

Country Report: Western Sahara February 2022

Western Saharan independence groups have been engaged in conflict with Morocco over its territorial sovereignty since Spain ended colonial rule in 1975. Following the declaration of a Republic by the nationalist group the Polisario Front, Morocco invaded and occupied the territory. Since then, war has driven 158,000 Sahrawi people into refugee camps in Algeria. Moroccans now outnumber Sahrawis in Western Sahara.

The Western province of Sahara is home to the indigenous [Sahrawi people](#), a mixture of Berber and Arab descent. The Polisario contends that Morocco's refusal to allow West Saharan independence is a violation of Article 2 of the [UN Declaration](#) of Human Rights and Article 1 of the [International Covenant](#) on Civil and Political Rights, Morocco claims that Spanish colonization only suspended Morocco's traditional sovereignty over the territory, and Morocco is restoring its legitimate authority.

In the 1980's Morocco constructed a 2700 km long sand and rock berm, known as the Moroccan Western Sahara Wall, it separates 80% of the western territory that is controlled by Morocco from the Polisario controlled east. 120,000 Moroccan troops patrol it. Over seven million landmines are strewn along it.

The United Nations brokered a ceasefire in 1991 and established the Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara ([MINURSO](#)) in 1991. The referendum to decide whether Western Sahara would be independent, or part of Morocco has never been held.

In November 2020, the Polisario ended the ceasefire due to its frustration with endless referendum negotiations. The '[open war](#)' has deteriorated into low-intensity clashes between the Moroccan army and the Polisario Front along the rock wall, which runs through Western Sahara and the southwestern portion of Morocco. Morocco has launched [missile bombardments](#), drone strikes, and attacks on the Polisario soldiers patrolling the Moroccan wall. In August 2021, Algeria publicly broke diplomatic relations with Morocco, citing the government's '[abandonment](#)' of efforts to resolve the conflict.

From 1975 until a 1991 ceasefire, Morocco perpetrated numerous human rights abuses in Western Sahara. The Moroccan army used napalm and white phosphorus on [Sahrawi refugee camps](#) in Guelta Zemmur. Moroccan forces have arbitrarily detained, tortured, and murdered Sahrawi nationalists, many of whom were kept at the secret [Tazmamert centre](#) for 18 years.

In 2015, a [Spanish judge](#) ruled that there was sufficient evidence to show that 11 former Moroccan officials could be tried for genocide against the Sahrawi by Morocco from 1976 to 1991. A Spanish High Court dismissed a charge of genocide against the Polisario leader, [Brahim Ghali](#), after the prosecution failed to produce enough evidence against him.

Morocco's penal code punishes criticism of Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara with [prison time or fines](#). It obstructs free [assembly and association](#) by banning Sahrawi self-determination meetings. Morocco is accused of [violence, false imprisonment, and forced disappearances](#) against activists and journalists.

Due to attacks unimpeded by MINURSO and restrictions on the Sahrawi people, Genocide Watch considers Western Sahara to be at **Stage 3: Discrimination and Stage 8: Persecution. Genocide Watch recommends:**

- Moroccan forces should retreat from Western Saharan provinces and demilitarise the Moroccan wall.
- Western Sahara should allow their people to participate in a referendum for self-determination under [Article 1](#) of the UN Charter
- The Moroccan Government should help with efforts to resettle the displaced refugees in Algeria and Mauritania displaced due to the conflict.
- The International Criminal Court should launch investigations into human rights abuses and perpetrators should be held accountable for their crimes.