



LIFE UNDER OCCUPATION

Report of a delegation of the
All-Party Parliamentary Group
on Western Sahara to the
Occupied Territory of Western Sahara

13–16 February 2014



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House of Commons
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INTRODUCTION

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Western Sahara is an officially recognised cross-party body of the UK parliament whose purpose is to promote issues of mutual concern between British MPs and Western Sahara. In the pursuit of this mandate, the Group had long wished to send a delegation to the Occupied Territory of Western Sahara to witness the human rights situation facing the Saharawi people living under Moroccan occupation and to report back to parliament on the prospects for the Saharawi people to exercise their right to self-determination.

The delegation was finally able to visit the Occupied Territory of Western Sahara in February 2014. This report provides details of the meetings held by the delegation with Saharawi human rights groups, trade unions and other civil society organisations. It also includes details of the meetings held by the delegation with representatives of the Moroccan authorities in Occupied Western Sahara, and with the UN peacekeeping mission MINURSO. While time constraints meant that the delegation was based solely in and around the capital El Aaiún (sometimes also written Laayoune), it was also able to meet there with representatives of civil society groups from other parts of the Occupied Territory such as Dakhla, Smara and Boucra.

The delegation consisted of the following four members:

- Jeremy Corbyn MP (Labour, Islington North), Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Western Sahara
- Mark Williams MP (Liberal Democrat, Ceredigion), Secretary of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Western Sahara
- John Gurr, Coordinator of the Western Sahara Campaign and secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Western Sahara
- John Hilary, Executive Director, War on Want

This was the first British parliamentary delegation to the Occupied Territory of Western Sahara. Previous delegations of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Western Sahara had visited the Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria, while other parliamentary groups had been taken to Occupied Western Sahara by the Moroccan state authorities during visits to Morocco.

The delegation held a public meeting in the UK parliament on 25 February 2014 to report back on their visit, which was also addressed by the prominent Saharawi human rights defender Brahim Dahane and by Amnesty International researcher Sirine Rached. The meeting was well attended, testifying to the high level of concern at the continuing denial of basic rights to the Saharawi people living under Moroccan occupation. Members of the delegation also gave their impressions from the visit in a number of interviews and media articles published in February 2014; two of these are also included in this report.

The delegation wishes to put on record its appreciation to all those Saharawi people who made the visit possible and who gave up their time to meet with us. Some are named in this report, but we are equally grateful to the many others who are not named here. In particular, the delegation wishes to thank Mohamed Salem Lakhal of CODESA for his invaluable contribution in organising the visit, coordinating between different civil society groups, transporting the delegation to meetings in and around El Aaiún and providing interpretation variously between English, French, Spanish, Hassaniya and Arabic. Without his services and the assistance of Hassan Abba, who performed the same duties once Mohamed Salem Lakhal's car had been impounded by the Moroccan police, the delegation would not have been able to gain anything like the required level of insight into the true situation facing the Saharawi people living under Moroccan occupation, and we are truly grateful.

Jeremy Corbyn MP

Mark Williams MP

John Gurr

John Hilary



Housing in El Aaiún, Occupied Western Sahara

AFRICA'S LAST COLONY – HISTORICAL TIMELINE

1884	Spain begins to colonise the 'Spanish Sahara', an area south of Morocco inhabited by semi-nomadic people collectively known as the Saharawi
1963	The UN calls on Spain, the colonial power, to conduct the decolonisation process in Western Sahara
1973	POLISARIO Front formed to fight the Spanish for independence
1974-5	SPAIN LEAVES, MOROCCO INVADES
1974	Spain conducts census to prepare for holding a referendum on self-determination, but Morocco asks International Court of Justice to examine sovereignty of Western Sahara
16.10.75	ICJ rules that no links sufficient to establish sovereignty exist between either Morocco or Mauritania and Western Sahara; and that self-determination through the free and fair expression of the will of the people of Western Sahara should proceed
06.11.75	Morocco invades Western Sahara, while Spain turns a blind eye; many Saharawi flee into the desert, where their makeshift camps are napalmed by the Moroccan Air Force, forcing them to cross the border into Algeria
27.02.76	Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) proclaimed at Bir Lehlou, liberated area of Western Sahara; meanwhile, Saharawi in Moroccan-occupied areas begin to 'disappear' in their hundreds
1975-91	WAR BETWEEN POLISARIO FRONT AND MOROCCO AND MAURITANIA
1979	Mauritania agrees peace terms with POLISARIO Front and withdraws from Western Sahara
1984	SADR admitted into the Organisation of African Unity; Morocco resigns in protest
1981-91	Morocco constructs a land-mined, defensive wall the length of Western Sahara – the <i>berm</i> ; when all sections are joined up, at over 1,000 miles it is the longest wall in the world
1991-now	UNDER MOROCCAN PRESSURE, UN FAILS TO HOLD REFERENDUM
1991	Ceasefire comes into effect under the Settlement Plan, which provides for a referendum on self-determination for the Saharawi people; Morocco moves 170,000 new settlers into the territory
1997	UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan appoints former US Secretary of State James Baker as his Personal Envoy to Western Sahara

