

# **The Saharawi Struggle for Self-Determination:**

**a history of the campaign in Britain**



**December 2012**

## To Lamine Baali



*Lamine Baali (right) with Saharawi human rights activist, Mohamed Daddach*

This short history has been written to put on record the work and achievements of the campaign in Britain for the rights of the Saharawi and to acknowledge the enormous contribution made to that work by Mr Lamine Baali who was the Polisario Front's Representative in the UK from 1984 to 1995 and again from 2008 to 2012.

In December 2012 Lamine Baali will leave London to become the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic's Ambassador to the African Union.

In a booklet of this length it is has not been possible to cover all activities of the campaign or to mention all those who have worked hard on its behalf. I can only extend a general thanks to all who have made the campaign possible, financially and operationally.

I am grateful to all those who have provided material and to John Gurr, Keith Lomax and Mark Luetchford who have commented on early drafts, and to Angel Martinez who has contributed the section on Sandblast.

Ken Ritchie  
Western Sahara Campaign  
December 2012



# The Saharawi Struggle for Self-Determination: a history of the campaign in Britain

## Introduction

When Morocco invaded Western Sahara in 1975, few in Britain took much notice. Few were aware that Spain had a colony to the south of Morocco and, of those who did, few were greatly bothered about who controlled it. A decade earlier Britain had seen its former African colonies, with the troublesome exception of what was to become Zimbabwe, gain their independence, and it was clear that the ending of colonial rule was often a messy business. While Morocco may have been behaving badly, this part of Africa was not in Britain's sphere of influence and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was not going to spend much time worrying about dispute over what appeared to be a sparsely populated bit of desert.

A much more important foreign policy concern in October 1975 was the health of Franco, the general who had ruled Spain with an iron fist since 1939. Not many in Britain were going to regret his passing, but what Spain would look like post-Franco and how a new Spanish regime would change European politics appeared to be bigger questions than the future of the Spanish Sahara.

The British Government might have been sympathetic to the Saharawi (although there is little to suggest anything other than indifference), but in 1975 it was not an issue on which Britain felt a need to take a strong stance. Spain had been the colonial power and the invader, Morocco, had been under French control: from Britain's point of view, unsurprisingly, this was someone else's problem – a view that was to characterise British policy for years to come.

However, not everyone in Britain was prepared to turn a blind eye to Morocco's aggression. There were some who raised their voices in protest, demanding a tough line from the British government – Britain was, after all, a signatory to international conventions on human rights, a member of the UN Security Council and a significant voice in the Europe. Getting Britain to accept that it therefore had responsibilities, however, was going to be an uphill task, but the protesters were undeterred. The campaign that began in the UK shortly after Morocco's invasion has continued to the present day and, while the failure of successive British Governments to take more robust positions on Western Sahara is to be regretted, that campaign has not been without its successes.

This booklet tells the story of the campaign. It is about the efforts of many politicians, trade unionists, people from voluntary organisations, the media and the arts, and many others who have given their time and in many cases their resources to support the Saharawi in their struggle. They have been motivated by a sense of injustice, but they have also been inspired by the people of Western Sahara, and in particular those who have represented the Saharawi here in the UK. By far the longest serving of these representatives has been Lamine Baali, and this booklet has been written to acknowledge his efforts and achievements.

# I THE EARLY YEARS

## The beginning

Western Sahara became a Spanish colony – Spanish Sahara - in 1884 when Europe imposed its imperialist map on Africa at the Congress of Berlin. The Saharawi, although only a few hundred thousands in number, resented the arrival of a European power and the decades that followed saw many challenges to colonial rule. Morocco, soon after regaining its autonomy in 1956, made its own claims on the territory, signalling the conflict to come. It was during the 1960s, however, when many other African countries were gaining their independence, that Saharawi nationalism became a serious force. The United Nations also took an interest in process of decolonisation: in 1965 it asked Spain to prepare the country for independence and as early as 1968 called on Spain to hold the referendum on self-determination for which the Saharawi are still waiting. Spain was in no hurry, but, as it became apparent that Spanish rule was coming towards its end, Morocco's King Hassan made it clear that he did not want the Saharawi to get in the way of his territorial ambitions for a Greater Morocco.

Meanwhile the demand of the Saharawi for independence continued to grow. The suppression of an uprising in 1970 led to the creation in 1973 of Polisario (the Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro) which was ready to fight for it, and, unfortunately, would need to do so. In 1975, following a UN mission which asserted the right to self-determination and the rejection of Moroccan claims by the International Court of Justice, Moroccan troops entered Western Sahara. Franco, on his death bed, signed the infamous 'Madrid Accords' which divided Western Sahara between Morocco and Mauritania, and by the end of the year the occupation of the country was complete. Fleeing Saharawi were attacked from the air with phosphorous bombs, and around 165,000 escaped to southern Algeria where they have lived in desert camps ever since. When Mauritania, harassed by Polisario attacks, withdrew in 1979, Morocco laid claim to the entire country.

## The Sahara Action Committee

In Britain, the British Red Cross, Oxfam and Christian Aid responded to the humanitarian crisis

in the refugee camps, but the issue required a political response. There were some in Britain who were appalled by these events and determined to do something. In May 1977 a group of around 30 people got together to discuss what could be done. They included journalists such as Francis Ghiles, from the Anti-Slavery Society academic Jeremy Swift and John Gretton (who had already written the Society's 'Western Sahara; the fight for self-determination'), representatives from the Young Liberals and Third World First and Steve Vines of Labour's International Department. Apologies, with messages of support, were received from MPs Peter Hain and William Wilson as well as Lord Brockway. Also at the meeting was a representative of Polisario which was keen that Britain should play its part, had sent to London as its first UK representative. The Sahara Action Committee (SAC) was born, with George Dunk as Chair and Roger Hardy, a writer in Middle East affairs who had previously worked with CAABU (the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding) as Co-ordinator.



*Desert camps – home for 165,000 refugees*

The Committee began life with little in the way of resources, but the Joseph Rowntree Social Services Trust gave it a base in its offices in Poland Street in London. Support also came from the Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers which had followed the conflict and Nick Blake, a member of their committee, was soon playing an active part in SAC's work.

One of the most influential voices at the time was that of Tony Hodges, a writer and journalist who travelled extensively in the Maghreb during the early years of the conflict. His numerous reports appeared not just in Britain but around the world, and his book, 'Western Sahara, Roots of a Desert

Conflict', published in 1983, remains the authoritative work on the background to the conflict. Tony Hodges was to become a driving force in the campaign in Britain.

The Sahara Action Committee was soon at work, lobbying politicians, encouraging media coverage, protesting outside the Moroccan Embassy and tourist office and producing newsletters. These newsletters, although no more than typed pages, covered many of the issues that would fill newsletters in the years to come – successful raids by Polisario, Morocco's response with US and Saudi support, UN resolutions on which no action was ever taken, the growing diplomatic support for Polisario, human rights abuses, etc. In 1978 SAC held its first public meeting at the Africa Centre, and its political work resulted in a statement from the Labour Party in support of Polisario. In 1980 it took part for the first time in a co-ordinating conference of European solidarity groups and it held its first meeting at Westminster, with politicians from the three major parties, as well as Tony Hodges. A meeting was also held in Oxford and, in Edinburgh, John Mercer (who was soon to write the Minority Rights Group report on Western Sahara) organised a seminar with speakers from the university.

1978 and 1979 saw some detailed articles on the conflict in the broadsheets and specialist journals, many of them the result of Tony Hodges' work, but perhaps the most significant, at least in public awareness-raising, was the London Evening Standard's front page headline on 25 October: 'Death in the Desert'. This claimed to be the first eyewitness report on Polisario's successful raid on Mahbes in which Morocco suffered hundreds of casualties. The plight of the refugees was also highlighted by Christian Aid in 1978 through its "The Hidden War" report.

The Queen's visit to Morocco in 1980 provoked an angry response from SAC. It arranged letters of concern from politicians including MPs David Alton, Andrew Faulds, Peter Hain, Matthew Parris and William Wilson, and Lord Avebury and, in a letter to the Foreign Secretary, the SAC protested that in spite of assurances of Britain's support of the right to self-determination and its profession of neutrality, the Queen's visit could be interpreted as endorsing Morocco's claims to the country. Letters to Buckingham Palace only met

with the response that the Queen acted on the advice of her ministers. However, the visit was not entirely the success that King Hassan might have wished: reports that the Queen had been kept waiting by the King and that the perception that she had not been treated with appropriate dignity provided ammunition that campaigners would use when the King made a return visit to London eight years later (see below).

Polisario was also busy at Westminster during this period: more and more parliamentarians were becoming aware of the conflict and MPs David Steel and Tony Clarke made the first attempt to form a cross-party group.

The SAC's membership had increased to over 80, and in 1981 they packed the restaurant of the Africa Centre for a dinner to mark the fifth anniversary of founding of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) – the state in exile created by Polisario - with Matthew Parris MP as guest speaker.

### **Lamine Baali arrives**

In 1981 a young Polisario member, Lamine Baali, made his first visit to Britain. He had been an active member of Polisario's youth wing before working with their national radio, followed by brief periods with Protocol Section and the Ministry of Education of SADR (the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic), the state in exile which the Saharawi had formed. After some time in London, Lamine Baali left for Sweden where he successfully set up a women's support group, and then did further work back in the camps with Polisario's media team. In the autumn of 1983, however, he was back in Britain, making plans for his return the following year as Polisario's new UK representative.

The SAC had many achievements. It had brought together a group of influential academics, journalists and political activists, and it had won the support of many politicians. But Lamine Baali recognised that next stage of the campaign would need something more – a 'campaign' rather than a 'committee', and one that would be better resourced and have a wider outreach. During his visit in 1983 he enlisted the support of those who would launch the new Western Sahara Campaign.

## 2 THE WESTERN SAHARA CAMPAIGN IS BORN (1984 – 86)

In 1984 Lamine Baali returned to London as Polisario's representative in the UK and immediately got to work pulling together the people who would get the new Western Sahara Campaign off the ground. Central figures were Roger Hardy who had played a leading role in the Sahara Action Committee, Tony Hodges whose book, 'Western Sahara, The Roots of a Desert War', published in 1983, was the definitive work on Western Sahara, Adrian Fulford, a barrister from the Haldane Society which had spoken out against the illegality of Morocco's actions and Ken Ritchie from the old committee. With Lamine, the four met regularly, both in Ken Ritchie's office and Tony Hodge's house.

Hardy, Hodges and Fulford were of the view that a campaign was only possible if there was money for a part-time staff member and an office. Ritchie, believing that it would be impossible to find the resources needed, left them to tackle the fundraising, but he was proved to be wrong – the Barrow Cadbury Trust offered £5,000 over two years and the Joseph Rowntree Social Service Trust granted £ 870 for launch costs. A co-ordinator was duly employed and Peter Davies of the Anti-Slavery Society generously offered a desk in the Society's library and that was to be the campaign's address for many years.

In the second half of 1984, the four founding members met regularly with Lamine Baali to plan the work of the new Western Sahara Campaign (WSC). David Alton (then an MP), Lord (Fenner) Brockway, the veteran Labour anti-colonialist, Basil Davidson, the writer on African liberation, Lord Gifford, Peter Hain MP and Alf Lomas MEP were enlisted as sponsors (joined shortly afterwards by Harriet Harman MP), and nearly £2000 was raised from campaign supporters. The first WSC Newsletter was produced, and a new report on Western Sahara by the London-based Minority Rights Group added to the WSC's campaign resources.

