

Concluding Remarks in Fourth Committee by Petitioners for Western Sahara Reflect Long-Time Divide over Disputed Territory

The Fourth Committee (Special Political and Decolonization) today heard the last of more than 200 petitioners who had registered to speak during this session on the situations in the 17 Non-Self-Governing Territories.

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With the situation in Western Sahara in focus, the statements highlighted the role of the United Nations in the resolution of this long-standing question. Among the petitioners who called for an urgent implementation of

relevant UN resolutions to facilitate a self-determination referendum was Joana Maria Gomila Lluch of Parlament de les Illes Balears — Grupo Interpalameario. She said that the Sahrawi people cannot wait for another 50 years to become free.

“There can be no further delay in the organization of the referendum,” she stressed, highlighting their long-standing fight for freedom, having faced Spanish colonialism, followed by Moroccan and Mauritanian occupations. After years of fighting, the Sahrawi people remain committed to organizing a referendum under UN resolutions, which will put an end to the last colony in Africa, she emphasized, calling for a change in Spain’s policies towards the Sahrawi cause.

The best solution to the conflict is the organization of a referendum for self-determination, said Llorenç Galmés Verger, introducing himself as the President of the Council of Mallorca. Urging the international community to uphold UN resolutions to address the conflict, he highlighted Mallorca’s solidarity with the Sahrawi cause, facilitated through charitable associations and humanitarian projects. He voiced support for the Sahrawi people, whom he said have been living under the occupation in subhuman conditions for 50 years. Spain, he noted, has “a historic debt” to the Sahrawi people.

Echoing this sentiment, Marta Carrio I Palou of the Parlament de les Illes Balears emphasized that the

Sahrawi people's struggle for self-determination is legitimate and honourable. Calling for an immediate change of Spain's international policies, she stressed the need to put an end to a "shameful" alliance with Morocco, a country which "invades, mutilates and tortures" people. She also urged international pressure to achieve peace and a referendum for Sahrawi self-determination.

"How is it possible that in the middle of the twenty-first century that an entire people are still languishing in refugee camps, deprived of their basic necessities?" asked Omar Lamine of Intergrupo Parlament Illes Balears. Speaking as a member of a population that has been displaced for more than 50 years, he highlighted the plight of the Sahrawi boys and girls, who were born and grow up in the middle of a desert instead of a home. Describing the conflict as "silenced and denied", he said that the Sahrawi children grow up knowing that "the world has let them down" and that their dreams and future have been held captive by "an unfair occupation by Morocco". "The suffering of boys and girls is an open wound on the conscience of humanity," he said, stressing that real justice will only be achieved when the Sahrawi people are able to return to their homeland.

Urging the Committee "to do whatever it can" to facilitate the Sahrawi people's rights, Mark Drury of the International Academic Observatory on Western Sahara, shared his experience of doing ethnographic field work in Laayoune. He described how the Moroccan security

forces closely monitored and suppressed any signs of support for Sahrawi self-determination. Recalling his interactions with Sahrawi human rights activists, who “were constrained by conditions of pervasive surveillance”, he detailed the “litany of dangers” and “brutality” that activists have faced, including in Moroccan prisons. “You do not need an anthropologist to recognize that these are the quintessential conditions of colonialism,” he said.

In the same vein, Mouhidine Souvi, describing the Moroccan Government’s actions in Western Sahara as “nothing short of colonialism”, pointed out systematic violence and oppression against the Sahrawi people in an effort to erase their identity. The occupation has been emboldened by Morocco’s international supporters, including France which has recently endorsed Morocco’s “so-called” autonomy plan. Turning to the European Court of Justice’s decision requiring Western Sahara to be recognized as the origin of its products, he said it was the first step toward Sahrawi self-determination.

However, Khadija Ezaoui said those who are claiming the European Court of Justice’s ruling as a grand victory should remember that “this verdict is a non-event that has nothing to do with Morocco,” she said. Pointing to judgements issued in other countries — such as the High Court of New Zealand — she said they have all rejected similar claims by the Frente POLISARIO and its sponsors and thus confirmed the legitimacy of the trade

agreements. She also highlighted Morocco's ambitious development programme in its southern provinces, adding that it is aimed at creating a robust economic base that positions the region as a key player in Africa's future. "These provinces are rapidly becoming a hub for clean energy."

Along similar lines, Sidi Hassan Belkadi praised Morocco's efforts to preserve cultural heritage. "The celebration of local identity and the cultivation of pride" is not just part of the national development agenda, but it reflects that country's deep commitment to safeguarding local cultural rights. He drew attention to a regional television network which actively promotes the local dialect and Sahrawi traditions. Laayoune is also home to the largest public library in Africa, he said.

Among those speakers who posited that the only authority that can resolve this long-standing question is the UN Security Council was journalist Sifiso Mahlangu, who pointed out that the Council has continually highlighted the importance of a political settlement and has described Morocco's proposal for autonomy as serious and trustworthy. Further, the International Court of Justice recognized the historical ties between Western Sahara and Morocco in 1975, thus giving that country a legal basis to make its claim. For centuries, the Western Sahara region has been an essential component of Morocco's cultural and traditional fabric. The historical archives clearly show that the Sahrawi tribes pledged their

allegiance to Moroccan sultans for centuries, he said, adding that "this allegiance is more than just a vestige of the past; it represents a shared identity."

Other speakers called on the United Nations to ensure accountability in the Tindouf camps. Ignacio Ortiz Palacio of Forum Canario Saharaui noted that various international organizations have called for monitoring of Frente POLISARIO. For close to half a century, that organization has been stealing the possibility of lasting peace in North Africa. It is essential to counter the corruption and misappropriation that is enabling its leaders to get rich. The inhabitants in the camps are "simply pieces on the chessboard, locked up in an inhospitable desert," he said, adding that they have no access to any legal or judicial redressal.

"I grew up in the Tindouf camps," El Fadel Braika said, adding that since the age of 14, he was an armed recruit in the Frente POLISARIO. Noting that many children from his generation were "indoctrinated against an enemy that was created in our minds," he said that the camps were an arena for the worst kind of exploitations. During the 1988 revolt, the organization, with help from the host country and its police, "tortured and killed many of us in secret prisons within our own camps to terrorize us and to bring us to our knees," he added.

Amal Jbour highlighted the oppression that women are subject to in the Tindouf camps, adding that the host

country has enabled the Frente POLISARIO's violations of the rights of women and children without any accountability. The Moroccan autonomy initiative is an opportunity to bring an end to the suffering of women and children in Tindouf, she said, adding that it is a "glimmer of hope" and "a political solution to an artificial conflict". Calling upon the international community to coordinate efforts to bring an end to the conflict, she said that the host country must engage in finding a political solution.

Morocco's "hostile neighbour", said Zine El Aabidine El Ouali of African Forum for Research and Studies in Human Rights, wants to hold the entire region hostage to serve its own hegemonic interests. However, it has "neither the money nor the resources nor the necessary intelligence to achieve this," leading to a state of paralysis. Describing the Frente POLISARIO as a puppet manipulated by host States, including, in the past, Libya, he said a solution should be found to this conflict that is causing volatility in the Arab Maghreb.