

# Confidence-building measures in Western Sahara

Edward Benson

**Despite the fact that a long-term solution to the extended displacement of Sahrawi refugees still seems far off, there is at least now an opportunity for some Sahrawi families to be briefly reunited.**

As Spain was preparing to relinquish control and withdraw from Western Sahara, Morocco asserted its claim of sovereignty over the territory of the former Spanish colony. In response, the Polisario – a Sahrawi group that had been fighting the Spanish for the right to self-determination – turned its focus on the Moroccans and war ensued. As a result, thousands of Sahrawis fled in 1975 into the

desert, where they still remain, scattered across five refugee camps located in a territory which the Algerian government has allowed the Polisario to control in the south-western part of the country, close to the Algerian town of Tindouf.

The political sensitivities involved in the Western Sahara question have so far prevented UNHCR from conducting a proper registration

exercise. The host government, Algeria, estimates the number of refugees in the five camps near Tindouf at 158,000 persons.

In 1991, a ceasefire brokered by the UN saw the establishment of MINURSO – a peacekeeping mission tasked with monitoring the ceasefire and organising a referendum on the future of the territory. The ceasefire has remained and, though modest in numbers, MINURSO is now the longest serving UN peacekeeping mission in Africa, a longevity that is a reflection of the lack of progress in finding a political solution.

### Confidence-building measures

It is against this background that UNHCR has implemented a Confidence Building Measures (CBM) programme, to address the humanitarian needs of the refugees and to “contribute to establishing a certain level of confidence among the parties concerned in the conflict in Western Sahara.”<sup>1</sup> UNHCR initially proposed four CBM activities: visits between refugees in the camps near Tindouf and their family members in the Territory of Western Sahara; a telephone service in the camps, allowing refugees to call their relatives in Western Sahara at no cost; seminars to bring together separated Sahrawis to discuss topics of common interests of non-political character; and a mail service between Western Sahara and the refugee camps. As of now, UNHCR has only been able to implement the telephone service and family visits.

UNHCR began operating the telephone service in 2004 and there are currently four telephone centres for the refugees to use. The family visits allow family members who have been separated, the majority for at least a generation, to reconnect in person. Each week, family members living either in the camps near Tindouf or the Territory are transported between the two locations by UN plane and vehicles hundreds of miles across the Sahara Desert to visit their families. Should visiting family members wish to remain rather than return, they are free to do so; UNHCR follow the outcomes of such decisions, particularly if it involves the separation of minors from their parents. However, while over 8,000 Sahrawis, from both the Territory and the refugee camps, have participated in family visits since the start of the programme in 2004, to date only a very tiny minority has opted to remain rather than return.

The popularity of the visits with Sahrawi families is evident. In UNHCR’s most recent registration exercise at the end of 2008, over 27,000 individuals recorded their intent to visit their families in Western



In the Territory of Western Sahara, in Smarra town, Mohammed Fathil greets his daughters El Ghalia and Aghbanama, plus five grandchildren he has never seen.

Sahara and the refugee camps in the months and years ahead. Many will have to wait years before their wish will materialise since demand far exceeds operational capacity.

### Humanitarian impact

It is hard to overstate what these five-day visits mean to those lucky enough to benefit. For the first time in over thirty years, people have the chance to spend time with their mother, father, son, daughter, husband, wife, brother or sister. Naturally, the celebrations each time family members arrive to re-unite with their families either in Western Sahara or the refugee camps are something to behold. Hundreds may surround the cars as the beneficiaries pull up outside their host’s residence, jostling with one another to be the first one to make physical contact with a member of their family whom they may have not seen for a generation or, for the younger ones, for the first time.

As ecstatic as the emotions can be at the start of the visit, the opposite is true when the five days have passed and the family members have to leave. Particularly for those returning to the isolated and land-locked desert refugee camps of southern Algeria, where temperatures are in excess of fifty degrees in the summer, sandstorms are regular, and they are dependent on humanitarian aid,

the reality of what they are returning to is brutal. One elderly woman as she was boarding the plane back to the refugee camps explained that in her water bottle she had seawater and pebbles from her visit to the Atlantic Ocean. Though she remembered as a child growing up next to the sea, having been in the refugee camps for over thirty years and seemingly with no solution to this situation in sight, she was unsure if she would ever see the sea again.

### Negotiations and confidence

The CBM programme has not been easy for UNHCR to negotiate and deliver between the parties. The 65-point Plan of Action (POA) required several months of

negotiation to gain the agreement of the Governments of Morocco and Algeria and the Polisario.

On building confidence, the issue is complex. Visits can allow beneficiaries to understand better what life is like for their relatives on the other side, including the role of the respective parties and UNHCR. This – depending upon their five-day experience – can contribute to general confidence.

Progress in confidence between the parties involved in the Western Sahara conflict is far harder to gauge. In a conflict of this duration, with entrenched levels of distrust and frustration, humanitarian actors should be realistic in terms of what might or might not be achievable, particularly in the short to medium term. However, if the programme is delivered transparently with all parties feeling they are being treated equitably, confidence can be built between the humanitarian actor and each of the conflicting parties, a significant and not easy step to make when tensions and suspicions run so high.

### Partial progress

Since the original POA was agreed some years ago, experience has been gained and some operational momentum achieved. UNHCR has

access to the Sahrawi people in the refugee camps and in the Territory that no other international actor enjoys. CBM remains the only humanitarian activity that spans the camps and the Territory.

Despite little progress at the political negotiating table, in 2008 there was agreement among the parties to explore the establishment of family visits by land in addition to the existing programme by air.<sup>2</sup> If realised, there might be a chance for families to visit for longer than the five days and in far greater numbers. The symbolic act of travelling

overland, passing the heavily-mined 2,000km sand wall, known as the Berm, which separates Western Sahara from Polisario-held areas, could be symbolically important: a trip that they or their ancestors did some thirty years ago and an activity that would be replicated if there were ever to be large-scale returns of refugees in the event of a political solution. Long-term solutions aside, uniting families that have been long separated and with no obvious end to displacement in sight should, from a humanitarian perspective, be reason enough to sustain this important initiative for

one of the world's most protracted and forgotten refugee situations.

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1. UNHCR Western Sahara Operation, CBMs Plan of Action

2. Communiqué of the Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General for Western Sahara, Peter van Walsum, Meeting at Manhasset (Greentree Estate) 16-18 March 2008