### **The campaign is launched**

It was not, however, until 1985, however, that WSC was formally launched. On 27 February, the ninth anniversary of the founding of SADR, 45 people attended the inaugural meeting in the Commonwealth Institute. Speakers included

Mohammed Sidati, the member of the Polisario Political Bureau responsible for foreign affairs attended (he had been in London the previous week to meet with Denis Healy and leading Conservatives), Tony Hodges and, of course, Lamine Baali. The Greater London Council sent a statement welcoming "the establishment here in London of the Western Sahara Campaign" and a message of support was received from Andrew Faulds MP. A constitution was adopted and a committee elected, with Adrian Fulford as chair and Ken Ritchie as Treasurer. The next day Mohammed Sidati gave a press conference attended by 20 journalists.

The months that followed the launch saw a period of intense activity. In April there was a showing of the US television documentary, 'Blood on the Sand', at the Africa Centre, and Tony Hodges spoke at a meeting arranged by CAABU at Westminster. The support of the trade union movement was seen, then as now, as being of key importance and, in May, Lamine Baali organised a visit by two Saharawi trade unionists, holding meetings with senior figures in the TUC, the NUJ, the TGWU and the Tailors and Garment Workers Union. In the same month representatives of the National Union of Saharawi Women came to Britain for a series of meetings. In June, a visit to Britain by a UJSARIO (Polisario's youth movement) delegation was followed by David Styan, who had taken over as WSC Co-ordinator, attending the second UJSARIO congress in the camps.

Lamine Baali visited Ireland, for which he was also responsible, in June where he met with the political parties, aid organisations and others – shortly beforehand Tony Hodges from the Campaign had shown 'Blood on the Sand' in meetings in Cork and Dublin.

Although WSC was now in full swing, Western Sahara was never going to be a major foreign policy issue for Britain. From an early stage, co-ordination with other support groups in Europe was seen as an important part of WSC's strategy. The Campaign therefore contributed to the planning of a major conference that was held in Paris in November 1985. Lords Avebury, Brockway and Gifford, as well as Judith Hart, Ken Livingstone and Matthew Parris and actress Julie Christie were enlisted as 'sponsors' of the conference, and the

twelve-strong British delegation that attended included Jeremy Corbyn MP and Mike McGowan MEP.

From then on, WSC would continue work with partners in other countries, particularly through what became EUCOCO – the European Co-ordinating Conference on Western Sahara. International work was not always easy for the Campaign – WSC was a small player compared with some of the European participants and, particularly when the Campaign’s initial funding from trusts had come to an end, the costs as well as the benefits of involvement in Europe had to be carefully considered.

### **War on Want adds its support**

By this time War on Want was supporting projects in the camps. That was important not just because the refugees were largely reliant on international aid, but because War on Want was also a campaign. War on Want’s involvement had begun in 1981 when two members of the former Sahara Action Committee, Ken Ritchie and Tom Lines, had successfully proposed a motion at the charity’s AGM. War on Want staff member James Firebrace visited the camps and presented a detailed report. By 1984 support was being given to a shoe-making workshop, but this was soon extended to the remarkable vegetable gardens that the Saharawi had developed in the camps in spite of dry, desert conditions. Through time War on Want was to become the lead agency in a European consortium supporting this programme: in the words of War on Want’s fundraising leaflet, it was ‘making the desert bloom’. In 1990 when War on Want experienced financial problems, OneWorld Action became involved, with their work led by Andy Rutherford.

Both War on Want and One World Action remained staunch allies of WSC, and Glenys Kinnock, then chair of One World Action spoke at Labour conference meetings for WSC. An FBU delegation visited the camps with War on Want to build a warehouse. Oxfam also provided assistance to the camps, and Tear Fund made generous grants to WSC for information services.

### **SADR ten years old**

February 1986 saw the tenth anniversary of the founding of SADR and a large party from Britain attended the celebrations in the camps. The group included MPs Ron Davies and Sean Hughes and, importantly, Lord Winchilsea who returned determined to do something to help (and about whom more will be said later).

In the following month, Oxford University’s Refugee Studies Unit held a conference on Western Sahara – an event in whose planning the WSC had played a major part. Around 80 participants discussed papers from Tony Hodges, David Seddon of University of East Anglia who also served on the WSC committee, James Firebrace of War on Want and other international academics. An output of the conference was the book, ‘War and Refugees: the Western Sahara Conflict’, published in 1987.

When the WSC held its 1986 AGM in May it had much to talk about – its Annual Report ran to 16 pages, giving an impressive list of activities, events and contacts made. In its first year, 6 newsletters had been produced and the mailing list had grown to 300. Lamine Baali was the key speaker, and the 40 people who attended also heard from Tony Hodges and Alf Lomas MEP.

## **3. THE WAR GOES ON (1986 – 1990)**

By this time, Polisario had been engaged in its armed struggle against Moroccan occupation for 11 years. Militarily, in terms of armaments and troops, the two sides were hopelessly mismatched, but Polisario had on its side its knowledge of the terrain, its ability to move across the desert and conduct lightning strikes, and the

passion and nerve of its fighters. Morocco had continued extending a fortified wall – the Berm – to keep Polisario out of the main towns and the phosphate mining areas, but the cost of maintaining and defending the wall was imposing a huge burden on the Moroccan economy. Polisario demonstrated time and time again that it

could breach and inflict much damage, but it never had any hope of defeating a much stronger enemy. A military stalemate was therefore inevitable..

Military action could maintain pressure on Morocco, but the conflict could only be resolved by a political settlement, and with Morocco refusing to recognise Polisario that seemed a long way off. Nevertheless, international support for Polisario was gaining in strength: in 1980 the UN General Assembly had recognised Polisario as the representative of the Saharawi and had called for direct negotiations between the parties. In 1982 the SADR was accepted as a member of the OAU, prompting the resignation of Morocco. The following years saw attempts by the OAU to end the conflict: in 1983 it formulated its own plans for direct negotiations, a cease fire and a referendum, under the auspices of the OAU and the UN, on the territory's future. The demand for a referendum then became central to all diplomatic initiatives, and the UN, with extreme optimism, called for it to be held on 31 December 1983.

Morocco, however, was having none of it: it offered to hold a referendum itself, but a referendum run by Morocco on Moroccan terms without a ceasefire was a non-starter as far as Polisario and the international community was concerned. At the end of 1985 the UN joined the call for direct negotiations, but Morocco refused to talk with Polisario: as a result the UN Secretary General proposed 'proximity talks' (in which the two parties would talk through an intermediary): these began in April 1986, but they got nowhere as a result of Moroccan intransigence.

The WSC moved into its second year buoyed up by the momentum of its first, but the apparent failure to attempts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict did not give grounds for optimism. The major powers, including Britain, continued in their refusal to recognise Moroccan annexation of Western Sahara, they were even prepared to rebuke Morocco for its hardline stance, but they were not prepared to use any leverage to force Morocco into serious negotiations. For Britain, Morocco was not just a 'moderate' Arab state which should not be antagonised, but it was also a major trading partner.

WSC also suffered some setbacks at this time. It lost three of its founding members – Tony Hodges moved to Africa with the Ford Foundation, Roger Hardy became editor of a journal that made partisan involvement impossible and Adrian

Fulford resigned as chair because of the demands of a career that would take him to a knighthood and the bench. Financially too, times were hard – at one AGM a collection was needed to pay the campaign's bills. Graham Lane, then co-ordinator, had to organise a sponsored walk around the headquarters of the main parties to raise funds at the end of 1987, and the sale of WSC Christmas cards helped replenish the funds. New committee members were found and WSC was restored to health.

### **King Hassan in London**

An opportunity for further protests arose in July 1987 when King Hassan visited London. WSC swung into action, organising a protest letter by 50 peers and 100 opposition MPs who denounced the King as a despot in Britain to buy arms for his "wretched" 12-Year war. The letter was delivered to the Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, by the Conservative peer Lord Wise, the Liberal Lord Winchilsea and Labour's Baroness Ewart-Biggs. Demonstrations were also held by the WSC and Amnesty. What was particularly effective, however, were the media briefings recalling how the King had kept the British Queen waiting during her visit to Morocco in 1980 and how Princess Margaret had described her time in Morocco as being "like kidnapped". Descriptions of the King in the press ranged from "a weary garden gnome" to "a despot" and "a desert pratt". There was some speculation that the King cancelled the extra days he had planned to spend golfing in Scotland because of the publicity he received.

To coincide with the King's visit, War on Want launched its booklet, 'Exiles of the Sahara', by James Firebrace with Jeremy Harding, and a foreword by Julie Christie. Jeremy Harding also worked with the WSC on the production of a video with support from the European Human Rights Foundation and War on Want.

Further publicity for Western Sahara came in August 1988 with the first visit to Britain by children from the camps. The visit, organised with Woodcraft Folk, was essentially a humanitarian project, but photographs in the press of refugee children at an international youth camp and afterwards in London reminded people not just of the conflict but of the way it was depriving a new generation of Saharawi of the opportunities that most young people expect. Many more visits were to follow in succeeding years (see pages 14 and 15).

## Moving towards a ceasefire

Meanwhile the search for peace continued with a UN mission visiting both Morocco and the Saharawi camps towards the end of 1987. The European Parliament also adopted a strongly worded resolution expressing its “utmost concern” over the repression of Saharawi in the occupied territory. Nevertheless, the previous year the Parliament had renewed a fisheries agreement with Morocco that recognised Morocco’s right to fish in Western Sahara’s territorial waters, in spite of a statement by the International Commission of Jurists on its illegality: Morocco’s plundering of Saharawi fish stocks was to become a major campaigning issue for WSC in the years ahead.

WSC’s contribution to the international campaign was recognised in 1988 when EUCOCO decided to hold its annual conference in Britain. Folkestone was chosen to make it easy for those travelling from the continent (it was also easy for Moroccan agents who gained access to the hotel on the final morning and removed supplies of leaflets). Lord Winchilsea, on behalf of WSC, welcomed 72 delegates from 15 countries, and Polisario was represented by some of its senior figures as well as by Lamine Baali.

The first sign of a political breakthrough came in August 1988 when, following meetings involving the UN Secretary General, the two sides agreed to a referendum. The WSC welcomed the announcement, but cautiously as there was still concern whether the referendum would offer the Saharawi a genuine chance to choose independence. Any optimism was, however, short-lived: although King Hassan met with Polisario leaders in the January of the following year, he cancelled follow-up meetings and launched a new diplomatic offensive against Polisario. The UN Technical Mission tasked with finding a formula for the referendum was in place, but the peace process was effectively at a standstill. By the end of 1989, WSC was reporting that “Due to King Hassan’s refusal to continue negotiations ... the war has escalated to levels not seen since the early 1980s”: on four occasions in the space of two months, Polisario breached the wall, capturing weapons and prisoners. Not until the middle of 1990 was the WSC Newsletter able to talk of the peace process making “a shaky start”.

Throughout this period Lamine Baali and WSC continued to build political support. MPs Donald Anderson and Gerald Kaufman visited the camps, and in 1987 Andrew Faulds MP tried to form a new

all-party parliamentary group at Westminster, but with an election looming this did not get far. The following year a resolution on Western Sahara was submitted to the Labour Party conference, but was not debated, but in 1989 WSC held its first reception at a Labour conference when Donald Anderson and Jeremy Corbyn joined Lamine Baali on the platform. In 1988 Polisario marked the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding with a reception at the Royal Commonwealth Society: although this was a Polisario event, WSC provided organisational help.

During the 10 anniversary celebrations of SADR in the camps in 1986, Lord Winchilsea and Ken Ritchie spoke with Swedish colleagues about their work in organising lorry loads of supplies, contributed by local communities at solidarity meetings, which were then driven to the camps with accompanying journalists. In the coming years WSC tried to arrange a similar project in Britain, but found the financial and logistic problems considerable: Christian Aid was prepared to help, but for others it was a political project rather than an economic way of providing assistance. Lord Winchilsea, however, was undeterred. In 1988 he set up the Saharawan Aid Trust, using his position to attract support from many companies, leading to the first of ten ‘Rainbow Rovers’ convoys in 1989 (see following page).

