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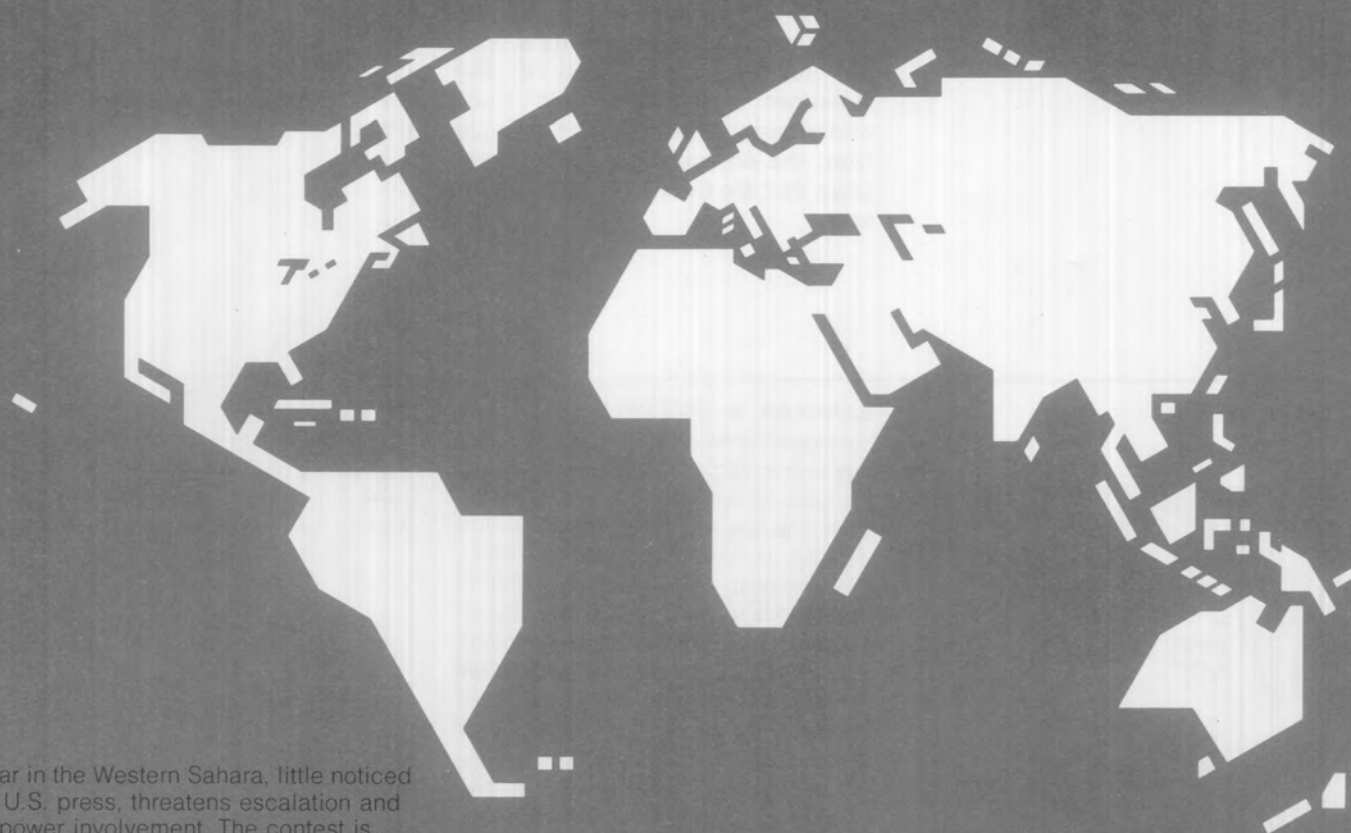
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Reports

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE WESTERN SAHARA
Part I: Prelude

by Barbara Harrell-Bond



The war in the Western Sahara, little noticed in the U.S. press, threatens escalation and Superpower involvement. The contest is between the Sahrāwī (Polisario Front) and Morocco, which claims the region as part of its historic empire.

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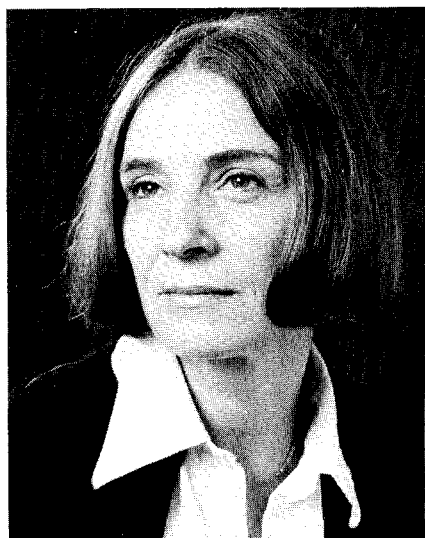
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Part I: Prelude

Few Americans took much notice of the Reagan administration's first policy statement on the Western Saharan conflict on March 26, 1981. While the Carter administration had made some attempt to link U.S. arms sales to Morocco with progress toward a negotiated settlement of the territorial dispute, the new administration declared that the Sahara issue would be dropped. As Morris Draper, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs put it, "Arms sales to Morocco would in the future be based on the same criteria as for other friends."¹

Spain's refusal to grant self-determination to the people of this ex-colony and its invasion by Morocco and Mauritania after a secret agreement with Spain in 1975 have not received major coverage in U.S. newspapers. Not many Americans are even aware that for six years the U.S., while officially neutral, has continued (along with France, South Africa, and the Soviet Union) to supply arms and give support for Morocco's claim which, as U.S. Representative Stephen Solarz reminded the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in 1979, "the overwhelming majority of countries in the world oppose as a contradiction of the very principle of national self-determination."

The Western Sahara? "If the name of this Colorado-sized territory in northwest Africa evokes any image at all," Solarz noted, "it is likely to be one of nomads along with their tents and camels against a background of blinding sunlight and endless sand engaged in the ancient and timeless confrontation between men and nature." Few would recognize that

the conflict involves major commercial and strategic interests with behind-the-scenes "superpower" involvement.

Yet the war has resulted in the creation of a large refugee population, exiles from the Western Sahara. It is not known just how many *Saḥrāwī** there are, either in the country or as refugees. In 1974 the Spanish census counted fewer than 80,000 but these nomadic people were generally unwilling to cooperate and many remained uncounted. Some contemporary estimates contend that only about 25,000 *Saḥrāwī* remain in the coastal cities occupied by the Moroccan army and that more *Saḥrāwī* live outside the Western Sahara than within the territory. The province of Tan-Tan in Morocco is almost entirely *Saḥrāwī* and the 1978 census there counted 81,900. In 1977 Mauritania gave the figure of 47,000 for the two regions bordering the Western Sahara and most of this population is thought to be *Saḥrāwī*. There are also *Saḥrāwī* among the population of the Algerian *wilaya* of Bechar.

It is not known when the term *Saḥrāwī* was first applied to the people of the Western Sahara, but Spanish colonial documents have consistently used this term to refer to the "tribes" that populated the region. Spain always emphasized the distinctiveness of these people from the populations of Morocco and, further south, Mauritania as part of their efforts to refute the claims

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

these countries made over the Spanish colony.