1999	<i>'Intifida'</i> erupts in Occupied Western Sahara – Saharawi demonstrations are met with force; arrests and imprisonment of many people follow
2001	James Baker proposes framework agreement as 'third way': autonomy within Morocco and a future referendum in which Moroccan settlers will be the majority
2004	James Baker resigns in frustration at Morocco's intransigence and the failure of the international community to exert pressure on Morocco to comply with international law and UN Security Council resolutions
2006	The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights produces a report on a visit to Occupied Western Sahara and the refugee camps, recording its concerns on human rights abuses and calling for the monitoring of human rights; the report is not officially released and its recommendations are ignored
2010	Thousands of Saharawi set up protest camp at Gdeim Izik, 15km east of El Aaiún, to call for an end to denial of their social and economic rights; after one month, Moroccan forces attack and demolish the camp, with many deaths and hundreds of arrests – 25 of those arrested are subsequently sentenced by military court to long prison terms (nine to life sentences) on the basis of confessions obtained under torture
2014	Western Sahara, the last colony in Africa, remains on the UN list of non-self-governing territories as a country in the process of decolonisation – a process that can only be completed by holding a free and fair referendum on self-determination where the indigenous population has the choice of independence, autonomy or merging with a neighbouring state



Moroccan fishing boats at the port of El Aaiún

HUMAN RIGHTS

Many of the groups met by the All-Party Parliamentary Group delegation were human rights defenders, and assessing the human rights situation in Occupied Western Sahara was a key objective of the visit. On an immediate level, many of the organisations that we met spoke of the difficulties they faced as a result of being denied official recognition by the Moroccan state authorities. The denial of formal registration (over many years, in the case of CODESA and ASVDH) means that they are prohibited from holding any public gatherings, thus denying their freedom of association, expression or assembly. The suppression of the peaceful demonstration of 15 February 2014 witnessed by the delegation (see below) is just one example of an established pattern that forms the backdrop to all activities by human rights defenders in Occupied Western Sahara.

Almost all of the Saharawi human rights defenders whom we met had themselves suffered gross human rights violations at the hands of the Moroccan authorities. To name just three of the most famous cases, Aminatou Haidar, President of CODESA, was forcibly 'disappeared', tortured and held in secret detention by the Moroccan authorities from 1987 to 1991, and again imprisoned in the notorious Black Prison of El Aaiún from 2005 to 2006. Sidi Mohamed Daddach, President of CODAPSO, spent a total of 24 years in Moroccan detention between 1976 and 2001, subjected to torture and isolation and denied medical treatment. Brahim Dahane, President of ASVDH, was forcibly 'disappeared', tortured and held in secret detention for four years between 1987 and 1991, then further imprisoned in 2005-06 and detained without trial in 2009-11. In addition to these internationally known figures, many others we met had suffered physical assault, arrest, imprisonment and 'disappearance' at the hands of the Moroccan authorities as a result of their peaceful activities in support of Saharawi self-determination.

The chronicle of the delegation's visit given below provides further details of the major cases of human rights violation communicated to us during our time in El Aaiún. These included several individual victims of extrajudicial execution by the Moroccan police; the 'Gdeim Izik 25', sentenced to long prison terms by a Moroccan military court on the basis of confessions obtained under torture; the 15 young Saharawi men who 'disappeared' on 25 December 2005 and whose whereabouts are still unknown; the large number of activists arrested and ill-treated while in detention; and the crackdown on freedom of expression through intimidation and arrest of individuals trying to document or report on human rights violations in Occupied Western Sahara. Many of these cases have also been catalogued by international human rights organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and by the Western Sahara programme of the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights.