## Signs of progress

By 1990 there were some signs of progress. The UN Secretary General appointed Johannes Manz as his Special Representative – Manz visited the area in preparation for a visit by Kofi Anna which followed.

WSC, however, was not going to relax its efforts. Regular protests were organised outside the Moroccan Embassy and its tourist office, then in Regent Street (this writer has mixed memories of performing as the rear end of a pantomime camel): the head of the tourist office later claimed there was no protest, there had not been a war and there were no refugee camps or prisoners! In March WSC members managed to attend the Moroccan National Day reception, but were not warmly received.

Amnesty International, with whom WSC had worked closely over the years (but whose remit prevented it from taking a position on self-determination) provided further ammunition by producing a report highly critical of Morocco containing evidence of prisoners being

“humiliated, beaten and tortured during interrogations”: King Hassan responded with fury: adverts were placed in newspapers across Europe, including in the Independent, which dismissed AI’s report as propaganda based on “subjective and spiteful testimonies”. WSC also made protests when 20 leading UK companies took part in a British Trade Exhibition in Casablanca: Britain may have claimed to be neutral on the conflict, but it was not going to use its economic leverage to persuade Morocco to negotiate.

By the middle of 1990, however, WSC was able to report a “Shaky start to the peace process”. Namibia had finally achieved independence and

the UN was stepping up its efforts to resolve the situation in Western Sahara. The UN Security Council accepted the Secretary General’s proposals for a UN-supervised referendum. Meanwhile the EU passed a supportive resolution calling on Morocco to respect human rights.

WSC itself was emerging from a sticky period – funding had been a problem, and for much of 1989 it had been without a co-ordinator with committee members sharing the burden in a voluntary capacity. War on Want staff and volunteers, like Mark Luetchford, helped keep the WSC active.. However, the bank balance recovered and Hugo Burdick, was appointed Co-ordinator.

## **Rainbow Rovers**

*When the Earl of Winchilsea and Nottingham (‘Chris’ to all who knew him) attended the SADR’s tenth anniversary celebrations in 1986 as a representative of the Liberal Party, he was struck by both the poverty and resilience of the refugees. He returned determined to do something to help. Later that year, with his friend, Conservative peer Lord Wise, and with Lamine Baali’s help, he made a further visit to the camps to formulate his plans.*

*In 1988 he founded the Saharawan Aid Trust to assist those in the camps, and he did it with style. Using his position in the Lords he set about getting donations of equipment and provisions as well as money – medical supplies from Boots, Beecham and ICI, shoes from Clarks and paper and pencils from W H Smith. He also used his extensive contacts in the music entertainment industry (he was a passionate jazz fan and performer) to raise funds – support came from A&M Records, Polygram, Island Records and others including the National Federation of Taxicabs which he had championed in the Lords. Oxfam, CAFOD, War on Want and the Rowntree Trust helped to meet the costs. He then assembled a convoy of landrovers which drove from outside the House of Lords to the camps in Tindouf in Algeria, with a film crew on board to record the journey. Their route took them through Brussels and Strasbourg where they were joined by a group of MEPs.*

*This was just the first of ten ‘Rainbow Rovers’ convoys. Drivers came from all walks of life – police officers played a large part in one and firemen in another – and from all parts of the country, developing local support for the Saharawi. The direct aid was of prime importance, but the convoys also helped to assure the Saharawi that they had not been forgotten by the rest of the world. On reaching the camps, the drivers spent time using their technical skills to repair vehicles, as well as helping to renovate schools and other facilities. The aid carried generally included medical supplies and equipment, and Chris Winchilsea was very successful in persuading hospitals to donate surplus beds and hospital furniture. Basic landrovers which could be easily maintained were used, and those left in the camps were very useful for transporting water and food and ambulance services, and at the end of their useful lives could be salvaged for spare parts.*

*Sadly, Chris Winchilsea died suddenly in 1999. In the camps there were three days of official mourning, and in his memory one of the largest convoys left Britain for the camps in 2001 - two articulated lorries, 14 landrovers and two buses – but other convoys were to follow.*

## 4. CEASEFIRE AND HOPES FOR A REFERENDUM (1991 – 96)

A breakthrough finally came in 1991. Both parties agreed to a ceasefire which came into effect on 6<sup>th</sup> September and to plans for a referendum to be held under the auspices of the UN in January 1992. Arrangements were to be made for the return of refugees and the UN was to establish a mission (MINURSO – the UN Mission for a Referendum in Western Sahara) to monitor the ceasefire and oversee the referendum process.

After 16 years of war and bloodshed, this was an occasion for celebration, but there was also apprehension. At the WSC meeting that followed the announcement there was at least one member who did not believe the plan would work and that proposals for a voters' list based on an old Spanish census could ever be agreed: events of the following years were to prove him right.

All thoughts turned to the referendum, assumed to be just months away. Anxious that WSC should not be short of money during this period, an appeal for funds was launched. On this occasion WSC was not seeking bankers orders but straight donations, believing that the campaign's work would soon be over!

### **Morocco blocks progress**

It soon became apparent, however, that Morocco was dragging its feet and things were not going to go as smoothly as the UN had hoped. WSC set about lobbying to get the British Government to use its influence to press for progress: it was felt that many who would not go as far as supporting Polisario's position would nevertheless join a campaign to ensure the success of the referendum, and 'The Committee for a Free and Fair Referendum' was established by WSC with Malcolm Harper, Director of the UK United Nations Association as chair.

In 1992 Western Sahara was raised in debates in both the Commons and the Lords and there were EDMs for politicians to sign. But in Western Sahara itself 1992 passed without much progress as Morocco tried its best to rig the electoral register in its favour. In 1993 the Committee for a Free and Fair Referendum continued its work – in July it held a Westminster reception on 'The right to vote – the right to a future', co-hosted by MPs David Steel, Cyril Townsend and Michael Watson; Lord

Redesdale joined Townsend and Watson in the first all-party delegation to the camps; WSC's own lobbying targeted not just MPs but also Sir David Hannay, Britain's representative at the UN; and Jeremy Corbyn moved an adjournment debate in the Commons. To ensure that WSC could respond quickly to events, a telephone tree was set up. And members were encouraged to write to their MPs.

In spite of Moroccan obstructions, in 1993 there was still optimism and Polisario believed a referendum was not far off: in July the WSC newsletter was able to use the headline, 'Voting early next year?'. A year later, however, it was clear things were going badly. In July 1994 a WSC briefing paper reported not just that Morocco was trying to add 120,000 (soon to rise to 170,000) of its own citizens to the electoral roll for the referendum, but human rights violations were continuing, the work of MINURSO was being obstructed, and Morocco was continuing to govern the territory as if the settlement plan did not exist. 'Time up for the UN plan?' was the headline of a WSC newsletter.

The British Government remained supportive of the UN plan, but without playing any major role in developments. It contributed financially to the costs of MINURSO, but withdrew its troops in October 1993. WSC and its parliamentary supporters expressed disappointment – they wanted to see a bigger British commitment to the peace process: "It is surely an appropriate time for Security Council Members, including Britain, to play a more active role in facilitating direct negotiation" wrote Baroness Blackstone, Menzies Campbell, David Steel, Lord Tordoff, Cyril Townsend and Lord Wise in a letter to The Times in 1994.

### **Campaigning continues**

Throughout these post-ceasefire years, there was no let-up in WSC's campaigning. There were children's visits - part organised and funded by WSC –including to Scotland for the first time. MSF funded a meeting at the Labour conference in 1992 (the following year MSF Youth donated sports equipment for the camps) and Glenda Jackson MP chaired a meeting at the 1993 conference, at which Michael Meacher MP and Lamine Baali were speakers. The plight of women

in the camps was highlighted at a One World Action conference in October 1993, leading to a report in 1994 which committee member Ana Balac helped to co-ordinate. Fishing rights remained on the agenda, and WSC set about preparing a legal challenge to the EU.

In October 1994, a freak event struck the Saharawi camps. Although situated in the normally dry and desolate desert of southern Algeria, that month they were flooded by torrential rain storms. Tents were washed away, sand-brick buildings collapsed and food stores were destroyed. In the absence of any humanitarian response by the British Government, WSC placed its own advertisement in the Guardian appealing for funds. Emergency supplies collected by WSC and Rainbow Rovers were taken to the camps, accompanied by Lamine Baali in December. Britain was urged to help in a Lords debate, in which Lords Winchilsea, Wise and Judd spoke, but the minister, Baroness Chalker, replied that she was satisfied with the support Britain was giving to UNHCR. WSC's new co-ordinator, Martin Hughes pressed further with the Overseas Development Administration but got the astonishing response that HMG did not want to help as they were neutral in the conflict!

At the end of January 1995, the failings of the referendum plan were brought out into the open when US Ambassador Frank Ruddy, who had been a member of MINURSO, spoke out on the mission's failures. He spoke of the harassment of MINURSO and the intimidation of prospective voters by the Moroccan authorities: in his view MINURSO had "ceased to be a UN-run operation" but instead had become "an instrument for Morocco's domination of the (voter) identification process". Questions in Parliament on his testimony, including from Jeremy Corbyn and Cyril Townsend, got replies that demonstrated the UK Government's appalling complacency. Meanwhile the Economist magazine warned that if the referendum process failed, the resumption of war was only a matter of time.

### **WSC goes nationwide**

WSC's work entered a new phase in 1994 when it opened an office in Leeds.

For most of its early years, WSC had been London-based – that was understandable as work revolved around Parliament, the national media and protests at Morocco's London embassy and, moreover, most of those involved in the campaign worked for London-based organisations. However,

support had grown around the country, particularly as a result of children's visits, most of which had been hosted by local groups of Woodcraft Folk. Early in 1994 WSC held a national conference in Manchester where Ruth Abrahams and others had been campaigning, and groups also formed in Wales and Scotland (where MEP Alex Smith was very supportive, offering the use of his office and moving a resolution in the European parliament which led to 500,000 euros in aid for the camps). The strongest group was, however, in Leeds: it was led by a local solicitor, Keith Lomax and his partner, Julie Thorpe, who had hosted a children's visit two years earlier, following which Keith and Julie had visited the camps. Cate Lewis was also a stalwart worker for the group until she left Leeds for Australia some years later.

Lamine Baali, keen to have a network of supporters around the country, strongly supported these groups, and he offered the Leeds group a Saharawi worker to develop educational programmes in the north of England, provided that the group could accommodate him. Mehdi Bachir of Polisario arrived in Leeds in 1994, an office was found in the building of the Leeds Methodist Mission, and on 12<sup>th</sup> October, the 'Day of Saharawi Unity', it was officially opened with local MPs John Gunnell, George Mudie and Mick Clapham in attendance. Local MEP, Mike McGowan was also a strong supporter – in November he became chair of the European Parliament Intergroup on Western Sahara.

For its first two years the Leeds group was dependent on volunteer help, but nevertheless it was remarkably active. As well as producing briefing packs for schools and others, a main focus of its work was on human rights – it initiated a campaign through which members 'adopted' political prisoners and were sent postcards demanding their release which could then be posted to the relevant authorities. WSC also stepped up its work on human rights, arranging distribution of an English edition of the Geneva-based Bureau for the Respect of Human Rights' newsletter, 'El Karama' (dignity), on human rights in Western Sahara and Morocco to all WSC supporters. In December 1995 it organised, with help from the European Human Rights foundation, a speaking tour by Mohamed Bouya, a former political prisoner who had 'disappeared': meetings were held in York, Sheffield, Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Preston, Leeds and London.

Although WSC now had a thriving office in Leeds, in London it was facing organisational problems.