After visiting refugee camps just inside the Algerian border—where 150,000 civilians, mainly women and children live in exile—Andrew Young asked, "How do we get on the opposite side of people who seem to practice so well what we preach?"²

My thoughts echoed his sense of shame as I watched women making spoons and knives and beating cooking pans out of salvaged war materials—their "made in U.S.A." marks still clearly visible. Inside the tents, sitting on pillows on the floor, huddled against the bitter winter cold in blankets that are in scarce supply, I found it painful to accept, over and over again, their generous hospitality. The *Saḥrāwī* refugees rarely have meat to eat themselves, but a guest is always given meat with his *cous cous*. While being shown around their hospitals and schools, I was embarrassed to be asked by each woman I met, "What do the women in your country know about us, the *Saḥrāwī* women?" Our parochialism contrasted starkly with their compelling interest in all aspects of Western society—from the roles of men and women, to working conditions, management of education and health, and politics.

* * * * *

This three-part *Report* is not merely an account of an unknown war in the northwest corner of the African continent which risks escalation and internationalization. It is also about a unique social experiment being conducted by a nation in exile, refugees struggling not only to exist but also to create the preconditions for a model African society—self-reliant,

egalitarian, and unified. The *Reports* are based on observations during an extended visit to all the refugee camps inside Algeria and a number of days spent traveling in a Land Rover over hundreds of kilometers of desert from which the Armée de Libération Populaire Sahraoui (ALPS) has ousted Moroccan occupying forces.³ It included a 200 kilometer trip into southern Morocco

which the ALPS invaded to force the Moroccans to concentrate on protecting their own borders. Today, the Moroccan armies are confined to the triangle of territory encompassing El Aaiun, Bu Craa, and Smara and to the southern coastal city of Dakhla, the area they invaded after Mauritania in a 1979 treaty withdrew its claim to any part of the Western Sahara.

Early History of the Western Sahara

Among the arguments in favor of Morocco's claims to the Western Sahara have been assertions that the local population is "too small" to form a nation or that there is no Sahrawi population distinct from other nomads who populate the Sahara desert.

While much work remains to be done on the prehistory of the region, there is evidence of hominid habitation of the Western Sahara dating back at least one and a half million years.⁴ The population has included both black and white people since the Neolithic period.

Skeletal evidence and cave paintings indicate that these early desert people included a strong Negroid element resulting from a migration northward and westward into the Sahara which began about 5500 B.C. These people had settled the area long before the arrival of the Berbers.

Our group 180 kilometers inside Southern Morocco.

Traveling through the liberated zones of the Western Sahara.



There is also support for contemporary Saharan beliefs that "white" pre-Arab Sanjaha Berbers took control of the desert by pushing out a black people, the "Bafot," thought to have created the oases. Phoenician merchants traded with coastal Berbers from about 1200 B.C. and Phoenicians controlled the gold trade coming from Senegal along the Atlantic coast. From about 200 B.C. a local alphabet was in use which spread over the Mediterranean-Fezzan-Niger triangle as the written form of the Berber language.

Following the destruction of Carthage in 148 B.C., Rome colonized the whole of the North African coast. The apparent fragmentation of the desert nomads may have suggested easy conquest, but the Romans soon learned to avoid the Sahara Berbers, and their attempts to administer the area met with the failure that was to characterize subsequent European efforts to control these people over the centuries. In 29 B.C., the Romans divided the indigenous people into protectorates: the one in the west half way down the Moroccan coast was called Mauretania Tingitana. In 43 A.D., Rome made this protectorate into a "province," as did Spain in 1958.

By the fifth century control of the Tangier area had passed to the Vandals; during the following two centuries the area was taken over by the Byzantines. Neither group, however, influenced the western desert population, the Sanjaha, who developed a way of life and a social organization which survives in the twentieth century. These people formed a confederation of four main desert "tribal" groups living between the Moroccan Sus, the west Mauritania Trarza (in Mali), and Timbuktu, speaking what is now called Berber. The "Tuareg" are the Sanjaha's closest descendants.

With the arrival of the first Arabs in 680 A.D., the Berbers assimilated Islam and it was they, not the Arabs, who carried the religion south into the desert along with their trade in cattle, horses, metalwork, copper, and cowries which they exchanged for ivory, gold, and kola nuts. By the tenth century the entire Maghreb-Sudan area was nominally Muslim. As John Mercer put it in a 1979 report, it was Islam that "brought an eleventh-century upwelling of

energy which led the Sanhaja [known by this time] as the Almoravids, to conquer from Ghana to N. Spain (incidentally allowing the Sahrawis to claim past sovereignty over Morocco)."

Internal dissent and the continuing influx of eastern Arabs into Morocco led to the eventual collapse of Almoravidan control, but Arabs reached into the western desert only in the fourteenth century when a group known as the Maqil gradually entered what is today the Western Sahara. Themselves nomads, the Magil got on with the Sanhaja, and the higher status accorded Arab Muslims facilitated their acceptance into the area.

Naturally, there was conflict with the Sanhaja over many issues; a practical matter was the right to use the wells, in the digging of which the Berbers were very active. The Sanhaja were merchants and shepherds, well enough off materially, pious and education-conscious—both boys and girls were taught—yet still very much divided within their confederation. The Arabs, poor and relatively backward, were fighters.

Political alliances, the appeal of Islam (a convert not only obtained the superior social status associated with the new order, but could take by force the possessions of the pagan), intermarriage between the Berbers and the Maqil Arabs, and the Berbers' adoption of Hassaniya (the language of the Maqil), led to their assimilation of "Arab blood and culture." This period marked the emergence of the present-day Sahrawi as a people having a separate identity from other desert Berbers.

Descriptions of the Sahrawi over the period from the fifteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries come from the chronicles of explorers and travelers and the records of manhunts and trading, mainly written by Europeans. According to contemporary accounts, this coastal population was composed of indigenous Sanhaja Berbers and Hassaniya Arabs (the Maqil). All were fervent Muslims, and feeling against "infidels" was strong.

European motives for landing on the coast of the Western Sahara included the hope of finding a pass

through the Atlas which would lead overland to "Guinea" (all the coast to what is today Liberia), the source of slaves, gold, and spices. There were numerous wrecks along this dangerous coast and shipwrecked sailors were often captured and held for ransom by the desert nomads. Some of those who lived through the long enforced journeys left accounts of their experiences and of their captors. One such sailor was Alexander Scott, whose four-year captivity provided plenty of opportunity for observation. Mercer paraphrases Scott's account:

The men wore the haik around them, a "blanket"; the chief and elders, each referred to as "Sidi," had turbans. The women, slender, fair-skinned when young, very wrinkled with age, had their blankets belted at the waist and fixed at the shoulder with silver clasps; a piece of blue linen covered their heads but they did not use veils. Marriage was simple, the price of a bride—from ten years old—was ten camels. Divorce, he said, was at will. On death a person was washed and at once buried, bushes and stones being piled on the grave. Children were taught to write on smooth boards in black ink made of milk and charcoal, using pens of split cane or reed...