Ultimately, the delegation was left in no doubt that the single most important human right denied the Saharawi people is their right to self-determination. We were repeatedly told that only through the referendum promised to the Saharawi people by the UN Security Council could this right be secured, and with it all the other human rights that were currently still denied. As a first step in the process of making progress towards this aim, however, all organisations were clear that the UN peacekeeping mission to Western Sahara, MINURSO, must have its mandate extended to include the monitoring of human rights in both Occupied Western Sahara and the Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria under the control of the POLISARIO Front. This call is now being taken up by an international campaign to press the UN Security Council to extend the remit of MINURSO when its mandate comes up for renewal in April 2014.

NATURAL RESOURCES

One theme that ran through many of our meetings was the importance of natural resources, and how their exploitation is used by Morocco to support its occupation. Phosphate mining, fishing and market gardening provide jobs for Moroccan settlers; very few jobs go to Saharawi.

Fishing

Although fishing is not the largest earner for Morocco, it was raised by many of those we met because of the recent extension of the EU-Morocco Fisheries Partnership Agreement. Fishermen from Dakhla pointed out that international law states that resource exploitation should only proceed with the consent of, and for the benefit of, the indigenous population. They told us how the waters off Morocco have been overexploited, so that 80% of fish landed now come from Saharawi waters. All offshore fishing is by Moroccan-owned trawlers. Moroccans also control the traditional inshore fishing; very few licences are granted to Saharawi. In Dakhla, where fishing forms the major industry, we were told that only 5% of workers are Saharawi. The delegation asked if they or anyone they knew had been consulted as to their wishes about the EU-Morocco Fisheries Partnership Agreement; the reply was an emphatic NO.



Phosphates

Phosphates are by far the biggest earner; the value of phosphate exports in 2013 was approximately \$330 million. Phosphate mining now employs approximately 3,000 workers. Only 21% of the workforce are Saharawi, we were told, and the great majority of them are employed in the more menial jobs; fewer than 4% of technicians are Saharawi. The former phosphate workers from Boucra that we met spoke about the importance of natural resources and how addressing their exploitation would help in moving towards resolving the conflict. "The Saharawi people should directly and openly control their resources and the benefit should go to all Saharawi including the jobless and handicapped."

Tomatoes

There are 12 farms roughly 40km north of Dakhla producing tomatoes mainly for the European market. All farms are owned either by the Moroccan royal family, by powerful Moroccan conglomerates or by French multinational firms. No farms are owned by local Saharawi, and not even by small-scale Moroccan settlers in the territory.

For Morocco, the exploitation of Saharawi resources provides employment to settlers and helps to entrench the occupation. Any support for this exploitation by the UK or other European countries, whether through trade or trade agreements, creates impediments to ending the occupation. Many Saharawi told us that Morocco would leave Western Sahara if it was no longer able to benefit from the country's natural resources.

CHRONICLE OF THE DELEGATION

13 February 2014

1800: Delegation arrives El Aaiún

14 February 2014

0930: Meeting with MINURSO rearranged for the end of the visit; instead the delegation met with Mohamed Salem Lakhel of CODESA to confirm priorities and objectives for the coming three days.

1130: Meeting with Sidi Mohamed Alwat, President of the Association Ibsar El Kheir for disabled people (pictured right), and with other members of the association. As a Saharawi organisation, the association is banned and thus receives no financial support from the authorities, being forced to operate in very limited premises and without basic equipment. The delegation was informed of the additional discrimination faced by disabled Saharawi children and adults in Moroccan institutions, and the preference they and their families had for attending the association's facilities, however limited.



1230: Meeting with Sidi Ahmed Moussa Eddia, Secretary-General of the Trade Union Confederation of Saharawi Workers (CSTS), as well as Ahmed Dayyam and other members of the confederation. The delegation was told the history of the Boucra phosphate mines, which were formerly operated by the Spanish, providing jobs for 24,000 Saharawi workers. Since Morocco seized control of phosphate production in Western Sahara, that number has fallen to around 3,000 workers, the vast majority of



whom are now Moroccans. The trade union confederation CSTS is independent and unrecognised by the Moroccan state authorities, and campaigns for the Saharawi people's right to their own natural resources by means of demonstrations outside the regional offices of the Ministry of Mines and Energy in El Aaiún. Sidi Ahmed Moussa Eddia (pictured in the centre of the photograph) is also President of the Coordination of Gdeim Izik, which the delegation would meet later that afternoon, and one of those actively involved in the Gdeim Izik protest movement in 2010.