Many of its key supporters had moved out of the city, it no longer had the Anti-Slavery Society, which had moved offices, as an address, and it was facing financial difficulties. Successive Treasurer's reports warned it was running out of money and its Co-ordinator, Martin Hughes, could only be paid for particular tasks. Nevertheless, he remained very active in organising events, such as the human rights tour, and in lobbying politicians, promoting EDMs and parliamentary questions, helping get an all-party group re-formed, briefing FCO officials on WSC's concerns and creating a WSC website. A high point in lobbying in 1995 came when Malcolm Harper had an opportunity to meet and raise Western Sahara with Boutros Ghali, the UN Secretary General, during a visit to Britain.

In 1996 when Martin Hughes moved on to other work, Richard Stanforth, who had been working as a volunteer in the Leeds office, was made Co-ordinator and the Leeds office became the national office of WSC with Keith Lomax as the WSC Chair. Richard Stanforth remained Co-ordinator for five years in which he gave the campaign exceptional service (it should be noted that Richard, like all other WSC Co-ordinators, was only given a honorarium for working one day each week, although all Co-ordinators have given WSC much more time on a voluntary basis).

The Leeds office also gave rise to the Western Sahara Trust. WSC had in the past considered setting up an associated charity to help it attract grants, but nothing had come of its discussions. However, council tax considerations made it advantageous for the Leeds office to be rented by a charity, and the Trust was therefore formed, making use of Keith Lomax's legal expertise. The

work of the Trust was later to go far beyond the maintenance of the Leeds office – over the years it has provided grants for children's visits, educational tours and humanitarian help to Saharawi asylum seekers.

### **Lamine Baali leaves for Sweden**

By this time WSC had lost one of its main sources of inspiration and support. Lamine Baali, who had done so much in creating and maintaining the campaign, as well as engaging in his own political work, was transferred to Sweden in 1995. A gathering of supporters to wish him well demonstrated the very high regard with which he was held.

For the next twelve years Lamine Baali was Polisario's representative to the Scandinavian countries – Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland. It was a period in which these countries moved to the forefront of international efforts to secure justice for the Saharawi. Both Norway and Sweden developed strong support groups; Sweden was the first to vote against EU Fisheries agreements that allowed foreign vessels to exploit Western Sahara's fish stocks; and Norway led the campaign against companies prospecting for oil in the territory, forcing Norwegian companies to suspend their activities. During Lamine Baali's time in Scandinavia, all countries were to send high level delegations to the camps and all provided humanitarian help. What WSC lost, Scandinavia gained.

Lamine Baali's departure might have been a serious blow for the campaign, but he was soon replaced by the very able Brahim Mokhtar.

## Children's visits



By 1988 around 165,000 Saharawi had been living as refugees for 13 years. A whole new generation had experienced nothing but the privations of life in tented camps surrounded by inhospitable desert. Support groups in a number of European countries – particularly Spain and Italy – had for some years tried to help by arranging holiday visits for young Saharawi. Lamine Baali was keen that Britain should also play its part by offering similar experiences, but WSC initially responded with some caution – the costs were much more than WSC could afford, the logistical problems were considerable, and as the conflict required a political solution, there was a view that WSC's scarce resources should be kept for political campaigning. However, it was also argued that visits by children, as well as providing children much needed relief from camp existence, could do much to publicise the issue.

Lamine Baali found a solution to the problem: a group of ten children were invited by Woodcraft Folk, with financial help from WSC and its supporters (including Julie Christie), to an international camp in Shropshire. There was some irony in children coming from the tents of their camps to tents in England, but the visit was a great success, generating television and national press coverage. And as well as seeing the greenness of

rural England, they were able to spend some days experiencing life in London whilst staying at a London Youth Club run by Muriel Seymour, and visits including to the House of Parliament and to a fire station (courtesy of the FBU). British Home Stores helping to provide for them.



In the years that followed, children's visits were almost annual events. Most were organised by local Woodcraft groups with WSC helping with briefings, logistics, arrangements for visits to the Houses of Parliament, etc., and sometimes money. Other groups got involved as well – in 1989 the Liverpool Taxi Drivers' Association hosted a visit for ten children who were accommodated in the taxi

*drivers' homes before travelling to London where they spent a week as guests of WSC. The first visits to Scotland and Wales were made in 1994 and more followed.*

*Keith Lomax and Julie Thorpe of the Leeds Woodcraft group visited the camps in 1989 to see the conditions in the camps in preparation for receiving children in Leeds. In 1993 the Leeds group went further, arranging a return visit by a Woodcraft delegation of over 20 people to the refugee camps, including their 6 month old baby Ben who was personally welcomed by President Abdelaziz*

*Concerns that children's visits might have been a distraction from WSC's political work proved to be totally misfounded. They generated more column*

*inches and photographs in local and national papers than anything WSC had done before or has done since. Coverage of the visits told of the children's sense of wonder at seeing and doing things they never experienced before – cities, green fields and hills, travel by train, using escalators on the London underground and the sheer joy of playing in swimming pools. However, in reporting on the children's activities, most articles also referred to the conflict that had driven their families to desert refugee camps. As a result of the visits many more people became aware of Western Sahara and its problems and many signed up as supporters of the campaign. Some years later, Cathy Jamieson MP, who was to become one of the Saharawi's main allies in the Commons, related how it was a visit to her constituency that got her involved in the issue.*



## 5. THE BAKER YEARS (1997 – 2004)

Towards the end of 1995, Human Rights Watch published a report which damned Morocco for human rights abuses against Saharawi and for obstructing the referendum process, and which damned the UN for allowing them to do so. It was clear that the process was in deep trouble, and a WSC newsletter in 1996 began with the stark headline, 'War?'. Although talks between Morocco and Polisario were continuing, albeit intermittently, it was apparent that Morocco did not want a referendum and was going to do everything in its power to prevent one.

However, by the middle of 1997 there was fresh optimism. The new UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, appointed the former US Secretary of State, James Baker, as his special envoy. Baker met with the two sides, separately, in London in March, and for the first time Morocco agreed to direct negotiations under the UN's auspices. Baker made it clear that the talks were to be about the implementation of the original plan, with any revisions agreeable to both parties, and that limited autonomy was not on the agenda. The talks moved to Houston where an agreement was signed in September. "The final countdown to a free and fair referendum ... has begun" reported WSC in a newsletter which called on members to step up their pressure to ensure that this time the referendum would actually take place.

Although these events were beyond the control of activists in Britain, there was no let up in the campaign. Letters continued to be sent to politicians and the press, and protests and meetings were held, and not just in London – the Manchester group staged a series of candlelit vigils for the 'disappeared', and in Scotland the General Secretary of the Saharawi Trade Union body was warmly received by the STUC during a tour of the UK. WSC hosted a delegation of Saharawi women which led to a well-supported EDM. Each year there were further children's visits and more Rainbow Rovers convoys: a WSC member also participated in a European 'Youth Caravan' to the camps. An educational project featuring Western Sahara began in Tower Hamlets, led by Margaret Burr who visited the camps for the English Language institute in 1997. Late in 1997 the campaign got a boost from the New Internationalist magazine which produced an issue devoted to the conflict – complimentary copies

were distributed to all supporters. WSC may still have been a small campaign, but its effectiveness was complimented by John Gunnell MP at its 1996 AGM and at the 1997 AGM was encouraged in its efforts by Mike McGowan MEP.

Britain elected a new Labour Government in May 1997. Labour had been unequivocal in support of Polisario during its years in opposition – senior Labour figures had spoken on WSC platforms and Neil Kinnock had even mentioned Western Sahara in a conference speech. Moreover, Robin Cook, the new Foreign Secretary, was promising an 'ethical foreign policy' and WSC members Tess Kingham and Jim Fitzpatrick had been elected and Tess Kingham was soon Chair of a reconstituted All-Party Parliamentary Group with the support of Jeremy Corbyn and Lord Redesdale. There were reasons to believe, as the Labour election campaign slogan put it, that "things could only get better", but it was not to be.

### Another referendum plan

The UN Security Council approved a new referendum plan in November 1997 under which voter identification was to resume in December and a referendum was scheduled for December 1998. But it was soon clear that Morocco was not going to play ball. The slippage from the referendum timetable was criticised in several EDMs at Westminster and Tess Kingham introduced an adjournment debate. SADR President Mohamed Abdelaziz visited London in June where he attended a packed reception in the Palace of Westminster and addressed the All-Party Group, but to WSC's disappointment he was denied a chance to meet with ministers: Britain may have had a new government, but it was going to stick with the policy that SADR was not a state and could not therefore be officially recognised, even although it was an equal partner in the UN-sponsored plan.

By September 1998 WSC was asking its members to write to the FCO Minister, Derek Fatchett, asking him to take a strong line on Morocco's efforts to thwart the plan – infringements that the Secretary General had reported to the Security Council. The only consolation was that the UN had at last come off the fence and openly pointed the finger at Morocco. December 1998 came and went

without a referendum. WSC warned that “The sands of time are running out’ and again asked members to write to Fatchett. Tess Kingham tabled a strongly worded EDM and a meeting was held at Westminster to emphasise the seriousness of the situation. The threat of a resumption of the war was a real one, but at the eleventh hour Morocco agreed to proposals by Kofi Annan for the resumption of the process with a vote in July 2000.

Yet again, however, Morocco obstructed the UN’s work in preparing a voting list. In September 1999 the UN presented a list of 84,251 voters, but immediately Morocco got to work challenging the 72,000 names that were considered inadmissible. An EDM tabled by Jeremy Corbyn calling on the parties to abide by the terms of the Houston Agreement attracted 118 signatures – Morocco responded by sending its ‘Minister for Human Rights’ to express concerns and talk with them. Meanwhile WSC was reporting further human rights violations, including the violent suppression of a demonstration by Saharawi students in El Aaiun in support of Saharawi in Moroccan universities who had been detained, being accused of being Polisario spies, and who were on hunger strike. By the time James Baker returned for talks with the parties in London in mid-2000, WSC estimated that 100 MPs had written to the Government as a result of WSC or constituent pressure, but protests in Britain or elsewhere were not going to divert Morocco from its strategy and Kofi Anna soon conceded that there was “little possibility of holding the referendum before 2002 or even beyond”.

### **EUCOCO comes to Manchester**

For WSC a big campaigning opportunity came in 1998. For a second time it was invited to host the EUCOCO meeting (the annual meeting of European solidarity organisations). Manchester was chosen as the venue, and while there were 72 delegates at the Folkestone conference ten years earlier, this time there were 170. Organising a weekend of meetings and events, including a vigil in the city centre and a civic reception hosted by the Lord Mayor, and arranging accommodation and meals was a considerable task but, thanks to the work of local supporters and the Leeds office, it was accomplished in style, much to the appreciation of all participants. (It could, however, have been very different. Shortly before the start of the conference, the home of Keith Lomax and Julie Thorpe went on fire. Rather than keeping a safe distance and waiting for the fire service, Julie

rushed in to rescue not their own valued possessions but the essential conference papers and records! The only undamaged room was dedicated to preparing for the conference which Keith chaired a fortnight after the fire.)

On 26 June 1999, WSC and the Saharawi suffered a sad loss. Lord Winchilsea, who had set up and led Rainbow Rovers, who had spoken up for Saharawi rights in the Lords on numerous occasions, and who had frequently attended meetings of the WSC committee, died suddenly. There were three days of official mourning in the camps.

King Hassan II died of a heart attack a month later. He had been, in the words of one reporter, “a ruthless despot”, and some had hopes that his son, Mohammed VI, would usher in more liberal policies. The hopes, however, were short-lived. Morocco’s claim on Western Sahara was one thing that united the country’s political factions and the new king was not going to discard it (indeed, some years later the SADR President speculated that Mohammed, lacking the strong authority of his father, needed the Western Sahara issue even more) . Over the years the few Moroccan voices that challenged the national policy, such as Abraham Serfaty who was in 2003 to denounce it as “incompetent and chauvinist”, could expect treatment similar to Saharawi activists. In 2004 the independent journalist, Ali Lmrabet was accused of treason by the pro-government press for having visited the refugee camps.