Attempts at Colonization

Their fighting ability and their relative economic independence—nomadic herdsmen had the advantage of being able simply to move in and out of an area when under pressure—prevented the Sahrawi people from ever being colonized in the way that sedentary African societies were. During the sixteenth century the Saadian dynasty of Morocco mounted four unsuccessful expeditions. These were followed over the next centuries by armies of the ancestors of the present monarch. At times, Europeans operating in the area appealed to the Sultan of Morocco for protection, but they were told that the region did not come under his jurisdiction; and, in fact the south of Morocco itself was known as *bilad as-siba* "the unsubmitted land." Morocco's Saharan ambitions were temporarily checked by European colonization in north-west Africa. The last 60 years of the nineteenth century were marked by increased competition between Spain, the Sultan of Morocco, and

Britain—in the person of Donald MacKenzie, a Scottish trader—to gain control of the Western Sahara.

MacKenzie had the greatest success and is remembered by historians for two schemes in particular. One plan was to irrigate the Sahara by building a canal that would also provide direct access from Southampton to Timbuktu. The other scheme was to establish a trading post, and in this he was successful.

Although the Sultan of Morocco made several military incursions into the area during the nineteenth century, one involving an army of 20,000 men of whom 6,000 died of thirst, all failed. Spain also increased its activity in the area and its formal colonial relationship with the Western Sahara dates from 1884 when, after an agreement with local chiefs, it built a settlement at Villa Cisneros (now Dakhla) and declared a protectorate over the area of Rio de Oro from Cape Bohador to Cape Blanc.

Spain was still confined to coastal settlements that required constant military protection from the indigenous people, but in 1885 its rights over parts of the Sahara were recognized at the Berlin Conference. According to the European powers who were partitioning Africa, the provisions for "legal colonization" included the requirement that a territory should be "without master"—that is, that no effective sovereignty should previously have been established or, if it had, that such sovereignty should not be strong enough to resist the imperial power. In the Western Sahara, neither of these conditions pertained.

Over the centuries, the people of the Western Sahara had evolved a system of government based on a traditional Council of Forty (Ait Rebain) formed by representatives of the various nomadic groups populating the area. This council met at least once a year to organize the use of pastures and water and to hear disputes between groups. It was from this council that the Spanish obtained permission to build their settlement at Dakhla. Spanish troops had ample experience of the military capabilities of the local people to resist Spain's expansion into the interior and such military strength was maintained until 1934. However, events in adjacent territories also influenced the evolution of the Western Sahara.⁵

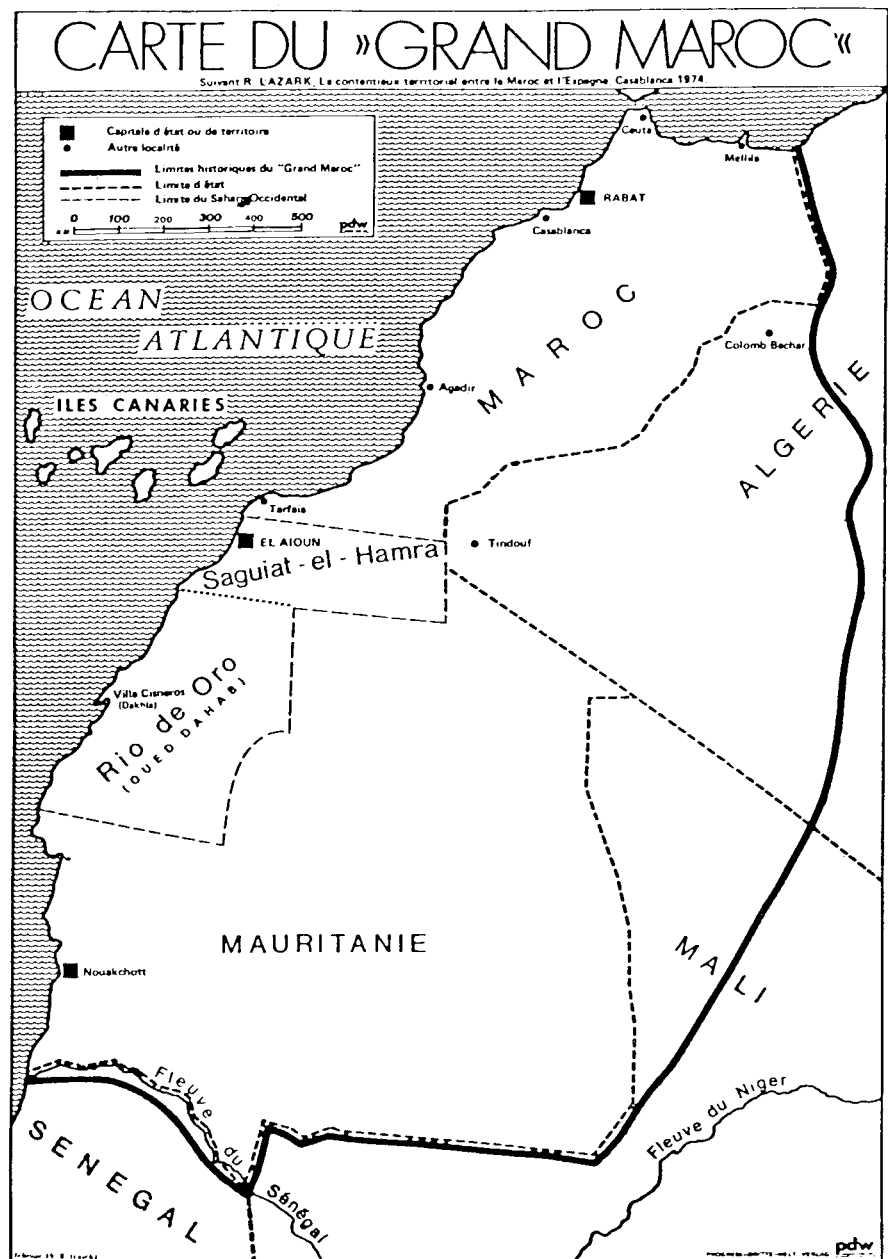
In 1886 France and Spain negotiated the question of their respective zones of influence in West Africa. The Treaty of Paris, a secret agreement signed on June 27, 1900, set the southern and eastern boundaries of Rio de Oro, and the Paris Convention of October 3, 1904 set the northern boundary of the Spanish Sahara which included Saguiet el Hamra and the zone of Tarfaya as far as Wadi Draa (further ratified in 1912 and 1920). This convention also limited Spain's control over certain settlements within the French sphere on the Moroccan Mediterranean coast. In 1904 the area now called