1330: Visit to the fishing port near El Aaiún, home to the largest indoor fish market in Africa, but now almost entirely operated by Moroccan boats rather than Saharawi fishermen. The delegation also saw the phosphate export plant located next to the fishing port, which sits at the end of the 100km conveyor belt (see photograph) that transports the phosphates from the mines at Boucra to the coast – the longest belt of its kind in the world. See the dedicated section on natural resources in this report for further details concerning the Moroccan state’s appropriation of phosphates, fish and minerals in Occupied Western Sahara.



1600: Meeting with members of the Coordination of Gdeim Izik (shown left), the movement established after the destruction of the Gdeim Izik protest camp by Moroccan forces in November 2010. The delegation was shown video footage of recent demonstrations organised by the group which had been violently suppressed by Moroccan police and paramilitary forces, including assaults on women protesters.

1730: Meeting with the Committee of Families and Mothers of the 15 Disappeared, a group of young Saharawi men who disappeared on 25 December 2005 and have never been seen or heard of since. The delegation met with the mothers of the disappeared, and learned how they had continued their struggle to learn the truth of their sons’ fate in the face of continuing Moroccan intransigence and repression.



1830: Meeting with Sidi Mohamed Daddach, President of CODAPSO (Committee for the Defence of the Right to Self-Determination of the People of Western Sahara), Hmad Hamad, Vice-President of CODAPSO, and other members of the committee. CODAPSO was founded in 2005 in order to press for the self-determination of the Saharawi people through a free and fair referendum, as the only means to secure their full human rights in the future. It is highly critical of the UN peacekeeping mission MINURSO for its failure to move forward the referendum promised to the Saharawi people in 1991.



2000: Meeting with Brahim Dahane, President of ASVDH (Saharawi Association of Victims of Grave Human Rights Violations), and other members of the association. ASVDH held its founding congress in May 2005 but has repeatedly been refused official recognition by the Moroccan authorities. The delegation was told of new propaganda strategies being employed by Morocco in light of its fear that it is losing the global public relations war over its occupation of Western Sahara. For its part, the Saharawi



movement had adopted a strategy of taking to the streets in a series of coordinated demonstrations as a deliberate means of breaking down any barrier of fear amongst the Saharawi people. This had been most successful in the mass protest held in El Aaiún on 4 May 2013, when several thousand people took to the streets calling for self-determination and an end to the Moroccan occupation. Since then, Moroccan forces have cracked down forcefully on all demonstrations organised by Saharawi groups, as well as raiding the homes of human rights defenders involved.

2130: Meeting with the Coordination of Saharawi Human Rights Activists in El Aaiún. This is the coordinating body for 15 Saharawi human rights organisations in El Aaiún, some of which we had met separately. Between them the groups are active across the full range of civil, political, social, cultural and economic rights. The Coordination is also the body which sends the Moroccan authorities and MINURSO formal notice of peaceful demonstrations planned in El Aaiún. All of the human rights organisations are denied legal status, however, so the demonstrations are banned.

15 February 2014

0900: Breakfast meeting with the Regional President of the National Council for Human Rights (CNDH), Mohamed Salem Cherkaoui (pictured here with Jeremy Corbyn MP). The CNDH is the national Moroccan body mandated to monitor human rights in each of Morocco's regions, and it established a regional commission to cover Occupied Western Sahara in 2011. The CNDH is criticised by Saharawi human rights activists for failing to secure justice for victims of human rights abuses at the hands of the Moroccan state forces, or to publicise their cases. For its part, we were told that the CNDH regional commission in El Aaiún had sent 260 complaints concerning human rights abuse in Western Sahara to the Moroccan police, but had not received a single response to them. Previously, the CNDH regional commission has submitted reports on human rights abuses in Western Sahara to CNDH head office in Rabat for publication in its annual report; this year will see the first publication of a report on the human rights situation in Western Sahara by the regional commission itself.



1030: Formal meeting with Yahdih Bouchaab, Governor (Wali) of the regions of El Aaiún, Boujdour and Sakia El Hamra, and Moulay Hamdi Ould Errachid, Mayor of El Aaiún, together with local MPs and tribal leaders. The delegation engaged in a lively debate about the human rights of the Saharawi people, including the right to self-determination, in response to which the Governor, Mayor and others argued for the alternative model of autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty. The delegation was shown a presentation on the current economic climate in Western Sahara, which operates as an almost wholly tax-free environment in an attempt to attract inward investment. The following slide from the presentation refers to the mining sector, covering phosphates, salt and sand:

Secteur Minier

- ✓ Un gisement de phosphate exploité et traité localement
- ✓ Salines et Sabkhat .
- ✓ sables.

