

Liberation Delayed: the Independence of Western Sahara from Morocco

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With the Saharawi People Decades since Spanish withdrawal Western Sahara remains under Moroccan control

A long-delayed referendum on the independence of Saharawi from Morocco was the subject of an international conference in Abuja, Nigeria during late October.

The conference was sponsored by the Nigerian Labor Congress and other mass organizations. This gathering was held under the title of the “African Conference in Solidarity With the Saharawi People.” The three day gathering during October 28-30 convened to discuss the theme “Liberation of Western Sahara: Ending Colonialism in Africa.” (Sahara Press Service, October 31)

The former Spanish colony has been dominated by Morocco for decades but is recognized by the African Union (AU). Morocco withdrew its membership from the AU in anger over continued insistence that this area be allowed to move towards political independence. The Western Sahara is considered by many as the last remaining colony on the continent.

Hundreds of thousands of Saharawi people are stranded both inside and outside their national territory. This conference was extremely significant in that it was sponsored by the largest trade union federation in Nigeria, which is the most populous state on the African continent. In addition to sponsorship by the NLC, labor organizations from 28 other countries were involved in the gathering.

Statements of solidarity and support were delivered by delegates from Algeria, South Africa and other continental states. The event demonstrated the ongoing concern related to the plight of the Saharawi people and the continuing exploitation of mineral resources by foreign interests. The conference demanded that Morocco, a close ally of the United States and France, withdraw its military and security forces from the Western Sahara and move towards holding a referendum on the future of the territory.

Going even further, the conference hosts called upon the international community to take punitive actions against the monarchy in Rabat if it did not comply with the resolutions of the AU and the United Nations mandating self-determination and independence for the Saharawi people. Inside the Western Sahara there are large deposits of phosphates and natural gas.

Additional prospects exist for the exploration and extraction of oil. Successive U.S. administrations have supported Morocco in the conflict which was ceded the territory after the withdrawal of Spain in 1975. Although it claims that its position is neutral at present, Washington has continued to support Morocco militarily in the North Africa region.

Actions Urged Against Morocco and France NLC President Abdulwahed Omar told the delegates in Abuja that Africa and the world should condemn Morocco for ignoring the just demands of the Saharawi people and the international bodies, including the UN and the AU stressing that the colonized population should take control of its own affairs. Omar said that "On our part, we are calling on the UN, AU, EU and other friends of liberation to exert the necessary pressure on Morocco to let the Saharawi people go. The right to self-determination is an inalienable right and is non-negotiable." (Nigerian Observer, October 31) He continued emphasizing that "No nation, no matter how powerful, has a right to trample on a weaker one. Similarly, resolutions are nothing if they are not given effect to and respected. For too long, the world has looked the other way while the Saharawi tragedy unfolds.

Yet, Africa cannot be said to be free if a part of it is in chains. No nation is free if others are in bondage." Other speakers included Lagos-based lawyer Femi Falana who called for legal actions against Morocco and France within the European Human Rights Court. He said that France should be held accountable for its support of the occupation of the Western Sahara called the Saharawi Democratic Arab Republic by the Polisario Front, the liberation movement that has been fighting for four decades for independence. Falana said that "After this meeting,

I have already gotten in touch with lawyers in Europe to charge Spain, France and other collaborators with Morocco in the European Human Rights Court. This is with a view to checking the illegality of the exploitation of the resources of Western Sahara." (Nigerian Observer, October 31) Strong Resolutions Passed The conference passed resolutions aimed at expanding the international support for the Saharawi struggle. These measures were championed by the liberation movement as encouragement to continue their movement towards national liberation. The resolutions emerging from the meeting called for the following:

- To create the African Solidarity Movement for the Independence of Western Sahara (ASOMWS) to strengthen the resistance towards the decolonization of Western Sahara.
- Calls upon the ASOMWS to collaborate with solidarity movements in Europe, Latin America, North and South America and Australia to promote the struggle of Saharawi people for independence.
- The establishment of a Task Force of ASOMWS, which includes Nigeria as chair, Benin Republic representing West Africa, Algeria representing North Africa, Cameroun representing Central Africa, Kenya representing East Africa, and South Africa representing Southern Africa. This Task Force is responsible for the coordination of all activities of ASOMWS between the two conferences and shall have a secretariat located in Nigeria until the next edition of the conference.
- Ask the grass-roots organizations (trade unions and civil society organizations) to boycott the companies involved in the looting of Saharawi natural resources.
- Devote a special day of solidarity with the Saharawi people, and called on the ASOMWS's Task Force to make it a day for the Saharawis, annually commemorated by African civil society organizations.
- Launch a constant program of work in order to remove the Moroccan wall of shame

that separates Western Sahara and its families, and places the lives of Saharawi civilians at a constant danger.

-Recommend to organize an African program of humanitarian assistance for the benefit of the Saharawis refugee camps.

-Calls on the Academic Unions of Nigeria to organize academic seminars on Western Sahara in the coming years.

-And that the Republic of Benin will host the 2nd edition of the African Conference of Solidarity with the people of Western Sahara next year. (Sahara Press Service, October 31)

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