

Holidays in peace: Sahrawi children visit Spain

by Gina Crivello, Elena Fiddian and Dawn Chatty

Thousands of young Sahrawis spend summer holidays with Spanish families. The Vacaciones en Paz hosting programme has grown into a transnational network which allows Sahrawi youth to partially offset the hardships of their daily lives as refugees.

As Spanish colonial rule ended in 1975, Morocco took control of Western Sahara, triggering a conflict which resulted in mass displacement of Sahrawis to camps around the southern Algerian city of Tindouf. Thirty years on, the conflict remains unresolved.¹ An estimated 150,000-200,000 Sahrawis are almost entirely dependent on humanitarian aid.

Vacaciones en Paz ('Holidays in Peace') is organised by the Unión de Juventud de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro (UJSARIO)² - the youth organisation of the Polisario Front - in partnership with some 300 Spanish solidarity associations (Amigos del Pueblo Saharaui).³ Every summer since 1988 between 7,000 and 10,000 Sahrawi children have come to live with Spanish families.

Many return year after year to the same families. While in Spain they receive medical care, clothes, toys, gifts for their families in the camps, food items, school supplies and money. Most return home with cash and some families additionally send money throughout the year. Host parents report that children often come with specific family requests and may return home with pressure cookers, solar panels and sewing machines - provided either by host families or local solidarity associations.

For some host or Spanish families, financial support is the most important form of solidarity they can offer. After hosting a child for three consecutive years, a mother explained:

Every year we take a collection from friends, family and

neighbours; even for Easter and Christmas we do the same. I feel very responsible. It's almost as if my greatest responsibility is economic.

Many hosts stress the wider community impact of their support, believing that the money, food and goods they send have potential to improve the wellbeing of both individual children and their families. However, some hosts who have visited the Sahrawi camps are concerned that they may have contributed to socio-economic differences there. A host noted:

If we consider that 10,000 children come to Spain every year and if every child returns with €100 or even €50, you do the calculations... this has generated an economy... Eight years ago these little stores you now see didn't exist. Now, instead of going to buy from the Algerians who go to Tindouf, these families go to Tindouf to buy the products so they can set up their own stores ... it's clear that in the camps there are social classes now. The family that has five kids who come to Spain has an economic status that is higher than a family who has two kids at home who don't come.

On arrival in Spain each child receives a medical examination. Most show signs of iron-deficiency and malnourishment and others are diagnosed with more serious ailments such as kidney stones or eye irritations. Families and support organisations often cover medical and dental expenses or the cost of eyeglasses. Children

with serious medical conditions requiring longer-term or invasive treatment may stay on in Spain after the summer programme ends.

Many parents stress the emotional impact of hosting:

- "I love my daughter with all of my heart."
- "It's been a very positive and enriching experience."
- "I have been able to help someone in need and it motivates me to be a better person."
- "Hosting a child is not charity. It's a privilege and an act of justice."
- "A boy, smiling at you when he has learned something, when he can explain something to you in your mother tongue, it's lovely, it's something that makes it worth the effort."

A small number of hosts are interested in fostering children in order to offer them education in Spain, as long as families in the camps support the idea.

However, there are also negative experiences. One parent complained of lack of respect towards the Catholic religion. Two Sahrawi girls reported being smacked by members of previous host families. Many children reported they were generally satisfied with host families but did not develop emotional attachments with them.

Several trips are organised each year to enable Spanish families to travel to the refugee camps and visit the children they have hosted. Some hosts find the visits to be emotionally taxing.

Their behaviour there is influenced by their customs and traditions, so out of respect they can't or don't express their feelings... Here he's very open and caring... he's called us mummy and daddy without us having to say anything... But when you get there, you're desperate to

hug him and see him... forget it. When we speak with him on the phone, he's not at all talkative. It's not at all like when he's here.

Some host parents have been politically involved in the Western Sahara issue since the 1970s. Believing it is important to raise the children's political awareness, they may talk with them about the background to the conflict and use maps, photos and books to improve their understanding. One such host commented that:

They consider that they live in Laayoune, but it's not the Laayoune... you know... so we speak with her, show her maps, tell her where her family is from originally, that they have a sea, etc...

UNHCR-sponsored home visits in 2004 allow Sahrawi refugees living in camps near Tindouf to visit family members whom many have not seen for 30 years.

Others seek to discourage the children from wanting to live in Spain and urge them to retain hope of one day residing in the occupied territories which they have never seen.

Some hosts have no political motivations. A first-time host mother

explained that her family's decision to offer hospitality was:

...more for personal and sentimental reasons ... we don't know much about the political situation. At the political level, I feel like we can't do much... In two months, I can make a difference in a girl. I can feed her, make sure she gets the medical attention she needs ... but the political question, it just doesn't interest me much.

The bonds created during the summer holidays are reinforced by repeat hosting, by telephone and written contacts and by the Spanish family's return visits to the camps. These exchanges provide some children with a path for future emigration to Spain, either for study or employment.

Vacaciones en Paz is a window of opportunity for Sahrawi children. Their medical and nutritional needs are attended to, cultural horizons are expanded and many develop deep emotional bonds with their host families. However, Sahrawis have a strong sense of

family loyalty and commitment to the independence struggle. Despite the economic benefits of visiting Spain, all the Sahrawi children we interviewed said they were keen to return to the camps at the end of the summer. Asked about their long-term ambitions, most said they intended to live near their families and did not indicate they would seek to emigrate when they grow up.

This article is based on interviews with a sample of Sahrawi youth and their hosts in Madrid in August 2005. Gina Crivello is a research assistant at the Refugee Studies Centre and Dawn Chatty its Deputy Director. Elena Fiddian is a University of Oxford doctoral student. Emails: ginacrivello1@yahoo.co.uk; dawn.chatty@qeh.ox.ac.uk; elena.fiddian@qeh.ox.ac.uk.

For further information about the research, visit: www.forcedmigration.org/guides/llreport2/

1. See preceding article by José Copete.
2. www.ujсарio.net
3. www.nodo50.org/saharamad