Production entre 2 et 2.8 MT/an
soit 9 à 10 % de la production nationale

2212 emplois directs

Projet phare: Ste Americaine:

CRISTAL SAHARA MONTAIN

Production prévue : 2MT /an

Exportation: Plus de 400 000 T

1300: Lunch hosted by Moulay Hamdi Ould Errachid, Mayor of El Aaiún

1400: Presentations from the Mayor's office of architectural project plans for the development of El Aaiún. There is a massive programme of works underway in the city, at considerable cost to the public purse, to transform El Aaiún into a modern oasis. The image here (right) shows the plans for the new municipal library currently under construction.



1700: Three members of the delegation (Jeremy Corbyn MP, John Gurr, John Hilary) were witnesses to the suppression of the demonstration called for 5pm that evening in the central Smara Avenue of El

Aaiún. More detailed accounts can be found in the media articles written by members of the delegation and included as appendices to this report. While Moroccan police, both uniformed and in plain clothes (see news photograph here, taken on the day), actively pursued protesters in order to prevent any demonstration from forming, the car belonging to Mohamed Salem Lakhali, in which we were being driven near to the demonstration itself, became a 'safe zone' for people to congregate around without fear of being attacked. The car was eventually impounded, and one of the delegation's cameras was stolen by the police from within the car.



1700: (Mark Williams MP) Meeting with pro-Moroccan civil society groups; see also the report from the following day's breakfast meeting, when the full delegation met with some of the same groups again. The meeting heard from representatives of:

1. Women's Forum for Development of Culture
2. Saharawi Women's Human Rights in Spain
3. Association for Social Development
4. Laayoune Institute of Education
5. President of Human Rights Defenders in Sahara, a member of the Forum of Equality & Reconciliation
6. President of the Association for the Defence of Detained and League of Human Rights Defenders (and ex-POLISARIO member)
7. Political Bureau of Environmental Political Association
8. Director of Centre of Languages

9. President of the Moroccan Association of Hemophiliacs
10. Director of the Post Office
11. Director of Defence of Consumer Rights & Independent Committee of Human Rights
12. Women's section of political party
13. National Association of Returnees
14. Association of Teachers of English
15. Independent Committee of Human Rights, and teacher of English

2030: Meeting with Aminatou Haidar, President of CODESA (Collective of Saharawi Human Rights Defenders), and other members of the collective. CODESA was established in 2002 and has become one of the most important sources reporting on human rights violations in Occupied Western Sahara, despite being refused official recognition by the Moroccan authorities. The delegation was shown details of human rights violations suffered by Saharawi activists since 26 April 2013 – the day after the UN Security Council last voted down the possibility of extending the MINURSO mandate to include human rights monitoring. We heard that 59 peaceful demonstrations had been suppressed by force by the Moroccan authorities during that time, with hundreds of demonstrators (women and men alike) hospitalised after being badly beaten. These and many other human rights violations underline the urgency of extending the MINURSO mandate to include human rights monitoring. The delegation was also told at this meeting that the Governor (Wali) of El Aaiún had put out a statement that evening accusing the delegation of inciting violence at the demonstration earlier in the day.



16 February 2014

0800: Breakfast meeting with pro-Moroccan civil society groups, whom Mark Williams MP had already met on the previous afternoon (see above). The groups acknowledged the social and economic challenges facing the Saharawi people, and recognised that this was one of the causes behind recent demonstrations against the Moroccan state authorities.

0900: Meeting with Soukaina Jad Ahlou, President of the Forum for the Future of Saharawi Women (FAFESA), Mbarka Alina, Secretary General of the Forum, and other members of the Forum, including representatives who had travelled to meet the delegation from Dakhla and Smara. The Forum was founded in February 2009 in order to promote the rights of Saharawi women and to demand the right to self-determination for the Saharawi people. All members are activists who have experienced arrest and ill-treatment at the hands of the Moroccan authorities.