Over the years Morocco had taken a keen interest in what WSC was doing, but in 2000 for the first time Moroccan agents infiltrated WSC’s AGM. WSC, however, was undeterred: lobbying and protests continued; there were more children’s visits; the campaign got encouragement from its landlord, the Leeds Methodist Mission, which held a sponsored walk to raise funds for toys for children in the camps; and banners from WSC were prominent at a demonstration in front of the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

More important, however, were the demonstrations taking place in Western Sahara itself. It was becoming clear that those living under occupation were losing patience and in the years that followed their resistance to Moroccan rule became a major new front in the struggle.

### **Britain arms Morocco**

A new storm was, however, brewing. In opening an adjournment debate in 2000, Jeremy Corbyn

criticised the approval of a licence for the export to Morocco of CS gas grenades and rubber bullets – concerns echoed by Jenny Tonge and Alan Whitehead. Keith Vaz, deputising for the Foreign Secretary, weakly asserted that there was no evidence that British-supplied riot control equipment had been used in Western Sahara (equally, there was no evidence that it had not and, even if the equipment had only been used in Morocco, why was it being provided to a country with an appalling human rights record?).

But worse was to come. The following year in a meeting of a select committee, the Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, under questioning from Tess Kingham, inadvertently revealed that Britain had agreed to upgrade the heavy guns that Morocco used to defend its wall in Western Sahara. WSC and supportive MPs were outraged. Cook argued that the upgrade did not breach agreements as Britain was not adding to Morocco's arsenal. He added that Britain had consulted the UN which had not raised objections, although no-one in the UN acknowledged any approach from Britain.

In a powerful, open letter to the Foreign Secretary, APPG Chair Tess Kingham wrote: "The Labour Party has always supported the internationally recognised right ... to self determination". . Pointing out that several Labour ministers in the FCO had been sponsors of the Campaign for a Free and Fair Referendum, she continued: "When we took office here was a perfect opportunity to implement a foreign policy with an ethical dimension", but "Not only are we unwilling to pressurise Morocco to comply with the peace process, we are also equipping them with the means to kill the very people the Labour Party has traditionally supported".

Richard Stanforth worked with Tess Kingham, War on Want and Mark Thomas the comedian and political activist, managed to get the widespread media coverage for the issue.

Later that year the Government published a list of the arms they had licensed to Morocco: it ranged from assault rifles and heavy machine guns to optical tracking systems and components for combat helicopters. When Polisario representative Breica Lehib, accompanied by Mark Thomas, the comedian and political activist, asked a question at the BAe AGM, he was told by the chair that it was "highly unlikely" that BAe would export arms to Western Sahara – a response that was strongly criticised by the Campaign Against the Arms Trade.

By that time, however, Britain had had another general election in which, unfortunately for WSC, Tess Kingham had not sought re-election.

The ceasefire agreement was now 10 years old but the Saharawi had little to show for it. Repression and human rights abuses continued in occupied Western Sahara and for the Saharawi in the camps there was no end to their exile in sight.

In 2001 Baker came up with a new plan: rather than a referendum, Western Sahara would be offered limited autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty. WSC immediately got to work opposing the abandonment of the referendum plan. It was able to report that in the space of a year, its efforts had resulted in articles in *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Telegraph*, *The Financial Times*, *The Economist*, *Big Issue*, *Africa Confidential*, *History Today*, *Private Eye*, *The New Internationalist* and *The New Statesman*, as well as radio and television coverage.

Much of this had been due to the efforts of WSC's co-ordinator, Richard Stanforth. In 2002, however, Richard was recruited by Oxfam. His last act as Co-ordinator was to encourage all those he had worked with to sign bankers orders in favour of WSC, providing a much needed boost to the campaign's regular income. Fortunately WSC soon found Tim Brauholtz to take his place.

In another change, the popular Polisario representative, Brahim Mokhtar, moved to a new assignment and it was some time before Fadel Ismail took his place. Those who met Fadel Ismail were impressed by his experience, but tragedy soon struck: in June of the following year he was found dead in his flat, having suffered a severe asthmatic attack. His place was taken by Lehib Breica who had previously been an assistant in Polisario's UK office.

When Spain took over the Presidency of the EU early in 2002, there was some hope that Spain's government, which was taking a more sympathetic position, would use the opportunity to promote a just settlement. In a concerted action with support groups across Europe, WSC members demonstrated in front of the Spanish Embassy. Ken Ritchie and Tim Brauholtz met with the Ambassador but, although he was sympathetic, Spain was not going to be strong enough to overcome French support for Morocco.

It was the Saharawi themselves, however, who made it clear that Baker's new plan was a non-

starter – they had not languished in the desert for 27 years only for autonomy as part of a Greater Morocco. In 2002 Kofi Annan and Baker had to go back to the Security Council, this time asking them to choose between:

1. The referendum plan but without requiring the agreement of both sides;
2. A revised framework agreement, taking account of the concerns of both parties but without seeking their agreement;
3. Partition;
4. A withdrawal of the UN without any resolution of the conflict.

The Security Council dithered. Option 1 was unattractive: a referendum could take years to implement, and unless both parties agreed its terms, one or other was unlikely to accept its outcome. Nevertheless, in Britain an EDM calling for the British government to push for a resumption of talks on a referendum attracted 111 signatures, a call backed up in a meeting convened by Jenny Tonge MP at Westminster. Option 3 was unlikely to work, and option 4 was both dangerous and unacceptable after so much investment in the process. There was almost a year of indecision before James Baker came up with a new plan: Western Sahara would become a province of Morocco, with an elected 'Authority' with substantial powers, for 4 or 5 years after which there would be a referendum offering independence, continued autonomy within Morocco, or full integration. Polisario accepted the proposals, although it was a considerable concession, but Morocco dismissed them as an attack on its "territorial integrity".

### **Human rights concerns**

WSC continued to highlight human rights abuse in the occupied territories, and there were plenty to highlight. In 2002 they reported "a summer of harassments and arrests" in occupied Western Sahara, and later that year a newsletter was devoted almost entirely to human rights, trials which made "a mockery of justice" and the appalling conditions and torture in Moroccan prisons. The 2002 AGM was held in Cardiff and addressed by Ann Clwyd MP, chair of the All-Party Group on Human Rights.

A WSC-organised petition on behalf of 526 Saharawi who had 'disappeared' was signed by

several hundred people early in 2003, with the list of signatories headed by Julie Christie, Harold Pinter and Andy de la Tour.

Human rights issues were also raised in the autumn of 2003 when Khadidja Hamdi and Zahra Ramdan of the Saharawi Women's movement made a very successful visit to Britain, appearing at party conferences (at Plaid's they were given a warm reception on the conference platform) and meeting with Prime Minister Tony Blair and Jack Straw, the Foreign Secretary.

Concerns over Morocco's exploitation of Western Sahara's resources were also high on the agenda, and WSC members took part in a conference in Brussels on how they might best be protected. The focus was on international companies prospecting for Saharawi oil, and Hans Corell of the UN Legal Department delivered an important ruling that Morocco was an occupying power, not an administering power, and that the award of oil contracts were therefore illegal. That, however, did not stop Morocco and the oil companies in their tracks.

In 2001 there was a particularly large Rainbow Rovers convoy in memory of Lord Winchilsea – two articulated lorries, 14 landrovers and two buses – but other convoys were to follow. Children's visits continued to keep the issue in the public eye and in 2002 there was further publicity when Michael Palin's television programme on his travels in the area, including on a stay in the camps with Mehdi Bachir, who had been the Polisario member attached to the Leeds office, and his family.

### **More changes and more of the same**

Working as Co-ordinator of WSC could never be regarded as 'employment'. WSC was only ever able to pay a small honorarium for not even one day a week, but the job required bigger time commitment than that. Co-ordinators therefore tended to be people who were engaged in studies or who had other part-time jobs. Tim Brauholtz, whose analytical skills had contributed much to WSC's efforts left for a research position and Laura Smith briefly took over before leaving in 2004 for further studies.

At that time the Leeds group had lost some of its key members, particularly Cate Lewis who returned to Australia after having given a lot of help to Leeds-based co-ordinators. Cate helped reinvigorated solidarity activity in Australia in

partnership with the POLISARIO Front representative there – Kamal Fadel who had been Lamine Baali’s assistant in London in the 1990’s.

Not only was it difficult to give support to co-ordinators in Leeds, but there was a recognition that political decisions were taken in London and London was where a lot of the campaigning needed to be done. Leeds had done a tremendous job for WSC, but it was decided that a new co-ordinator should be London-based. Tom Marchbanks, who had been working for War on Want, was recruited and War on Want donated office space.

Mark Luetchford became Chair – a position he still holds in 2012. Mark had been an active committee member for many years, having originally become involved through his work with War on Want, and for a period had served as WSC’s Co-ordinator.

There were changes in Polisario too. Lehbib Breica, who had been Acting Representative since the death of Fadel Ismail, was posted to Addis Ababa and Liman Ali arrived from Barcelona in his place.

Internationally, however, the most important change was the resignation of James Baker. Polisario called his departure “A serious setback to the UN’s efforts”, while the Moroccan Foreign Minister described it as “a result of the tenacity of Moroccan diplomacy and its rejection of certain principles threatening Morocco’s territorial integrity”. WSC, in its newsletter, speculated that his resignation was largely motivated by Morocco’s intransigence and the failure of the international community to give the peace process sufficient backing. He did not “deliver wholehearted UN pressure on Morocco and he faced outright opposition from the government of France”. (In a later press interview James Baker supported this interpretation).

In his final days as Special Envoy, Morocco accepted his “Peace Plan for Self-Determination of the People of Western Sahara”, but only if self-determination was removed from it. The Security Council rejected this as unacceptable, and of course it would have been quite unacceptable to Polisario.

## 6. THE SEARCH FOR PEACE CONTINUES (2004 – 2006)

Although it was hard to see where the peace process could go from here, WSC was able to report on small pieces of good news. Some political prisoners were released and Ali-Salem Tamek, a Saharawi human rights activist on whose behalf WSC had campaigned, was given a passport to enable him to travel abroad for medical treatment after his hunger strikes and years of imprisonment. In recent years Polisario had also released many of its prisoners of war. There were also hopes that family visits between the camps and the occupied territory would resume, as would the UNHCR postal service between families on either side of the wall which Morocco had blocked. Nevertheless, Morocco was not letting up in its repression of Saharawi rights, confiscating passports and transferring Saharawi public employees to towns in Morocco. To prevent the outside world knowing what was going on, relatives of the ‘disappeared’ and human rights activists were being denied permission to travel abroad, and four separate groups of foreign

journalists were deported in the six months from November 2003 for the ‘crime’ of wanting to freely associate with Saharawi.

In October 2004 the European Social forum was held in London and 150 delegates attended a meeting under the banner, ‘Another Sahara is Possible’. Several high-ranking Polisario members spoke, as well as Jeremy Corbyn MP and Liman Ali, Polisario’s UK representative. Notable contributions were made from the floor by two Moroccans who declared their belief in the justice of the Saharawi struggle, while the Saharawi present made the point that their argument was with the Moroccan government, not the Moroccan people. The Forum ended with a march for Western Sahara through central London, headed by Saharawi in traditional costume.

When the Moroccan Prime Minister visited London for meetings with Blair and Straw in December 2004 he commented that they had “a

good knowledge” of the issue – perhaps an indication that WSC’s efforts were having some impact. There was some frustration, however, that while Moroccan politicians could meet government ministers, Polisario leaders could not: in contrast, the Spanish Prime Minister met with SADR President Mohamed Abdelaziz when he visited Madrid the previous month. By this time, however, meetings between Polisario representatives and FCO officials were taking place and for a number of years WSC had enjoyed good relationships with the relevant FCO desk. Although there were issues on which WSC and FCO could agree, there were many others on which it appeared that FCO officials, at least in private, accepted WSC’s arguments.