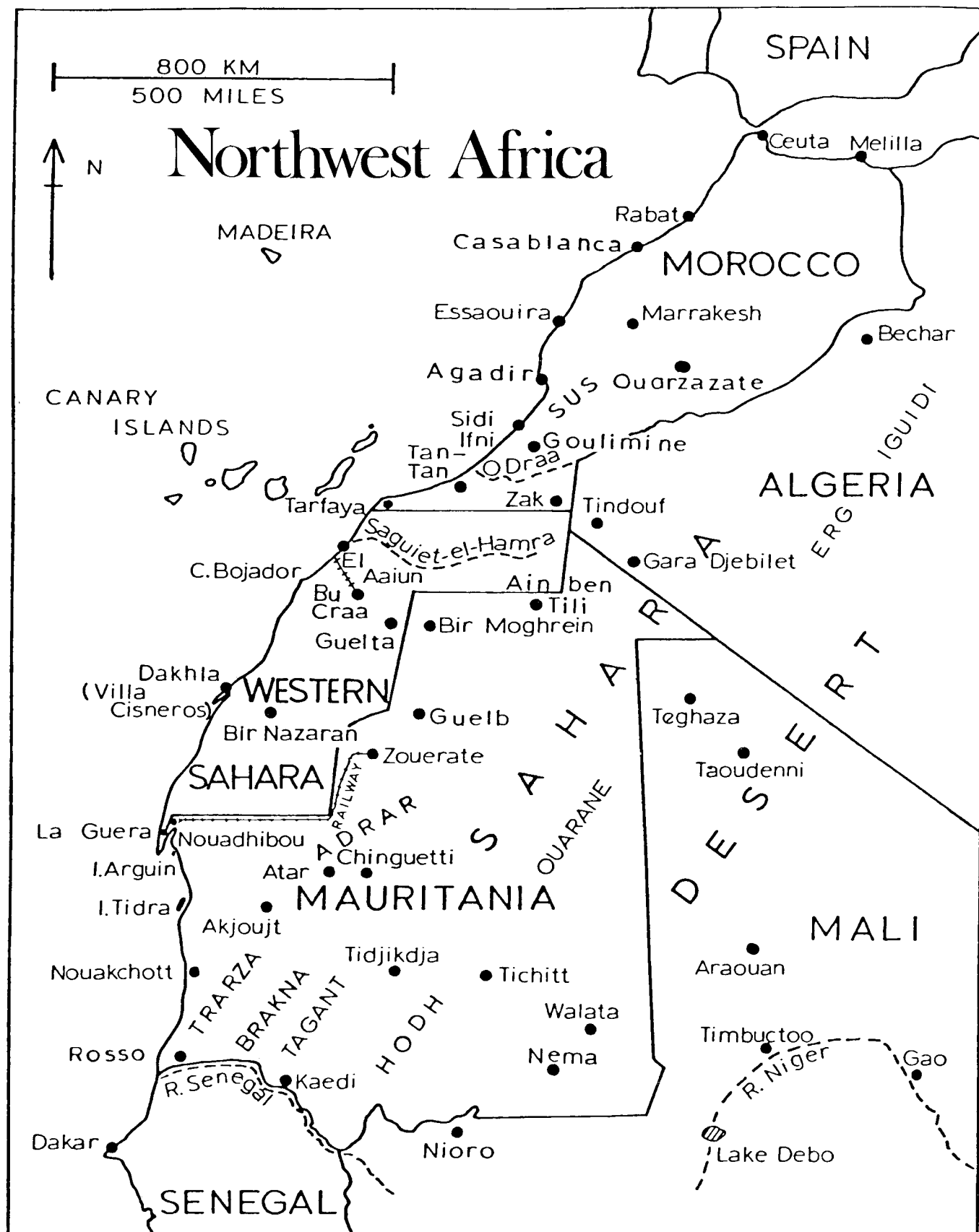
Western Sahara was declared a Spanish protectorate.

French military pressure from the south in Senegal and Spanish and French military activities inside Morocco led to various alliances to resist the invaders. Internal rivalry between indigenous groups, however, favored the Europeans whose tactics of "divide and rule" brought about defeat.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, the French invaded the interior of today's Mauritania and faced the armies of the famous desert leader Ma el Ainin, who in

King Hassan's View of Greater Morocco





1887 was armed and titled his "Caliph" in the desert by Sultan Hassan I. Reaction to the French advance caused many nomads to support Ma el Ainin's declaration of a *jiḥād* or holy war. He moved the base of his operations to the region of Saguiet-el-Hamra and there founded the fortified city of Smara, which became a religious and economic center. From this vantage point he sought aid from Morocco. But Ma el Ainin, because of inability to unite the nomads, as well as the inferiority of his arms, failed to halt the French invasion. In 1907 when Morocco was split between Abdelaziz, who collaborated with the French, and his brother Abdelhafid, the Pretender, Ma el Ainin visited the latter in Marrakesh to obtain more arms. By this time, he was certainly aware that France would soon attack from the northern side of the desert as well.

The forces of Ma el Ainin were betrayed by Abdelhafid who aligned himself with the French and promised he would eliminate "the desert *jiḥād*-preacher." Even the death of Ma el Ainin in 1910 did not end the resistance, however, his role being taken up by his son, and it was another 25 years before the nomads were "pacified." While the French bore the burden of subduing the nomads, the Spanish cautiously annexed an additional small portion of the coast during 1916-1920.

France and Spain were not the only European powers competing in this northwest region of Africa. Both Britain and France coveted Morocco and France was forced to concede her rights and interest in Egypt to gain British acceptance of French colonial rights in that country. France also recognized Italy's claims to Libya in exchange for Italian support in the struggle to control Morocco. Germany, first attempting to destabilize French control in Morocco by supporting anti-French resistance, was bought off when France handed over territories in the Congo. In 1912, Morocco came under French control. (Spain and France continued to be dissatisfied with the division of that country and Spain's occupation of the northern coastal towns remained a source of controversy long after Morocco had gained independence in 1956.)

By this time the Western Sahara had become a refuge for rebels from both

Mauritania and Morocco, and a center for armed resistance. In 1912, for example, one Moroccan resistance group attacked the French from inside the borders of the Western Sahara and managed to get as far as Marrakesh. The French retaliated by attacking Smara and succeeded in totally destroying this historic center of learning along with its famous library of some 5,000 manuscripts. The destruction of Smara became a symbol—and its desecration inspired further attacks against the French.

Finally in 1934 a joint French-Spanish operation obliterated many pockets of resistance in the Spanish Sahara and permitted Spain to extend its effective control beyond its three coastal settlements into the interior. Maintaining control was difficult, however; Sahrawian resistance movements regrouped and sporadic fighting continued until, in 1957, Spain was confronted with general insurrection and Spanish troops retreated to the coastal settlements.

Post World War II Colonialism in the Western Sahara

By the early 1950s, the "winds of change" had begun blowing across the African continent. While other European powers were grudgingly conceding to the demands of the nationalist movements within their colonies, Spain and Portugal were busy solidifying and formalizing their colonial governments and increasing their military presence to resist pressure to decolonize both from within their colonies and from the international community. Spain, like Portugal, had not benefited commercially from its colonial possessions as had other European powers and, unlike Britain and France, had not been able to afford to set up the social, legal, educational, and economic infrastructure that would allow them to withdraw and yet retain relationships of economic benefit to themselves. So Spain (like Portugal) responded to the membership requirements of the United Nations by declaring in 1958 that the Spanish Sahara was not a colony but a province of Spain.⁶

The problem was that Spain had never gained effective control of the interior and after 1956 its fragile presence there was further threatened by Sahrawi who had joined forces with a segment of the

Moroccan Liberation Army to lay claim to the entire region. Morocco had won its independence from France in 1956 and at that time Si Allal el Fassi, the leader of the Independence Party (ISTIQUAL) had put forward Morocco's claims to all the territory held by Spain. (This party previously claimed "greater Morocco"—the whole of Mauritania, the Western Sahara, and part of both Algeria and Mali.)