1030: Meeting with the families of Saharawi martyrs killed in the period since 2010. The delegation heard moving testimony from the sister of Said Dambar, who was shot dead by Moroccan forces on 21

December 2010; from the brother of Babi El Gargar, who was killed on 8 November 2010 during the Moroccan attack on the Gdeim Izik protest camp; and from the wife of Brahim Dawdi, also killed in the Moroccan attack on Gdeim Izik. The family of Said Dambar (in whose house the delegation was received) have consistently been refused an autopsy and have not been told where Said's body was buried. They mark the day of his killing each month with a memorial ceremony inside the house, which is barricaded in order to prevent the Moroccan police from breaking up the ceremony.



1130: Meeting with civil society organisations from Dakhla and Smara. The delegation had been unable to travel outside the capital El Aaiún, and thus welcomed the opportunity to meet with civil society representatives from these two towns. Dakhla is over 500km south of El Aaiún on the Atlantic coast, and important for the cultivation of tomatoes (see the section of this report on natural resources). The town is home to a Moroccan military base, and Moroccan settlers make up a large proportion of the population. Smara is around 150km east of El Aaiún, and is also a garrison town for the Moroccan army.

1300: Meeting with families of Saharawi political prisoners held in Moroccan jails since the demolition of the Gdeim Izik protest camp in November 2010. Following the Moroccan assault on Gdeim Izik, over 160 people were arrested and 25 were sentenced by a Moroccan military court in trials that were widely condemned by international human rights organisations.



1400: Meeting with the Committee for the Protection of Natural Resources, whose President, Sid'Ahmed Lemjeyid (shown in the single framed photograph displayed to the delegation, right), is currently serving a life sentence in Morocco's Salé prison as one of the Gdeim Izik 25 sentenced by military court following the destruction of the Gdeim Izik protest camp by Moroccan forces in November 2010.

1500: Meeting with Wolfgang Weisbrod-Weber, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Western Sahara and Head of MINURSO, together with MINURSO staff members Enrico Magnani and Corinne Archer. The delegation was informed about the current state of the ceasefire between Morocco and the POLISARIO Front, which is holding well as a result of the continuing MINURSO presence, and about progress in the demining programme on both sides of the *berm* (at the present rate of clearance, it is estimated that it will take another 13 years to remove all mines laid in the war). The delegation was told of MINURSO's inability to engage in any monitoring of the human rights situation in Western Sahara following the UN Security Council's discussion and rejection of the extension of the MINURSO mandate.



1800: Delegation departs El Aaiún

APPENDIX 1

Why Western Sahara Matters

JEREMY CORBYN reports from his fact-finding mission to north Africa

Morning Star, 19 February 2014

Last week I was part of a delegation from the all-parliamentary Western Sahara group to visit the Moroccan-occupied territory, with John Hilary of War on Want and John Gurr of the Western Sahara resources group.

We held over 20 meetings with a wide range of groups of former prisoners, human rights campaigners, women's organisations, disability groups and trade unions.

We also met the Morocco-appointed governor of the region as well as the mayor of the city of Laayoune and pro-Moroccan civil society groups, the Moroccan Human Rights group and Wolfgang Weisbrod-Weber, the head of Minurso, the UN mission set up to work for a referendum on Western Sahara independence.

So why does Western Sahara matter?

When the European powers divided up Africa in the late 19th century Spain became master of this vast area of mainly desert land, stretching from Algeria to the Atlantic and south to Mauritania.

From the 1950s colony after colony achieved independence. French influence on Morocco ended in 1956, though Mauritania and Algeria had to fight bloody wars for their own independence.

Spain finally withdrew from Western Sahara in 1975 after the death of fascist dictator General Franco.

But it handed administration of the territory to Morocco and Mauritania - sparking a war when Sahrawi national liberation front Polisario launched a bid to win self-determination.

Mauritania soon withdrew but Morocco did not and has occupied the country since. It built a sand wall around most of the territory ahead of a ceasefire in 1991. The landmines from the fighting will take another decade to clear.

The UN set up Minurso, which still has offices in Laayoune as well as in Tindhouf, Algeria.

Years of negotiation over a referendum on the territory's future proved fruitless as Morocco and Polisario were unable to agree on an electoral roll.

The UN has since suspended its referendum plans.

Rabat asserts that the area should be an autonomous part of Morocco. Former US secretary of state James Baker suggested a compromise, with a referendum on independence after 10 years.

Polisario reluctantly agreed, only for the proposal to be rejected by Morocco.

The majority of Sahrawis live in refugee camps in Algeria. There are 100,000 people stuck in camps in the Algerian desert, many of whom have been there since the 1970s.

The remaining Sahrawi population in the territory are now outnumbered by Moroccan settlers. Many now rely on the Moroccan state and para-state companies for work.