Towards the end of 2004, ‘Endgame in the Western Sahara’ was published by Zed Books with help from War on Want. Its author, journalist Toby Shelley, was a member of the WSC committee. As well as reporting on the hardship and repression faced by the Saharawi, he put the conflict into a geo-political perspective. The US and the EU wanted a stable Maghreb for trade and investment more than they wanted justice for the Saharawi, and that meant carefully balancing the interests of Morocco and Algeria, something the US could not achieve by putting its full weight behind Baker’s plans. Moreover, Morocco was an important ally in a turbulent Arab world and with the threat of Islamic extremism: as writer in the Independent had put it some years earlier, “Do France, Spain and the US want to destabilise a promising young king of a strategically important country just to secure independence for a patch of desert ... which could fall into unfriendly hands?”.

Toby Shelley spoke at the War on Want AGM in London early in 2005, while in Newcastle an independent cinema presented an evening of films on Western Sahara. Leeds University also stage a half day symposium which attracted 70 people, with speakers including Polisario’s Liman Ali and university lecturer Dr Pablo San Martin who was also a member of the campaign.

When a party of Moroccan MPs visited Britain in March 2005 under the auspices of the Inter Parliamentary Union, WSC was given the opportunity to meet them. The WSC delegation, which included former diplomat Carne Ross who had resigned from his position at the UN over Iraq, put its concerns as reasonably as it could, but the Moroccans were not open to dialogue. Carne Ross was later to form Independent Diplomat, a

consultancy that in the coming years was to provide much support and advice to Polisario.

### **Campaign on fish intensifies**

The EU Fisheries Agreement remained on WSC’s agenda. In 2004 letters were sent asking supermarkets to stop selling fish from Western Saharan territorial waters and questions were raised in Parliament. It was, however, to be another eight years before there was some success when the Co-operative stopped selling sardines labelled as ‘produce of Morocco’ as they could not be certain of their real origin.

In summer of 2005 the EU yet again prepared to renew its fisheries agreement with Morocco. Despite assurances that the agreement would not include Western Sahara, the agreement was vague and it appeared that even the EU’s own legal advisors had reservations about it. War on Want added its weight to the campaign, and Ben Bradshaw MP, the Fisheries Minister, agreed to study War on Want’s evidence, adding that the British Government would not support the plan if it prejudiced the peace process. Nevertheless, the agreement was eventually ratified by the Council of Ministers.

### **Western Sahara Resource Watch**



In 2004 it was discovered that a Norwegian company had finished an off-shore seismic survey in Western Sahara, and that a Dutch company with British subsidiaries was doing similar work in Western Sahara. This brought solidarity groups from the Scandinavian countries (where Lamine Baali was still the Polisario representative), the Netherlands and WSC together to mount a joint campaign.

This coalition was to develop into Western Sahara Resource Watch which, over the years developed into an organisation with an office and staff member in Brussels and a membership of individuals and support groups in more than 30 countries. From the outset, WSC was a key player in WSRW and it continues to be represented on its board.

On oil there was a partial success in 2004 when the French oil company, Total, decided to stop

prospecting: the company claimed their decision was not based on politics but on their failure to find oil, but there was evidence that it had been questioning the UN on the legality of the contracts it had signed.

In a bold move, SADR announced that it was open to bids from oil companies for exploration work in Western Sahara, the work to start when independence was gained. The SADR proposals were launched in London in May 2005, using the prestigious setting of the Wellington Arch at Hyde Park Corner, and WSC members present were delighted to see their old friend Kamal Fadel, Polisario Representative in Australia and former assistant in Britain, make the presentation.

In May, campaigners against oil exploration in Western Sahara scored a major success: Kerr McGee decided to end its work in Western Sahara. The campaign in Britain and internationally through WSRW had put the company under huge pressure, resulting in the many shareholders, including the Norwegian government selling their holdings and KMG, who had been working with McKerr Gee, had withdrawn following protests from “hundred, if not thousands” of the Christian community in Oklahoma where McKerr Gee was based.

### **Intifada erupts**

May 2005 saw large demonstrations in El Aaiun and other parts of Western Sahara, with violent confrontations between protestors and the Moroccan security forces, with other demonstrations by Saharawi students at Moroccan universities. This uprising was compared with the Palestinian intifada in which people living under occupation decided that enough was enough. It was a bit of a turning point. In the years of war, most active Saharawi were in the camps supporting the armed struggle: although there had been many brave human rights activists in the occupied territory and many protests, the scale of the demonstrations was something new. The exiled Saharawi may no longer have been in a position to fight for self-determination, but those in occupied Western Sahara had shown themselves prepared to mount their own resistance.

An extended edition of the WSC newsletter asked supporters to write demanding that Britain should do something to prevent human rights abuses and demand a new meeting of the Security Council to get the peace process back on track. A letter

writing campaign also started on behalf of the many Saharawi who were imprisoned, and held for long periods without trial, following the demonstrations. Some encouragement came from Moroccan human rights activists who, in spite of the hostility of their government, started working with their Saharawi counterparts.

The Moroccan government, however, was not to be moved. It had not yet responded formally to Baker’s final plan and in 2006 announced that it would consult with its people, both in Western Sahara and Morocco, before doing so. The king launched a diplomatic offensive, announcing that he was prepared to offer autonomy and in an attempt to win support, amongst the Saharawi but more importantly internationally, he set up a ‘Royal Consultative Council for Sahara Affairs’ and released more than 200 Saharawi who had been detained in the previous year’s demonstrations (meanwhile Polisario had released its remaining prisoners of war). But his line was not softening: following a visit to Western Sahara he declared: “We re-affirm that we will not give up a single inch or a single grain of sand of our beloved Sahara”.

In Britain an important outcome of the intifada was a strongly worded resolution passed at the TUC conference that year. In addition to condemning the violence, it called for a visit by a trade union delegation to the camps and the occupied territory: the following year a group of senior trade unionists travelled to the camps – unfortunately a visit to occupied Western Sahara has not taken place, the matter remains on the agenda and plans have been discussed.

### **Protests and human rights abuses**

As the months rolled on, intermittent talks between Polisario and Morocco failed to break the deadlock in the peace process, and in occupied Western Sahara the increased level of protest resulted only in a worsening of the human rights situation. A delegation from the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights visited Morocco, Western Sahara and the camps in 2006, disappointing some activists by their apparent reluctance to pro-actively seek out the evidence of violations that was all around them. WSC commented that “the proof will be in the product – the report”, but two years later the report had still not appeared and WSC was urging its members to write to their MPs and the Foreign Secretary demanding its release and the immediate implementation of its recommendations.

However, although the report had not been officially released, by that time its contents had been leaked. The delegation had found evidence of excessive and indiscriminate violence against demonstrators, and noted that:

“the question of self-determination is a fundamental human right... Almost all violations of human rights stem from the non-realization of this right, including civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural right,”

and the report went on to criticise “severe restrictions” on the right of people to express their views, create associations and hold assemblies.

WSC newsletters continued to report on the violent breakup of demonstrations, the harassment of human rights activists, beatings and imprisonments, and hunger strikes in the notorious ‘Black Prison’ of El Aaiun.



*In El Aaiun’s ‘Black Prison’*

## **Campaigning through culture**

Around this time a new dimension was being added to the campaign in Britain. Nearly 200,000 Saharawi had been confined to deserts camps for three decades, but they had lost none of their national cultural – indeed, it continued to develop, with some requests being received from the camps for guitars and amplification equipment. Some Saharawi artists had made names for themselves outside the camps in festivals such as WOMAD.

Cultural activities, however, was not just important for raising spirits and maintaining a sense of national identity in the camps – internationally it provided a way of making a much wider audience aware of the plight of the Saharawi and the injustice of their situation. The first person to really appreciate the potential of culture was Danielle Smith, a WSC member who became a regular visitor to the camps. Single-handedly, she raised the money needed to launch a charity, Sandblast, in 2006 and, in the years that followed, Sandblast’s work in the cultural and educational fields has been a hugely valuable complement to WSC’s political campaign (see below).

## **SANDBLAST**



*Sandblast is a UK human rights charity promoting the voices and visions of the indigenous Saharawi from Western Sahara through the arts.*

*Established as charity in 2006, Sandblast organised the London’s first-ever festival celebrating Saharawi arts and culture in November 2007 after 3 years of fundraising and preparations. Launched by special guests such as the British iconic filmmaker Ken Loach, Aminatou Haidar, Saharawi Nobel peace-prize nominee, and Hasiba Boulmerka, Algerian Olympic gold medallist, 2007 Sandblast Festival at Rich Mix in London’s East End attracted over 2,500 people. Over 18 Saharawi artists from the refugee camps in SW Algeria were invited to the three-day festival multi-media event, which also included Saharawi poets, painters, photographers and puppeteers, interacting with audiences and collaborating creatively with London-based artists. The release of TIRIS’s*

debut album *Sandtracks* at the festival was met with a rave five-star review in leading world music magazine *Songlines*. Through the extensive media coverage of TIRIS and their UK tour, thousands of people learnt of the Saharawi.

Also established in 2007, Sandblast's Saharawi Artists Fund (SAF) help covering travel costs, workshop materials and offer small living stipends for the workshop leaders in the camps, who usually donate their time and skills in exchange. Since its creation, this project has helped fund: introductory acting and film production classes led by Caravanserai Studio (2009); 10-day master workshop for musicians, with Mohamed Hafsi, musician, composer and producer; 6 weeks workshops in crafts design from discarded plastic bottles, by Florie Salnot; and 2 weeks youth theatre workshop led by Olive Branch Theatre.



Sandblast also organises 'Run the Sahara', an annual fundraising event, aiming to promote the Sahara Marathon, the unique and inspiring international running event that takes place in aid of the Saharawi refugees. As the official UK facilitator Sandblast's role is to organise the week-long trip to participate in this marathon in the Saharan desert. Along with providing logistical support, Sandblast organises a special educational/cultural programme to enrich the participants' experience. Since 2009, close to 50 people have run for Sandblast and helped raised over £35,000.

Over the recent and next years, these funds help to raise money for Sandblast's Studio-Live project. This music initiative aims to facilitate the creation of a local music industry from scratch in the camps and give the wonderful voices and talent there a chance to reach international audiences.

Sandblast's Studio-Live project aims to facilitate the building of a local music industry in the Saharawi refugee camps that can become internationally recognized and be a creative hub. Over the next few years, the refugees will become equipped to record, produce and showcase their music and preserve their rich oral heritage at professional levels. Training opportunities will target women and youth, who make up more than 70% of the camp population. Likewise, Studio-Lives envisages to build bridges between the Saharawi people both in the refugee camps and the occupied territories of Western Sahara as well as the community living in the Diaspora in Spain.

Working in close partnership with the artists and Saharawi cultural authorities based in the camps and organisations like Fairtunes, Naim Audio or Arts Council England (UK), the project intends to provide material resources, expertise and training in technical, artistic and business skills. Since, the Sandblast Team has visited the refugee camps three times in order to evaluate the needs and to establish partnership with local organisations. Likewise, two training workshop of sound engineering for live concerts have been successfully delivered in the camps in 2012.

Currently, Sandblasts devotes all its efforts to its music empowerment Studio-Live project aiming to equip the refugees with the skills and material resources to build their own music industry in the refugee camps and, ultimately, preserve their cultural heritage.



Sahara Nights, an evening with Saharawi and international artists, was staged by Sandblast and Fairtunes and London's Roundhouse theatre in June 2012.

## 7 WSC ENTERS A NEW PHASE (2007 – 2010)

Organisationally WSC was entering a new phase. Tom Marchbanks resigned in 2005 in order to pursue further studies. His place was taken by Imran Shafi in April 2006 but, after having done an excellent job, he too left at the end of the year on being offered full-time work. For much of 2007 WSC was without a co-ordinator, although that did not mean that its work stopped as committee members filled the gap. The committee's mode of working had also changed: WSC had begun in the age of typewriters, but now members were able to discuss issues by email and the internet, and with its members dispersed around the country, most meetings took the form of telephone conferences. While these conferences were useful for focused discussions and decision-making, the wider conversations that were possible in longer face-to-face meetings were missed and there was a danger of the campaign losing its momentum.

