopted by the Security Council supporting the principle of a UN Mission for the Organization of a Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). On 29 April 1991, the Security Council formally created

MINURSO. Its work is expected to last for nine or ten months, with the referendum taking place before the end of December.

The Secretary-General has proposed that the ceasefire – an essential prerequisite both for carrying out the repatriation of legitimate citizens made refugees by the war, and for the election itself – come into effect on 6 September. However, it may not be possible to meet these various deadlines. The UN is behind schedule in selecting countries and individuals for the various contingents. The UN forces are to depart within two months of the referendum, after observing either the withdrawal of the Moroccan troops or the dismantling of the *Polisario* forces, depending on the referendum's outcome.

MINURSO will have four components: the special representative – Johannes Manz from Switzerland – and a staff of forty-nine; a contingent of 1,695 troops; 880 civilians, including police, the commissions responsible for the referendum and identification, and a contingent responsible for repatriation. The military unit will ensure that most of the Moroccan army withdraws, that both Moroccan and *Polisario* troops are confined to barracks during the referendum campaign, and, with the International Red Cross, supervise the exchange of prisoners.

Canada does not recognize the Saharan republic and has remained neutral throughout the conflict. However, it has always supported the mediation efforts of the UN Secretary-General, and has contributed some military personnel and Elections Canada staff to technical missions in the area in 1987 and 1990. For the referendum, Canada will provide a battalion of soldiers, and their commander, Major-General Armand Roy, will head up the MINURSO military forces. Following the success in assisting the UN in Namibia, Elections Canada staff and approximately ten RCMP officers will also be sent. Canada's financial contribution to the mission was set by the UN at US \$ 5.9 million, almost four per cent of the projected operating costs of \$ 166 million.

### Western Sahara's Prospects

The creation of a new micro-state, dependent on phosphate deposits and fishing, might not be the ideal solution from the international community's point of view, but the aspirations of the people of Western Sahara cannot be ignored. Any settlement that is lawful as well as legitimate requires the holding of a referendum. On the other hand, the most practical outcome might be the integration of the region as an autonomous province within Morocco, an idea advanced by King Hassan. This would automatically bring Western Sahara into the Arab Maghreb Union. It is widely hoped a settlement can be reached by the end of the year, since failure to achieve a resolution to the issue by 1992 would likely force a re-opening of the whole agreement and require negotiations between the contending parties to start all over again. □

– RYCHARD BRÛLÉ

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