In 1957, the Moroccan Liberation Army (including Sahrawis) crossed the borders and attacked Spanish troops as far south as the Mauritanian border. The threat thus posed to the interests of both the Spanish and the French (still in control of Mauritania) led these two European powers to launch the "Ecouvillon" operation. After more than six months of bitter fighting the Moroccan Liberation Army was defeated. Even then, Spain needed an armed force to maintain its control of the Western Sahara: in addition to 55,000 Spanish soldiers and 4,500 police, there were 10-15,000 Spanish-led Sahrawi troops. "These troops were backed up by paratroopers and other special units in Iberian Spain and a special reserve of 35,000 soldiers stationed in the Canary Islands."⁷

Spain's huge occupying army was needed not only to combat opposition from within the new province but also to stave off the threat of a further Moroccan invasion. The latter threat increased as a result of subsequent power struggles within Morocco, and France reacted by accelerating its program for Mauritanian independence. In the same year (1958) that Mauritania became a French Commonwealth country, Mohammed V claimed the Saharan territories for Morocco. On April 1, 1958, Spain ceded the area of Tekna to Morocco and in 1959 the area of Ifni in exchange for Moroccan concessions vis-à-vis Ceuta and Melilla.

Mauritania was finally given full political independence in 1960, but Morocco refused to recognize the new state for nearly a decade, maintaining that the area belonged to her.

The Program to Settle the Nomads

More than 20 years ago, the General Assembly of the United Nations passed Resolution 1514 (XV)

concerning the granting of independence to all colonial countries and peoples. In 1964 a special UN committee called on Spain to grant independence to the Western Sahara; this was approved in General Assembly Resolution 2229 (XXI) in 1965. In 1966 the General Assembly invited Spain to hold a referendum under United Nations auspices "in conformity with the aspirations of the indigenous people of Spanish Sahara and in consultation with the governments of Mauritania and Morocco and any other interested party." The resolution also requested the Secretary General of the United Nations to "appoint immediately a special mission to be sent to Spanish Sahara for the purpose of recommending practical steps for the full implementation of the relevant resolutions of the General Assembly and in particular for determining the extent of United Nations' participation in the preparation and supervision of the referendum."

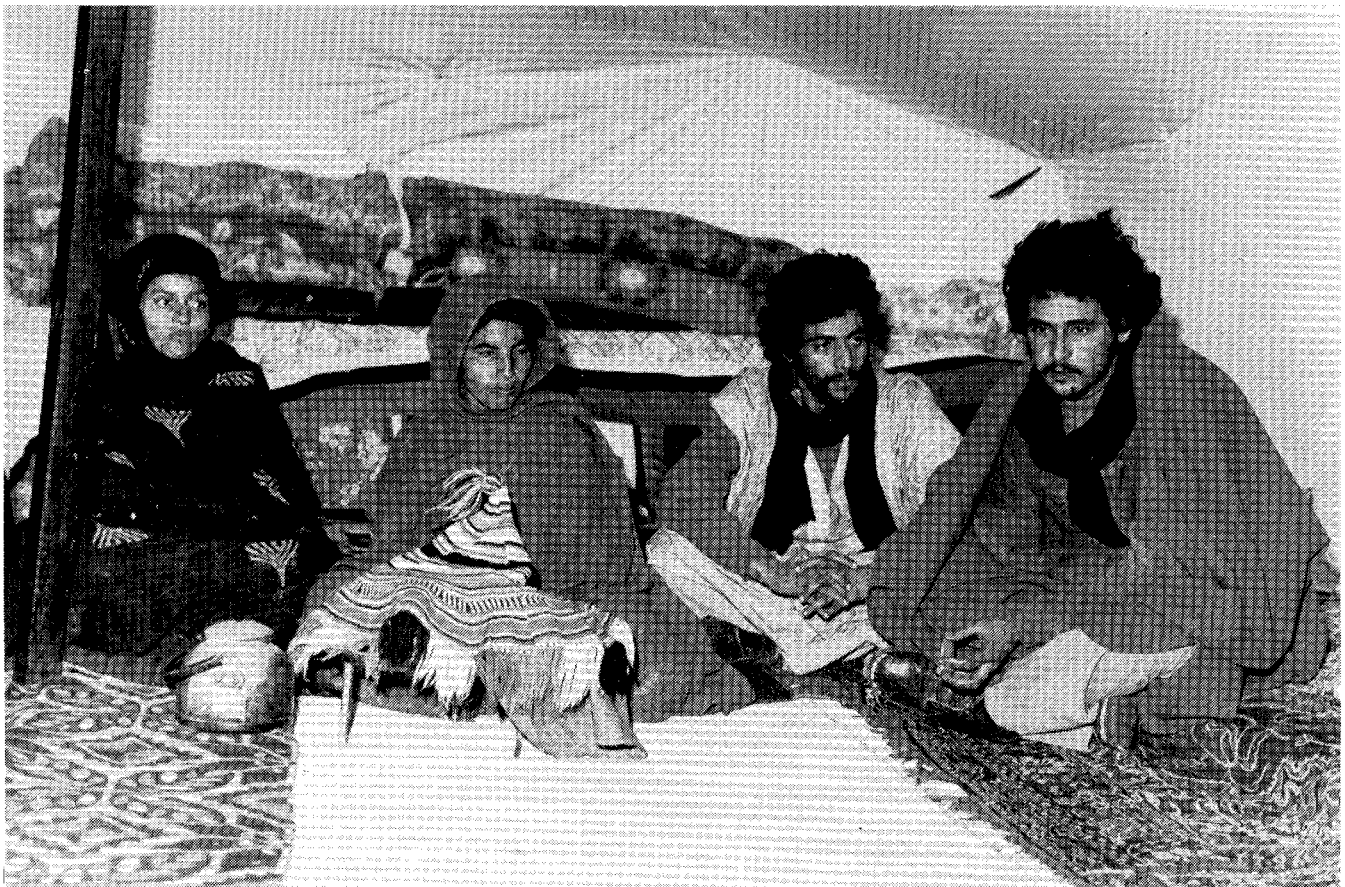
Spain's response to these pressures was to delay. On the one hand, *Inside a refugee tent near Tindouf.*