In legal terms the territory is a non-self governing territory, in other words occupied. That has been the reason for opposition to the EU's fishing agreement with Morocco which allows Western Sahara fish to enter our shops.

Behind the dispute lie the national ambitions of Morocco and the huge mineral wealth of phosphates which stream out of the territory through Laayoune, as well as prodigious quantities of fish off the coast.

There are now increasing Moroccan farming activities around the other main city of Dhakla, with vast tomato plantations being established. Some of the products end up in our supermarkets.

The abuse of Western Sahara residents goes on. When we met representatives of the Collective of Human Rights Defenders of Western Sahara (Codesa) we heard of arbitrary arrests, the detention of young people and discrimination against those who speak in favour of self-determination.

Codesa president Aminatou Haidar was herself jailed for years - and kept blindfolded for four of them.

She has been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize.

The president of the Sahrawi Phosphate Workers Union explained to us that in 1975 24,000 people, all Sahrawi, had worked in the industry, but now it was a tiny percentage of that and Sahrawis were on worse-paid jobs.

We also met the families of people who have been killed and of those still in prison.

But Moroccan-based civil society groups all supported autonomy within Morocco, while being unspecific about what that meant.

They talked of the importance of the national Human Rights Commission and about social and economic development. The proximity of the Canary Islands and the potential to increase tourism were raised.

When we met the governor and the mayor of Laayoune both insisted that autonomy could be a solution to the political crisis - and both heaped abuse on Algeria for housing the refugees and supporting Polisario.

A constant refrain was that human rights had been politicised and there was freedom of expression in Western Sahara.

Certainly there has been development, with good roads and huge infrastructure projects in Laayoune.

The whole occupied region is virtually tax-free and settlers' salaries are higher than in Morocco. The cost to the Moroccan government is enormous.

But we sensed a surreal disconnect when we left the sumptuous mayor's residence to observe a demonstration.

Minurso's mandate is up for renewal on April 15 and all Sahrawi self-determination groups demand that it should have a human rights mandate added.

Demonstrations are called on the 15th of every month to highlight this.

We drove through the streets in the wind and rain to where the demonstration was due to assemble.

We saw van-loads of young men getting out and being given large sticks which they used to beat any young man they saw walking or running down the street.

The small number who managed to assemble anyway were forcibly dispersed.

Our car was then stopped and the police attempted to arrest our driver, a Codesa member, for alleged traffic violations, and remove his car with a tow-truck.

We were actually attached to the tow truck with two of us still in the car.

After an hour of argument and the arrival of the Human Rights Commission our driver was released and we agreed to leave the area in his company.

His car was however removed as the police thought investigating his road tax was clearly a priority and could only be done by confiscating the vehicle. The operation involved at least 30 police officers.

Later that night the governor put out a statement saying we had "incited" young people to demonstrate by our presence.

And the following morning we met a woman with a badly bruised and cut hand from her attempt to attend the demo.

Throughout our visit we were accompanied by unmarked police vehicles and motorbikes which followed us everywhere and waited outside each meeting we attended.

The lack of a clear choice over Western Sahara's future has set settlers against local people in some - not all - cases and brought a huge police and army presence to the region.

Why? A conflict going back to colonisation has blighted the lives of the Sahrawi people.

Their resources should not be exploited until there is an agreement allowing them to choose their future, a choice they have never been allowed to make.

The UN must immediately renew Minurso and extend its mandate to monitor human rights throughout the territory.

Jeremy Corbyn is Labour MP for Islington North.

APPENDIX 2

Western Sahara activists feel full force of Moroccan intimidation

Moroccan security forces use heavy-handed tactics to repress Saharawi organisations and campaigns for independence

John Hilary, *The Guardian*, 25 February 2014

Western Sahara can only be described as a police state. I was there recently with the first British parliamentary delegation to the occupied territory and everywhere we went we were closely shadowed by undercover agents. Wherever we were driven by our Saharawi hosts, we were tailed by Moroccan police.

Most chilling of all was the heavy police intimidation of a peaceful Saharawi demonstration we witnessed in the capital, Laayoune, the day before we left.

The demonstration was the latest in a series of monthly protests called by human rights groups to demand the release of all Saharawi political prisoners being held in Moroccan jails, and an extension of the mandate of the UN monitoring body, Minurso, to include human rights.