In October 2007, however, John Gurr was appointed co-ordinator – a position he still holds. Over the years John not only had been very active campaigner in Wales where he lived, setting up Cymru WSC, but had also been a key member of the committee, had been instrumental in arranging programmes for visiting Saharawi, and had been involved in the development of Western Sahara Resource Watch.

### Lamine returns

The following year Lamine Baali returned to London, taking over from Sidi Omar as Polisario's representative in the UK. Sidi Omar and his predecessor had served their cause well and had worked well with supporters in Britain, but the return of Lamine, who had been instrumental in forming WSC 24 years earlier, was warmly welcomed. It was not long before he was giving a full report to the All-Party Parliamentary Group, starting with the observation that little had changed for Western Sahara.

### EU gives Morocco 'advanced status'

A major challenge arose in 2008 when the EU, under a French presidency, sought to offer Morocco 'advanced status'. WSC and its international partner, WSRW, were incensed that the EU might give the benefits of closer co-operation to a country with an appalling human

rights record and which was defying the UN over Western Sahara. Members were mobilised to contact their MPs and MEPs and a petition was organised. There was support at Westminster where the All-Party Group had been re-formed again, this time chaired by Jeremy Corbyn who had been a leading campaigner for Saharawi rights for decades, and with John Bercow (who was to become Speaker the following year) and Ann Clwyd, Chair of the All-Party Human Rights Group, as vice chairs, and David Drew as Secretary. One of its first actions was to seek a meeting with FCO minister, Kim Howells, to press for stronger action to prevent the exploitation of Western Sahara's resources, and WSRW began to have a more prominent role in WSC's work.

Protests over the award of 'advanced status' to Morocco were in vain, but the campaign continued. In 2009 John Gurr presented a paper to a seminar at the European Parliament in which he argued that the EU Fisheries Agreement was not just unethical, but a violation of international law according to the UN's legal counsel. The EU Commission argued that the Agreement was simply an economic one, but a Moroccan minister made it clear that the political support it implied was more important.



In November 2009, with the human rights situation deteriorating even further, WSRW launched its 'Fish elsewhere' campaign to have the Agreement suspended – 529 organisations and more than 11,000 people worldwide signed up to the campaign and some MEPs pressed, unsuccessfully, for a debate. Saharawi organisations also wrote to the Commission pointing out that they had not been consulted and that they had seen no benefits from EU sanctioned activities in their country, but the EU was not to be budged.

By that time, Aminatou Haidar, known as 'the Saharawi Ghandi' was entering the fourth week of a hunger strike in the airport in the Canary Islands,

having been refused access to her own country. Action by WSC and others across Europe at least persuaded the President of the EU to make an appeal on her behalf. By early 2010 WSC could report that “She stood tall and looked a despot in the eye and he backed down”.

### **MINURSO and human rights**

Each year MINURSO’s mandate came up for renewal, and its extension was often a last minute decision causing WSC some nail-biting moments. MINURSO was not an effective organisation and Frank Ruddy’s criticisms of 1995 remained valid, but it was better than no UN presence at all. However, WSC wanted a more robust body that could provide the Saharawi with some protection from attacks and harassment by Moroccan security forces. MINURSO was the only UN peacekeeping mission whose mandate did not include human rights monitoring, and WSC wanted to change that. But despite much lobbying by WSC, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (and Independent Diplomat which was assisting Polisario), France blocked any mention of human rights when MINURSO’s mandate was extended for a further year in April 2009. The only concession was a reference to “the importance of making progress on the humanitarian dimension of the conflict”. Uganda, Burkina Faso, Costa Rica and Mexico, who were all Security Council members at the time, all made statements expressing their dissatisfaction, but the British Ambassador weakly argued that the ‘humanitarian dimension’ included human rights. That battle was lost, but in the coming years there would be more to fight.

Although some claimed that the observance of human rights in Morocco was improving, the evidence from Western Sahara indicated the opposite. WSC reported on a new wave of arrests and harassment in August and there was an incident that directly involved Britain and WSC. Six young Saharawi were invited to a seminar, funded by the British Council and hosted by the organisation ‘Talk Together’, where they were to engage in discussions with six young Moroccans. The Saharawi all had visas for their visit, but when they got to the airport at Agadir, they were taken from the plane, beaten with batons, and then driven to El Aaiun where they were interrogated and assaulted, verbally and physically, before being released. One of the six, a nineteen year old woman, was stopped by police a few weeks later, blindfolded, forced to strip, beaten, threatened with rape and released naked after five hours of

interrogation on why she wanted to visit Britain. Here was clear evidence of the need for a strong MINURSO with a human rights mandate. Britain’s weak response to this outrage was lamentable, although two of the six who later escaped to Britain were offered asylum after WSC worked hard to ensure they had effective legal representation. Earlier the campaign had supported the first successful claim for asylum by a Saharawi when Aicha Dahane who had suffered human rights abuse whilst studying at a Moroccan university.



*Demonstrations continue in Western Sahara*

In October the All-Party Parliamentary Group organised a meeting at Westminster on human rights with an activist from Western Sahara and WSC’s chair, Mark Luetchford. In November, however, WSC was reporting yet more abuses, including the detention of seven activists on their return from a visit to the refugee camps. Amnesty took up their cases, and WSC urged its members to write to the king on their behalf. Human Rights Watch annual report was also hugely critical of the worsening of the situation during 2009.

While human rights and MINURSO were dominating WSC’s agenda, other work continued, particularly with WSRW on the exploitation of resources, and WSC tried to take up fisheries issues directly with the owners of Scottish boats fishing in Western Saharan waters: unsurprisingly, they got no response, but were encouraged by SNP MEP Alyn Smith arguing that Scottish companies should not be involved in an illegal trade. WSC member

WSC member Stefan Simanowitz set up the ‘Free Western Sahara Network’, a social-networking site which aimed to allow campaigners around the world to share information and increase the pressure for change. The International Education Fund, a charity based at Imperial College in London, launched an appeal for funds to provide

computers for use in schools in the camps, equipment for a blind school and healthcare education. WSC, with UNISON's support, produced a new leaflet which was sent to all New Internationalist subscribers and distributed through unions and other organisations.

Meanwhile talks on breaking the deadlock in the peace process were at a standstill. Christopher Ross was appointed as Special Envoy in 2009 but seemed unable to influence events. Although WSC was critical of the British government for not having taken a more robust stance, Britain had at least maintained its support for self-determination in the MINURSO debates. There was a further glimmer of hope when it was reported that the new Obama administration in the US had dissociated itself from the Moroccan autonomy plan and had reverted to the view that "there could be an independent Polisario state in Western Sahara".

Although there was no sign of political movement at the UN, Western Sahara had not been forgotten at Westminster. A WSC internal report lists 22 parliamentary questions tabled between in the first six weeks of 2010 – Mark Williams MP, a member of the All-Party Group, was particularly active. There was also, however, a question from Moroccan apologist, Daniel Kawczynski MP who asked if the Foreign Secretary would make it his policy to recognise Moroccan sovereignty. The reply was that the government regards the status of Western Sahara as "undetermined" and that it fully supported the efforts of the UN Special Envoy.

There was a further round of intense lobbying by WSC and others when MINURSO's mandate came up for renewal in 2010. WSC pressed the FCO hard on the need for an explicit mention of human rights, and Britain's Ambassador told the Security Council that Britain would be happy to see "human rights language" in the final resolution. But again France held firm for its ally, Morocco, and refused to allow MINURSO the mandate it needed. It is reported that in the meetings, Austria's Ambassador had asked how France, so important

in forming the concept of human rights, could be so vehemently opposed to the inclusion of the term in the final resolution. In Western Sahara, harassment, beatings and detentions continued.



The election of May 2010 brought an end to 13 years of Labour government. Many senior Labour politicians had been staunch supporters of Saharawi rights, but the Labour government, while sympathetic, had lacked backbone when faced with Moroccan intransigence and France's position of shortsighted self-interest. There were few Conservatives for whom Western Sahara was a major issue (it was, however, very different with their coalition partner, the Liberal Democrats).. However, as prior to the election, William Hague, who became Foreign Secretary, had expressed support for giving MINURSO a human rights role, WSC was not despondent. Soon after the election it urged its members to writing to remind the Foreign Secretary of his promise.

The months that followed the election saw more Moroccan attempts to tighten its grip on Western Sahara in the face of an increasing level of protests. There were more reports of harassment, imprisonments and mistreatment, particular of human rights defenders who had visited the refugee camps. WSC highlighted a statement from WSRW which damned the policy of the EU: the EU sought "continent-to-continent partnership" with the African Union, but it was undermining the policy of the AU and giving tacit support to the illegal occupation of an AU member state. Moreover, the only African country given advanced status with the EU was the only African country not a member of the AU because of its claim on Western Sahara.

## 8. GDEIM IZYK AND BEYOND

Saharawi protest reached an entirely new level in October 2010. Thousands of Saharawi set up a camp – the ‘dignity’ camp – at Gdeim Izyk outside El Aaiun. Estimates of the numbers involved range from 5,000 to 20,000, but whatever estimate is correct, the numbers were astonishing – such a camp in Britain, if population size is taken into account, would have been of several million people. For a month they stayed there, but early morning on 8 November the security forces stormed the camp with jeeps and helicopters, setting tents alight and dispersing crowds with water cannons. Clashes followed in the streets of El Aaiun, and by the end of the day 11 were dead, hundreds injured and many more arrested. Neither MINURSO nor the press were allowed access to the area to observe how Morocco dealt with those who challenged its authority.

The Gdeim Izyk camp provided proof, if proof were needed, that the Saharawi were not going to submit meekly to Moroccan rule. Some have spoken of it as the first act of the Arab Spring – whether or not that claim stands up, none can deny that it was a hugely significant moment in the Saharawi struggle for self-determination.



*Tents burn at Gdeim Izyk after the camp being stormed by Moroccan security forces.*

International condemnation followed. The European Parliament passed a strong resolution but, as in the past, there was no strong action to back it up. The Robert F Kennedy Centre for Justice and Human Rights sent a mission which produced a damning report, and the SADR President wrote to the UN Secretary General demanding that the UN act on its responsibility for protection human rights and international peace.

Western Sahara may have been in turmoil, but that did not stop Morocco from publishing its plans for the development of tourism in the territory. WSC responded, as it had often done in the past, with protests outside the Moroccan tourist office.

Early in 2011 WSC was back at work campaigning for MINURSO to have a human rights role. By this time WSC was leading and co-ordinating international action on the issue – a campaign driven by the determination of WSC member Natalie Sharples and others. Groups in countries including Australia, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the US joined in, pressing their own governments as well as embassies of Security Council members. Briefings were prepared and WSC delegations, which included Jeremy Corbyn MP, had meetings with the Minister, Alistair Birt, and FCO officials: the FCO appeared sympathetic to WSC’s demands, but it was clear that British ministers were not going to stand up to French objections. Meetings were arranged with various embassies and WSC members were asked to write not just to their MPs but also to the Security Council and, in particular, to the French and Columbian delegations at the UN.

In the end the French refused to move. At the Security Council’s meeting, the South African Ambassador accused it of “double standards”, and Francesco Bastagli, a former UN Assistant Secretary General, spoke of Western Sahara as a “long-neglected obligation of the international community”. He went on: “The Security Council can hardly be credible in its concern over Libya and other countries in the region while continuing to ignore the tragic plight of the Saharawi people”. However, for the first time the Security Council passed a resolution recognising the need to improve the observance of human rights and the Secretary General’s report noted that unrest in the brought increased urgency for efforts to resolve the conflict.