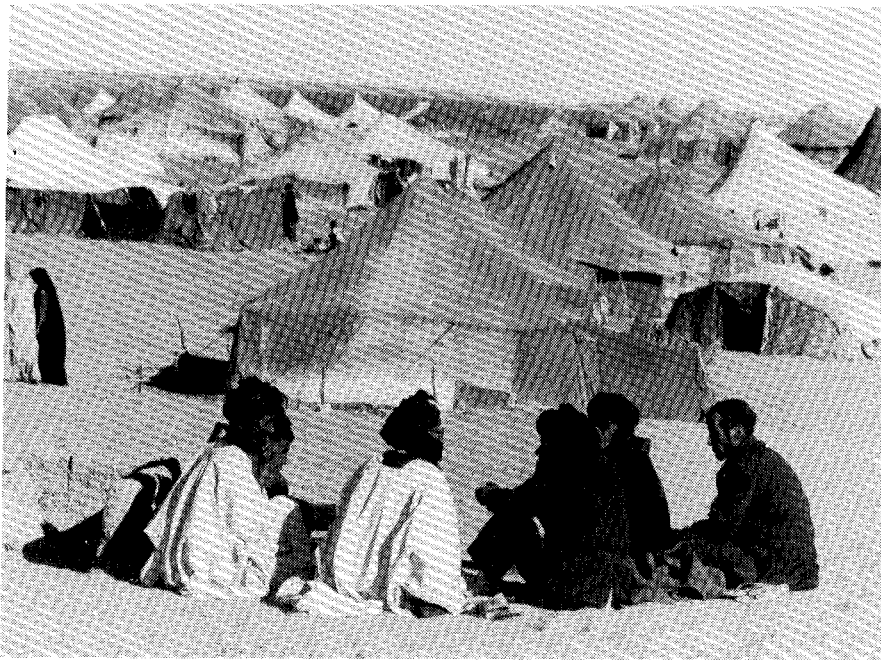
Franco assured the UN in 1966 that Spain would begin to prepare the Sahrawi for independence; the next year he announced the establishment of a local assembly, the Djemaa, made up of Saharan notables who had demonstrated a clear loyalty to Spain. The new Djemaa was to "advise" the Spanish government. Of its 104 members, 24 were appointed by the Spanish, 40 were appointed as representatives of the most numerous tribes, and 40 were elected by the heads of families of different tribes. Simultaneously, a program of forced urbanization, begun in 1958, was pursued with even greater vigor. To force the Sahrawis to move into the towns, the Spanish killed their cattle, poisoned their wells, and closed borders. New buildings were erected in the towns and communications were extended throughout the country.

Primary level education had been introduced in 1949, but by 1958 there were still only 23 Sahrawi students. In 1969 the first secondary school was opened with a lecture on "The Legal and Historical Rights of

the Spanish Presence on the West Coast of Africa." By 1972, 2,600 Sahrawi students were being educated, and in this same year, a total of 61 scholarships were made available to Sahrawi candidates to study in Spain.⁸ By then there were 50 Sahrawi and 160 Spanish teachers working in the Western Sahara. Summer trips to Madrid were organized for "deserving students" who were encouraged to report on their visits during class time when they returned to school.

Efforts to inculcate a sense of unity with Spain were not limited to the children. In 1966, no fewer than 16 African Orders of the Yoke and Arrows were awarded to compliant Sahrawis. Other handouts ranged from blankets to jet flights to Mecca. A sense of nationalism was further encouraged by playing on the Sahrawis' fear of neighboring states, and emphasizing the threat of communism. (In 1963, for example, Spain published a map of Africa which asserted the communist domination of Morocco to be 70-90 percent of the population, that of Mauritania





Above, a Sahrawi camp. Few camps have wells like the one below; and water is very scarce.

development of new resistance movements.

Efforts were made to break down the communal system of the indigenous culture by employing individuals in wage labor, encouraging private enterprise, and promoting distrust among the people. Sahrawi described this process in an interview with me:

We must not forget that Spain also used the tactics of division to create differences between tribes, to divide the tribes into different branches, the branches into families, and the families into individuals. For example, the government would call the chief and say to him, "You are the only one faithful to Franco. You are the only one who works well in the interests of Spain. But the others came to tell us that you are not working for us, that you do not want to work for us. Why are your people talking against you?" If you had visited a camp in the Sahara before colonialism, you would not have been able to tell the rich from the poor, for the simple reason that we shared what we had and we lent to the poor. Our only wealth was our camels. A rich family might lend some of its camels to a poor family for a lifetime. The only obligation was that the offspring of the camels would always belong to the owner. Spain tried to make a Sahrawi into a man who works only for himself, who does not help others. But at the same time, Spain did not give work to everyone. If they had given work to everyone, everything would have been fine. But they gave jobs only to the sons of the chiefs and they did not even let them help others.¹⁰



and Mali 60-80 percent, and that of Algeria 50-70 percent.⁹)

With their cattle, the base of their economic independence decimated, most Sahrawi people who remained in the territory (unknown numbers migrated to the neighboring states of Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, and Algeria) settled in the coastal cities and the towns in the interior. The Sahrawi refer to the 1960s as the

time of the "politics of the Land Rover," the latter having replaced the camels that were their traditional means of transport. While nomads could travel over the desert much more rapidly, they had to depend on the Spanish authorities for gasoline, spare tires, and replacement parts. Moreover, Spanish patrols were able to maintain a much closer control over their movements. Spain's main concern was to prevent the

Legislation after 1958 formalized relations between the province and Spain. Spanish citizenship was granted to the Sahrawi and the Western Sahara had limited representation in the Madrid government. Universal suffrage was not introduced but then neither did it exist in Spain itself under the Franco regime. Most elected positions were held by Spanish residents, those Sahrawi holding posts were those who could be described as faithful to the Spanish.

While making these efforts to convince the Sahrawi that it was in their best interest to remain part of Spain, the colonizers were busy ascertaining what resources could be exploited in the area.

"To the Victor Belong the Spoils"

Before 1972, Spain's commerce in the region was largely limited to fishing the coastal waters and to local markets among the settled population. Geologic exploration after 1940, however, indicated that the potential mineral and other wealth of the Western Sahara could turn that sparsely populated country into another Kuwait.

The coastal waters of Morocco and the Western Sahara constitute one of the richest sources of fish in the world. Annual production has been estimated to be ten tons to the square kilometer over an area of 150,000 square kilometers. The coastline of the Western Sahara is about 1,000 kilometers long and since their earliest contact with the area, Spanish fishermen have been exploiting this resource. Fishing began on a commercial basis after World War I, with a 1,500,000 ton annual harvest by Spanish, French, Greek, and Portuguese fishermen.¹¹ Recently more sophisticated fleets of trawlers from Poland, the U.S.S.R., South Korea, Italy, Japan, South Africa, and the United States have been "poaching" in the area.¹²

In 1960 Spain invited foreign oil companies to prospect the area. As Mercer reports, their appearance, "with the threat of their exploitation of the Saharais' unlocated and therefore limitless wealth, brought on the next of the always-imminent crises," and on March 11, 1960, when a Union Oil team was at work two kilometers from the northern border, Moroccan soldiers crossed the border and "captured the prospectors, five Spanish, three Americans, two Canadians and a Frenchman, taking them and their lorries and gear to Tan-Tan." A convenient opportunity to retaliate was provided three days later when another team of Italian prospectors (in the pay of Morocco) "had lost the route in the bad weather, and, short of fuel, decided to cross the border to seek help at the Union Oil Camp." Spain took the Italians under their "protection" in full view of the Moroccan Liberation Army sta-

tioned along the border, and delivered them to their representative in the Canary Islands. The prospectors were back in Morocco by March 16, and on March 21 Morocco turned its hostages over to their ambassadors in Rabat, stating that it would henceforth "rely on negotiations over the desert."¹³

Despite these minor interferences, prospecting for oil continued and as early as 1968, Esso described its finds as "the most important of the year in Africa,"¹⁴ potentially on the same scale as the Gulf area. The extent of these reserves has not been established, however, nor has there been any exploitation. In 1977, Morocco granted concessions in the Western Sahara to a number of oil companies, but they have been reluctant given the instability of the region to commit the necessary money for exploitation.