Saharawi human rights groups had duly informed the Moroccan authorities of the protest in advance, but because all Saharawi organisations are banned, they were denied permission to hold the demonstration. The occupying forces in Western Sahara are not big on freedom of assembly.

Instead, those trying to make it to the protest found their way blocked by gangs of uniformed and plainclothes police and paramilitary auxiliaries to prevent the rally from taking place.

Wherever groups of Saharawi began to gather in surrounding streets, we saw police vans driven fast towards them and plainclothes officers jumping out to disperse people with baton charges.

The small numbers who did manage to make it through were immediately set upon. Next morning we were shown video footage of uniformed and plainclothes police surrounding protesters and roughly bundling them away.

We also met a number of those the police had assaulted, including one woman sporting bandages where she had been hit. Most shrugged off their injuries as an unavoidable hazard of activism under Moroccan occupation.

The delegation, which included the MPs Jeremy Corbyn and Mark Williams and the co-ordinator of the Western Sahara Campaign John Gurr, was in the territory to witness the human rights situation facing the Saharawi people after 39 years of Moroccan occupation.

We too had a brief taste of police harassment when the car in which we were driving was pulled over and impounded on the pretext that its papers were not in order.

While we were remonstrating with the crowd of plainclothes police who descended upon us, one reached into the car and snatched the camera with which we had been taking photos of the demonstration. We managed to retrieve it after making representations to the prefect of police, but all images of the rally had been wiped from its memory card.

In UN parlance, Western Sahara is officially a non-self-governing territory. This makes it Africa's last remaining colony, and no other country in the world recognises Morocco's sovereignty.

When Spanish colonial forces quit the area in 1975, the Moroccans moved in from the north and the Mauriticians from the south. Mauritania soon pulled its forces out again but Morocco stayed, launching successive waves of immigration into the territory that have turned the Saharawi people into a minority in their own land.

Any call for Saharawi independence is considered a crime against the integrity of the Moroccan state, as is showing the Saharawi flag in public. This did not stop several people proudly displaying it to us throughout our visit, as a sign of their refusal to bow to Moroccan military rule.

Morocco has pumped large amounts of money into Western Sahara to entice more settlers to move in and create the appearance of progress and normality. We were shown grandiose plans for public parks and municipal buildings in a development spree designed to turn Laayoune into a desert Disneyland.

In return, Morocco helps itself to the territory's natural resources, foremost among them phosphates, fish and the prospect of significant oil and mineral reserves.

As Europeans, we are also complicit in the dispossession of Saharawi resources. Last December our representatives in the European parliament signed us up to a new fisheries agreement with Morocco that allows European boats to fish in Saharawi waters in return for a healthy fee to the Moroccan authorities.

This was a major step backwards in the fight for justice in Western Sahara, not least because the parliament had previously voted against such a deal. Under international law Morocco has no right to trade away the resources of the Saharawi people.

We visited the fishing port close to Laayoune and saw the many boats moored there waiting to head out for the next catch. Almost all those employed in the industry are Moroccan settlers, with few job opportunities available for the Saharawi themselves.

All Saharawi activists we met were adamant that the only solution to their plight can come from the referendum on self-determination they were promised by the UN security council in 1991.

Until that promise is honoured, the struggle for Saharawi independence will continue.

FURTHER INFORMATION

The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Western Sahara exists to promote issues of mutual concern between British MPs and Western Sahara. Details of the group's membership are available from the Register of All-Party Groups on the parliamentary website: parliament.uk

The Western Sahara Campaign works in solidarity with the Saharawi people to generate political support in order to advance their right to self-determination and to promote their human rights. More details about how to support the campaign can be found at wsahara.org.uk

Western Sahara Resource Watch is an international network of organisations and activists researching and campaigning against companies working for Moroccan interests in Western Sahara, with a comprehensive website at wsrw.org

The Western Sahara Action Forum provides information and resources to support the campaign for the United Nations to live up to its legal and moral obligations to implement a human rights monitoring body in Western Sahara: wsaforum.org

War on Want has supported the cause of Saharawi self-determination for many years, engaging in campaigns, activism and lobbying in the UK and Europe on behalf of Saharawi rights: waronwant.org

Adala UK aims to raise awareness of the conflict and of human rights violations in Western Sahara, working with activists within Occupied Western Sahara and in Morocco to give the human rights movement a unified voice at the international level: adalauk.org

The Sahara Press Service provides regularly updated news on all aspects of the situation in Occupied Western Sahara and the Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria: spsrasd.info/en