

Western Sahara: time for a new track?

by José Copete

Traditional diplomacy has failed to resolve the Western Sahara conflict. Is it time to adopt a multi-track approach to Africa's last decolonisation dispute?

Half a century after the UN General Assembly demanded a self-determination referendum, the Western Sahara conflict remains as insoluble as ever. In 1975 the rapid withdrawal of Spain – which had amalgamated the territory into a single colony since the late nineteenth century – prompted Morocco and Mauritania to occupy and partition the territory. Most of the indigenous population sheltered from the war in four refugee camps in neighbouring Algeria. Under military pressure from the Frente Polisario – the independence movement launched in 1973 – Mauritania withdrew in 1979, leaving Morocco as the only occupier.

Denying Moroccan and Mauritanian claims, the International Court of Justice declared in 1975 that the Sahrawi population had a right of self-determination. Spain remains the de jure administrative power. Western Sahara is on the UN list of Non-Self-Governing Territories. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), a government-in-exile proclaimed by Polisario in 1976, is recognised by 48 – mostly small – nations.

Despite a ceasefire brokered in 1991 by the UN, no settlement has been achieved. Morocco remains in occupation and refugees are yet to return. The referendum, originally scheduled for 1992, was planned to give the indigenous population the option between independence or inclusion with Morocco but has not taken place. The emphasis on 'traditional diplomacy' (Track I in peace-building parlance), carried out exclusively by official leaders representing the SADR, the Moroccan and other governments, the UN and its peacekeeping mission MINURSO,¹ has left no space for 'bottom-up' participation of civil society actors. Actors have simply focused on two activities – efforts

towards holding of the referendum and provision of humanitarian aid to the 165,000 Sahrawi refugees in camps near the Algerian city of Tindouf. Absence of indigenous empowerment has built a non-participatory peace process increasingly dependent on official leaders.

In other contexts many international relief NGOs have combined peace promotion with humanitarian assistance. However, in the case of the Sahrawis they have simply provided humanitarian aid. This focus on relief to inhabitants of the refugee camps has diverted attention from the needs of other vulnerable Sahrawi populations – the IDPs remaining within the occupied territory or self-settled refugees in third countries such as Mauritania and Spain.

In the current situation, after the postponement of the referendum by Kofi Annan and rejection of the proposals made by former US Secretary of State James Baker, the peace process is close to collapse. Recent demonstrations in the cities of Laayoun and Smara – in which hundreds of Sahrawi have demanded respect for international law, the holding of the referendum and independence – show the existence of a vulnerable community long forgotten. If the international community and the Moroccan government receive these demands with continued indifference or repression, violence is likely.

It is now necessary to:

- link aid to peacebuilding and explore new peacebuilding strategies
- adopt a multi-track perspective involving participation from non-official sectors of society such as traders, university and research centres, mass media, NGOs, political parties and unions and grassroots communities
- recognise the international and transnational dimensions of



EC/ECHO/Khaled Halouane

Saharawi refugee camp

the Sahrawi people: a complex of refugee camps, NGOs, associations, individuals, tribal fractions, institutions, routes of humanitarian aid and political tourism, political solidarity movements, Frente Polisario delegations, Sahrawi Republic embassies, liaison committees and task forces, all of which contribute to survival in the refugee camps.

Different communities now share the disputed land – indigenous Sahrawis and Moroccan settlers encouraged to settle in Western Sahara. Interaction among them and with any returning returnee population could be fraught with tension. Since the dispute began the Western Sahara has become a major transit point for African migrants en route to Europe.

The recent developments in the territory and the UN failure to resolve the conflict are not unrelated. It is time to stop thinking of the Western Sahara conflict as beyond resolution and to explore a participative strategy, a multi-dimensional post-settlement and post-return strategy, involving protection, reconciliation, transitional justice and development.

Jose Copete is an anthropologist trained in peacebuilding who has worked in the Sahrawi refugee camps. Email: jomacofe@yahoo.co.uk

For further information on Western Sahara, see: www.arso.org

1. UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/minurso