Spanish geological surveys also indicated the presence of titanium, vanadium, zinc, uranium, copper, gold, natural gas, magnetite, and iron. The reserves of iron ore, estimated at 70 million tons, are a continuation of deposits in Zouerate, Mauritania, which were mined originally by the French. Iron reserves of an assay value of 65 percent have been found in the deposits at Agrache in the Oed el Dahab of the Western Sahara. The possibility of acquiring access to these reserves was a strong motive behind Mauritania's claims to the territory, since its own iron resources will, at the present rate of extraction, be exhausted within the next ten years. Among the foreign interests which supported Morocco and Mauritania and offered to finance development of this mine in the Western Sahara was Saudi Arabia, which granted \$50 million. (Had Mauritania's claims to the region been successful, it could have counted on iron ore supplies for another century.)

Although prior to the 1960s the majority of the Sahrawi people were nomadic and relied on cattle-rearing and trading for their livelihood, some sedentary agriculture has always been practiced in the Western Sahara and many of the coastal people were fishermen. Underground rivers lace the desert and one of the largest underground lakes in the world is located there.

Its potential for irrigated agriculture has never been charted although many feel that, once irrigated, the area could produce enough food for its own population and that of Morocco and Mauritania as well.

Phosphate

Aside from fishing, the most extensive exploitation of the mineral endowment has been that of phosphate. The most important discovery was made in 1947 when deposits around Fos Bu Craa were found to yield 80 percent phosphate. The Bu Craa open-cast mine is still the main quarry, but reserves scattered throughout the five zones of the Saguiet el Hamra are reported to contain ten billion tons.¹⁵

The United States, the Soviet Union, Morocco, and the Western Sahara possess the largest resources of phosphate in the world and at present control 80 percent of world production. If Morocco were to acquire the Western Sahara reserves, it alone would control an estimated 71 percent of the known world reserves.

In 1967, a consortium for the mining of phosphate in the Western Sahara was formed under the International Chemicals Corporation of America. Financial difficulties led to the transfer of control to Spain under the Empresa Nacional Minera del Sahara.¹⁶ A conveyor belt was installed from Bu Craa to the coast and the West German firm of Krupp also constructed port facilities at El Aaiun. The conveyor belt runs 98 kilometers, the longest in the world, and is capable of transporting 14 million tons annually. Two warehouses were constructed at El Aaiun with a capacity of 300,000 tons.

Mining began in 1971 and the first exports were made in 1972. Two years later there were 2,400 persons employed in the operation, 800 of them Sahrawi.¹⁷ The conveyor belt was highly vulnerable to attack by guerrillas and required army protection. In 1977 all production ceased after it had been badly damaged and continued fighting subsequently has prevented its repair.

The importance of phosphate to world food supplies cannot be overestimated. Most modern agriculture requires phosphate fertilizers. Without them, food production would fall by at least a third, probably by

one-half for some products. Because the increasing cost of crude oil has raised the costs of petroleum-based fertilizer and of transport, the importance of phosphate—and thus of control over supply—has also increased.

The United States is both the world's largest exporter of food and the largest producer of refined phosphate, although most of the latter is retained for internal agricultural use. The U.S. expects to maintain phosphate self-sufficiency up to 1990. The Soviet Union, too, has produced sufficient phosphate for its own use in the past and that of the Eastern bloc countries, but recently it has suffered shortages and has had to look for external sources. With an eye possibly to political as well as financial benefits, Morocco signed a \$2 billion agreement in 1978 with the Soviet Union for financial and technical assistance for the mining of a new deposit at Maskala in exchange for a long-term agreement to supply that country with 10 million metric tons per year. Europe is totally dependent on imported supplies and France, one of the largest refiners, gets 80 percent of its supply from Morocco and Togo, which depends on phosphate for 40 percent of its export earnings.

The world market for phosphates has been highly erratic over the past decade, and it is also quite susceptible to manipulation through stockpiling. Moreover, a number of major oil companies—Continental Oil, Mobil Oil, and Gulf—have bought American phosphate mines and have been accused of trying to control the market domestically and internationally. A price war in the late 1960s brought the International Minerals and Chemicals Corporation to near bankruptcy, but since then prices have skyrocketed, from \$14/ton in 1967 to \$68 in 1975.

By this time Morocco was supplying most of the world market, though export competition from the U.S. began to stiffen. The price increases, along with much higher import bills for petroleum products, caused fertilizer consumption to drop. Europe's fell by 25 percent, that of Third World developing countries by 60-65 percent. U.S. sales to Europe undercut the

market, and within three years the price fell to \$30/ton.¹⁸

The multinational companies that control the fertilizer industry have remained impassive in the face of international pressures to lower prices and increase fertilizer exports to Third World countries that might thus increase food production and alleviate hunger.¹⁹ Critic Susan George reports that the president of one corporation confidently noted, "My own feeling is that we [the U.S. government] will emphasize grain shipments rather than fertilizer shipments as part of overall policy."²⁰

George, among others, believes the fertilizer industry should be considered a public utility rather than a source of private profit at the expense of the hungry and malnourished.

Phosphate is also used in the production of detergents, but perhaps the most important use of phosphate, or at least the one that has increased the strategic value of control over supply, is for the extraction of uranium (yellowcake) from phosphoric acid. The new uranium extraction industry is based in Florida, which has 80 percent of U.S. deposits of phosphate, but interest in other sources of supply is obvious.²¹ Westinghouse Corporation has made an offer to sell Morocco uranium extraction technology.²² Although Westinghouse asserts that the operation in Morocco is a "marginal proposition from an American businessman's viewpoint," a company spokesman observed that there was much to be gained for the Moroccan economy—hard currency from export sales, jobs in a high-unemployment economy, and *its own uranium to use as it sees fit* (emphasis added).

Obviously the Western Sahara represents a most important potential source of uranium from phosphate. Construction work on the plant in Morocco began in July 1980 and it is expected to produce 600 tons of yellowcake from 500,000 tons of phosphoric acid. One serious problem is the fact that King Hassan's government has chosen the American process which can only be profitable when the price of uranium is above \$40 per pound; the uncertain market for uranium arising from

doubts about the safety and economic viability of nuclear power could affect Moroccan plans.

The potential for uranium-from-phosphate and the acknowledged limits of U.S. deposits, however, have once again allowed Morocco to play a commanding role in the phosphate market. In 1980, the London-based Commodities Research Unit predicted that phosphate prices would appreciate by at least 20 percent in the following year. By September 1980 the price had already risen from \$30 to \$53 per metric ton, which will add some \$200 million to Morocco's export earnings. (Other African producers, especially Togo, Senegal and Tunisia, have also benefited from this price increase.) Morocco's expanding phosphate production and its interest in maintaining control over world market prices, therefore, related directly to its ambitions in the Western Sahara.

Spain and the Rise of Nationalist Movements among the Sahrawi

Some observers conjecture that had the Moroccan Liberation Army, with help from fighters from the Western Sahara, been successful in routing the Spanish in 1956-57, the country would today be integrated into Morocco to the satisfaction of the indigenous peoples whose historical and familial links extend as far into southern Morocco as Tan-Tan. The success of the "Ecouvillon" operation launched by French and Spanish forces, however, drove the Moroccans back inside their territorial divisions. From that time on, it is argued, changes that resulted from Spanish neo-colonialism in the Western Sahara in the 1960s contributed to the rise of modern nationalist movements. Moreover, the Sahrawi were encouraged in their struggle for political independence by the fact that beneath the sands of this seemingly arid region were the resources that would allow for economic independence as well.