Meetings with the FCO provided WSC with mild encouragement in that the FCO seemed more committed in the past to finding a way of resolving the conflict. Britain had not blocked the renewal of the EU Fisheries Agreement, but it had delayed it by demanding the production of evidence to show

that the people of Western Sahara benefited from it, and Britain's position in the negotiations at the UN appeared to have been sympathetic, even if weak. But despite the violence in Western Sahara and the protests by Moroccans demanding the reforms being made elsewhere through the Arab Spring, British exports to Morocco in the first four months of 2011 were 81% higher than in the same period in the previous year. British and Irish oil companies were preparing new seismic surveys in Western Sahara although the UN Legal Office had advised that further exploration would be in violation of international law. When WSC's co-ordinator, John Gurr, contacted UK Trade and Investment to ask why there was no advice regarding Western Sahara on the UKTI website, he was told: "there is no advice against doing business in Western Sahara – treat it as Morocco".

With countries such as Britain refusing to exercise any economic leverage over Morocco, it was unsurprising that Morocco was not minded to unblock the peace process. A further round of talks was held between the parties: UN Special Envoy Christopher Ross reported that while both claimed willingness to work together towards a political solution, there had been little progress.

WSC marked the twentieth anniversary of the ceasefire by taking a petition to the door of Downing Street, accompanied by MPs, trade unionists and representatives of human rights organisations.



*Lamine Baali, MPs Cathy Jamieson and Jeremy Corbyn and others deliver petition to No. 10*

A meeting was also held at Westminster with the All-Party Parliamentary Group, chaired by Cathy Jamieson MP and addressed by Lamine Baali and Paul Whiteway of Independent Diplomat. Carne

Ross, the founder of Independent Diplomat, praised WSC's efforts and offered four grounds for hope: (1) the secession of Southern Sudan; (2) the Arab Spring; (3) the effectiveness of UN Special Envoy, Christopher Ross; and (4) a more encouraging British position. Hope, however, had to be set against Morocco's determination to hold on to Western Sahara, its harsh repression of those who challenged its occupation and the reluctance to the UN and EU to impose a resolution of the conflict.

### **The plunder of Saharawi resources continues**

Campaigning against Morocco's exploitation of the territory's resources remained high on WSC's agenda, and in Western Sahara itself Saharawi had started to demonstrate, protesting that "our homeland's natural resources should in theory



*Lamine Baali, with Paul Whiteway and Cathy Jamieson MP, addresses Commons meeting on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ceasefire*

suffice to alleviate our burden, but they're being sold off to fill Morocco's treasury". It was not just that the wealth Western Sahara had in minerals, agriculture and fish stocks should be preserved and used for the development of a Saharawi state should statehood be gained, but trying to ensure that Morocco could not benefit economically from its occupation might help to persuade it to negotiate.

Phosphates remained Western Sahara's most valuable asset, but it was an asset being mined and sold without the any benefit for the Saharawi, and many who had worked in the mining industry had lost their jobs, their positions being filled by Moroccan immigrants. Late in 2010 when the mining giant, BHP Billiton made moves to take over a Canadian company buying and shipping Western Saharan phosphates, WSC worked with London Mining Network, a group campaigning on behalf of communities affected by mining activities

worldwide, to oppose the move. Baroness Miller tabled questions pointing out that BHP Billiton had arranged loans from British banks, recently bailed out by the British government, to fund the proposed acquisition: it appeared that British taxpayers might be about to fund an illegal trade. A WSC committee member raised a question at the BHP Billiton AGM, but by that time the takeover deal had collapsed. Later, in 2012, Nick Clegg was to suffer some embarrassment when it emerged that his wife was earning high fees for legal services to a major Moroccan mining company.

It was not just in the mining sector that the Saharawi were being replaced by Moroccans – fishermen were also finding that their places were being taken by Moroccans, and to make matters worse, there were reports that fishing business was being controlled by senior Moroccan military officers and businessmen for their own benefit.



WSC continued to work closely with WSRW in trying to get the EU Fisheries Agreement suspended or amended, and in December 2011 there was at last some success: the European Parliament rejected an extension of the Agreement. Negotiations on a renewal, however, continue with the Commission.

In Britain there was also a small success when the Co-operative decided to stop sales of its own brand sardines as they could not guarantee that they had not come from Saharan waters. Life, however, remained difficult for Saharawi fishermen whose places were being taken by Moroccans: protests continued, including one in April 2012 in which 25 fishermen boarded a vessel and chained themselves to the deck.

WSRW also turned its attention to agri-business. Tomatoes and other produce were being grown in Western Sahara on plantations owned by the Moroccan king and French-Moroccan companies, but marketed as Moroccan and therefore gaining the advantages of EU trade agreements. The issue of false labelling was highlighted in WSRW's 'Label and Liability' report in 2012. In response to a question from Cathy Jamieson MP, however, Minister Jim Paice spoke of the desirability of

labelling produce as being from Western Sahara, but added that "it may not be practical or economic" for a retailer as by doing so they would not qualify for the preferential tariff treatment provided by the EU-Morocco Agreement. While Cathy Ashton, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs, was promising "we cannot forget human rights just because we are talking to governments about commercial relations", it appeared that Britain was prepared to collude in Morocco's illegal trade.

WSC had been a founder member of WSRW and its Co-ordinator sat on the WSRW board and had for a period been its Chair. Helping maintain the WSRW office and staff member in Brussels, however, was a big financial commitment for WSC, but UNISON, which had done so much for the campaign in the past, stepped in to help with two very generous £1,500 annual grants.

### **More campaigning than progress**

The run-up to the renewal of MINURSO's mandate in April 2012 saw another major campaign by WSC. There was more lobbying and more protests, but by this time the nature and frequency of street demonstrations had changed. In the early days of the campaign, Polisario's UK representative had been the only Saharawi in the country, but there were now quite a number of young Saharawi, some refugees and some working in Britain on Spanish or other passports. For them, demonstrating was a chance to express their feeling and to do something practical for their cause. The presence of these young people gave the campaign a new dimension, and for older hands they gave the additional motivation of working with people who had suffered, and whose families had suffered, at the hands of Morocco's security forces.

A new group, Adala-UK ('adala' meaning justice in Arabic), had been formed by a young Saharawi, using contacts in the occupied territory to provide up-to-date information on human rights violations. It led to a number of meetings, often at universities and often showing new films that had been produced on the conflict, to raise greater awareness of the issue.

No amount of campaigning, however, was to overcome France's refusal to include human rights in MINURSO's mandate. WSC members had again written to their politicians and to the UN, and they had joined Saharawi at protests outside the French Embassy, but while 'human rights' were

mentioned in the pre-amble to the latest UN resolution, they were not included in MINURSO's renewed mandate. From a British perspective, however, there was some success: that the 2012 resolution called upon parties to "co-operate fully with MINURSO, including its free interaction with all interlocutors" and to ensure the "unhindered movement and immediate access for the United Nations and associated personnel in carrying out their mandate" was at the insistence of the UK.

A resolution of the conflict, however, seemed no nearer. In May 2012 Morocco declared that it no longer had confidence in Christopher Ross, the UN Special Envoy, making the absurd claim that he was "partial" for having reported on Morocco's

systematic interference in MINURSO's operations. Carne Ross, writing in WSC's newsletter, noted the consequences of the conflict for both the Saharawi and for the potential of the Maghreb as a whole and observed: "It would not take much to advance the resolution". Carne Ross concluded:

"When history, international law, regional geopolitics and security concerns all point to the same conclusion, there really is no other option. It's time for the Security Council to assume control and accelerate resolution of the dispute by deciding on a clear timetable and deadline for holding a referendum on self-determination, as required by international law. It's time to let the people choose."

## 9 POSTSCRIPT

Approaching the end of 2012, Morocco had been occupying Western Sahara for 37 years, it was 35 years since a small group of people had met in London for form a campaign in Britain for Saharawi rights, and for 21 years the Saharawi had been waiting for the referendum that was promised after the ceasefire. Following the 1991 ceasefire there had been several false dawns when it appeared that a referendum was imminent, but by 2012 it was clear that any resolution of the conflict was still a long way off. Talks between Morocco and Polisario were continuing, albeit intermittently, but there was no sign of progress and a sense that there never would be until the UN and EU decide that enough is enough and Morocco must be forced to comply with UN resolutions and international law.

That the peace process was stuck could have plunged WSC into despondency, but the sense of the injustice from which the Saharawi have suffered has maintained the determination of WSC to continue its work. In lobbying it can be difficult to assess success as a campaign can never be certain of the extent to which outcomes have been the result of its work, but feedback from politicians, government officials and others involved in the issue suggest that WSC, and its partners in Europe and elsewhere, have been instrumental in keeping Western Sahara on the

agenda and providing Polisario with the political support they so badly need.

WSC never set out to be a mass campaign. As has been noted, Western Sahara was never likely to be a major foreign policy issue for Britain, and a large membership and demonstrations which could fill Trafalgar Square, as had been achieved by the anti-apartheid movement, was not something to which WSC could aspire. Nevertheless, WSC has made its presence felt through its persistent and constructive (and often robust) lobbying. Some years ago an FCO minister, in addressing a small gathering of Labour members, commented that what Polisario had its favour was a strong and active campaign in the UK – what he did not know was that one member of his audience was at the time 20 per cent of that campaign! WSC can therefore take some pride in its achievements and that the British government is now taking a slightly more sympathetic approach is no doubt in some measure due to the work of WSC and its partners.

WSC, however, could not have operated in the way it did, or at least not as effectively, were it not for the tremendous support it has received from those who have served as Polisario's representatives to the UK. This history is largely a history of the campaign and it has not been possible to include the huge amount of work Polisario representatives have done behind the

scenes in building diplomatic support for their cause. Life for representatives cannot have been easy, particularly in the earlier years of the campaign when they were the only Saharawi in the UK and when, before the age of the internet and mobile phones, communications with colleagues in the camps and other countries must have been difficult. They did not have embassies with staff and facilities, but had to work from whatever affordable flats they could find, and as Britain has refused to recognise SADR, they could only work on the fringes of the diplomatic circuit. Moreover, they have always needed to contend with the hostility of Moroccan agents and journalists (often the same thing).

Since the ceasefire, however, they have been allowed occasional contact with FCO staff, some who have been not unsympathetic: Lamine Baali relates one occasion in which an FCO official insisted on accompanying him not just to the door but into the street – the official was aware that Morocco would be monitoring Lamine Baali's movements and wanted to ensure the Moroccan's knew that FCO was having a dialogue with Polisario!

Looking ahead, WSC's work, particularly on human rights and the exploitation of Western Sahara's resources, will continue. Towards the end of 2012 WSC received a huge boost in the form of a £6,000 grant from UNISON to enable it to employ a

fulltime person on its campaign to get human rights included in MINURSO's mandate when the matter returns to the Security Council in April 2013: Thomas O'Bryan will begin work early in January 2013. Over the years the support of UNISON, politically as well as financially, and indeed other trade unions, has been crucial to WSC's activities.

It is also encouraging that the campaign in Britain is now more than just WSC. Sandblast is now a well-established partner building support through cultural ties, and Olive Branch Theatre is also doing valuable work in the same field. Adala UK, Students for Western Sahara and the many young Saharawi now in Britain also add to the breadth of the campaign, while Independent Diplomat is an important source of advice to the campaign as well as to Polisario. In the autumn of 2012, at the suggestion of Lamine Baali, a meeting of all of these organisations was convened to discuss co-operation and co-ordination, and in the years to come the effectiveness of the campaign will hopefully be more than the sum of its parts.

Lamine Baali will, however, be sadly missed, but those who have worked with him have the consolation that his considerable talents are now to be used in the important arena of the African Union and that the work he set in motion will continue with the able support of his successor, Liman Ali, and his assistant, Sidi Breica.

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