There is very little documentary information about the rise of Sahrawian nationalist movements which developed outside the Western Sahara, but the sporadic guerrilla attacks on Spanish strongholds kept Spain well aware that its urbanization program and the minimal social



"Made in U.S.A." arms captured by the Polisario.

and economic benefits offered to those who settled in the towns and cities were failing to win the hearts and minds of the Sahrawi. Anne Lippert reports on one of these movements:

While Spanish authorities were appointing members to the Djemma (no elections were held until 1971), Mohamed Sid Brahim Bassiri, a journalist who had studied in Cairo and Damas, created the Front for the Liberation of the Sahara (MLS). From 1966 to his death under torture in 1970, Bassiri was the leader of a movement responsible for a series of strikes and demonstrations against the Spanish. The protests of 1970

were against Spain's new idea of "continuing association" (Spain with the Western Sahara) and took place in the major cities: El Aaiun, Villa Cisneros (Dakhla) and Smara. Forty Saharans died in the clashes at El Aaiun. The Spanish arrested 640 Saharans in the capital and 360 in other cities. Along with Bassiri, several other Saharans died under torture in prison in the Canary Islands. Saharan workers who supported the protest were fired, and many Saharan soldiers were relieved of their arms and sent home.

Other calls by Sahrawi nationalists for Spanish withdrawal from the Western Sahara were made from

Algiers, Tan-Tan, and Rabat. Guerrilla activity across these borders served to increase the repressive measures taken by Spain against the people within the country and every attack was followed by hundreds of arrests of the settled Sahrawi who were believed to be supporting the guerrillas.

Another group of militant Sahrawi was based in Mauritania where it was joined by others from Morocco and Algeria. On May 10, 1973, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguiet el Hamra and Rio de Oro (the two administrative divisions of the country created by the Spanish), or the Polisario, held its first congress and declared its slogan—"total and unconditional independence" with "armed struggle as the necessary means to achieve it." Attacks on Spanish strongholds continued. At last Spain was forced to make concessions.

Spain decided to create its own "independence movement" and established the official Partido de Unido Nacional Sahraoui (PUNS). The Sahrawi report that Spain forced local Sahrawi to join by the simple device of restricting the purchase of food and water to party cardholders. On July 12, 1974, Spain announced to the international community that it was prepared to put into action a program for internal autonomy of the Western Sahara and proposed a referendum on self-determination for 1975.

Spain apparently believed it would be possible to maintain a close relationship with the Western Sahara if it conceded self-government to the Sahrawi who served, side by side, with resident Spanish in the local administrative structures. But the process of decolonization of the Western Sahara—so long delayed—was interrupted by the renewal of Moroccan claims to the territory and by international rivalries which led to Spain's last-minute doublecross of the Sahrawi.

(August 1981)

NOTES

1. *New York Times*, March 26, 1981.
2. *International Herald Tribune*, February 20, 1980.
3. I was already doing research on the Western Sahara when I was asked by OXFAM (Oxford) to visit the refugee camps and prepare a report on current conditions there. OXFAM-Belgique has for several years been providing aid of various types. I want to thank OXFAM for its assistance in making official contacts for me with the Sahrawi Red Crescent and the Polisario Front in Algiers.
4. John Mercer, in *Spanish Sahara* (London, 1976) and "The Sahrawis of the Western Sahara," *Minority Rights Group Report*, No. 40 (London, 1979) gives the most complete account in English of the Sahrawi from prehistoric to contemporary times. All the historical information and quotations in this and the following section are taken from these two works.
5. Many writers refer to the widespread internecine fighting in Africa just prior to the colonial period and thus justify colonialism for bringing "peace" to African societies. Such a view ignores the disruptive effects of slave trading and other early European interventions in Africa.
6. For a discussion of similar efforts made by Portugal to pacify international objections to its colonial policy, see my series "Guinea Bissau," Parts I, II, & III, *AUFS Reports*, nos. 17, 21, & 22, 1981.
7. Anne Lippert, "The Western Sahara: The Theft of a Territory?" unpub. ms., n.d.
8. Using information from Mercer, *Spanish Sahara*, I discovered recently that one of these scholarship holders is today a co-owner of a boutique near London's Convent Garden.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 224.
10. Interview with a member of the Polisario Front in the liberated zones, recorded in February 1981.
11. Ann Lippert, "Statement, July 23, 1979, to the U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Africa, Hearings on the Conflict in Western Sahara and U.S. Policy."
12. *West Africa*, December 8, 1980. Although Morocco and the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (the name of the new state as declared on February 27, 1976) are at war, they have a common enemy in the foreign trawlers operating in their territorial waters. Since 1975 the Polisario have attacked not only Moroccan fishing boats, but also Spanish, Portuguese, and South Korean vessels, sometimes holding their crews for ransom. This danger to its fishing industry has been one of the reasons for Spain's withdrawal from its total support of Morocco in the war.
13. Mercer, *Spanish Sahara*, p. 226.
14. *Journal of the American Association of Geologists*, August 1969.
15. *Lamalif*, Casablanca, April 1976. These figures were supplied by the Secretary of Moroccan Planning, Mr. Ben Cheikh.
16. Rencontre et Développement/CCSA, *Western Sahara: A People in Struggle* (Algiers, 1979), p. 40. According to this source the capital was entirely owned by the INI (Instituto Nacional de Industria), the Spanish state institution that controls, among others SEAT (Fiat automobiles), ENSIDESA (iron metalurgy [sic]: 57% Spanish aluminum), AESA (shipyards), REPEsa (refineries: 30% Spanish petroleum) BUTANO (gas), ENESA (pegaso trucks and buses), IBERIA (93rd European airlines), etc.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
18. The impact on Togo of the fall in phosphate prices was disastrous and illustrates the typical vulnerability of Third-World economics in the world market system. Having obtained huge loans on the strength of anticipated income from phosphate sales to finance development projects, Togo found itself saddled with debt and forced to turn to the International Monetary Fund for rescue and "discipline."
19. The U.S. has successfully used its control over food distribution as a political weapon in particular cases. When Ghana was suffering serious food shortages in 1980, for example, and its "moderate" regime was threatened by political unrest, it was persuaded to boycott the Olympics in exchange for U.S. wheat. When I asked an American official whether Ghanaian youth were upset about this since it was widely reported that the Russians had offered to pay all their expenses, he questioned the true extent of Ghanaian interest in the Olympics and remarked, "We offered them a better deal." Africans from other states joke about how their government's voting in the UN Assembly is influenced by the PL 480 program for food aid. Other critics, like T. Jackson in *Against the Grain: The Dilemma of Food Aid* (OXFAM, 1981), charge that concessional food sales (like PL 480) are made to Third World countries in order to encourage new tastes that will have to be met by continued imports, and that these sales have created disincentives for local farmers to produce.
20. Susan George, *Feeding the Few: Corporate Control of Food* (Institute of Policy Studies, Berkeley, 1979).
21. June Taylor and Michael Yokell in *Yellowcake: The International Uranium Cartel* (Oxford, 1980), describe the world "war" in the 1970s over uranium prices and control over supplies. The chief U.S. producer/buyer is Westinghouse Corporation.
22. The *Multinational Monitor* for November 1980 and April 1981 discusses a number of issues involved in the attempted formation of a uranium cartel.

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