

Briefing 2025: Western Sahara and MINURSO

Recommendations to the UN Security Council

Immediately

- Update the MINURSO resolution to **formally record Morocco's persistent failure to co-operate with the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights** despite repeated requests to visit the occupied territory of Western Sahara, stretching back for nearly a decade. This demonstrates that a more robust framework is required to ensure compliance with human rights obligations.
- Grant MINURSO the **legal mandate to monitor, report on and intervene in matters of human rights** in territories controlled by both the Kingdom of Morocco and the Frente POLISARIO. Artificial institutional limitations paired with pandemic-era restrictions made MINURSO redundant in the lead-up to the current phase of renewed violent conflict. It must be enabled to fulfil its original purpose. This mandate must remain in place until a referendum has been held, and its findings must be reported directly to the UN Security Council.
- Demand an **end to arms sales to Morocco**, in the light of the ongoing conflict and the Moroccan military's use of drones to kill Saharawi, Mauritanian and Algerian civilians.
- Demand an **end to the illegal extraction of natural resources from Western Sahara**, including renewable energy and the export of agricultural produce, which disregards the interests and wishes of the indigenous Saharawi.

In particular, the Security Council should call for **the full compliance with the judgements of the EU Court of Justice** regarding EU-Morocco agricultural and fisheries agreements. Such action would serve to uphold international law, build on the recognition by courts around the world of the Saharawi's right to control their natural resources, and help the international community to collectively move past the global era of exploitative colonialism.

- Incorporate **climate change** considerations into MINURSO's mandate, to monitor the impacts of increased desertification and flooding on the livelihoods of Saharawi refugees, and consider how Moroccan dominance of Saharawi natural resources impacts greenhouse gas emissions.

As soon as possible

- Set a firm **date for a free and fair referendum**—with an option of independence—to be carried out in Western Sahara in line with the established international legal norm of self-determination and the UN’s institutional mission to end colonisation. Anything less will not be accepted by the Saharawi people.
- Develop a robust peace plan under Chapter VII of the UN Charter to enforce the outcome of the referendum in the event that any of the parties do not respect the decision of the Saharawi electorate.

This year East Timor has celebrated 23 years of independence. Timor Leste, like Western Sahara, was invaded and occupied in 1975. At the time of its independence, many thought Western Sahara – another territory awaiting decolonisation, occupied by a larger neighbour - would soon follow. The next year, 2000, the UN issued the list of those eligible to vote in the referendum in Western Sahara. But, 50 years after being invaded, those hopes have been dashed.

Summary

1. This year marks 50 years since Morocco’s invasion of Western Sahara. Generations of Saharawis have grown up in exile. Many who were forced to flee their homes in 1975 have died in exile. Thousands have been killed or tortured by Moroccan security forces.
2. The UN brokered a ceasefire after 16 years of war, in 1991, on the promise that the people of Western Sahara would be able to achieve their self-determination through a free and fair vote on their future. Becoming part of Morocco was to be an option in the referendum, as was independence. The UN had brought hope.
3. Yet Morocco obstructed self-determination, refusing to accept that the Saharawi people should have the option of independence. Moroccan security forces continue to clamp down brutally on Saharawi freedom of expression in occupied Western Sahara. The UN has appeared unwilling and powerless to stand up to Moroccan aggression.
4. In 2020, Morocco violated the terms of the ceasefire with an incursion across the agreed lines of control and occupied new territory. Since then, five more years of violent conflict have ensued. Many civilians have been killed in Moroccan drone strikes on travellers in Western Sahara. The Security Council has still not taken effective action, such as demanding a halt to arms sales to Morocco. Inaction just reinforces Morocco's longstanding strategy of non-compliance with UN resolutions knowing that there will be no consequence.
5. The UN Secretary General’s Personal Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, needs strong support from the Security Council to find a way to cease hostilities and break the political deadlock between Morocco and the Frente POLISARIO.

1. MINURSO still has no mandate to monitor and report on human rights in Western Sahara, despite Moroccan forces continuing to violate the human rights of the Saharawi people living in the occupied territory, and Moroccan drone strikes killing Mauritanian and Algerian civilians passing through Western Sahara, as well as Saharawis. A factual amendment to the resolution proposed in 2024 regretting that the OHCHR had not been able to visit Western Sahara for the ninth consecutive year was not passed due to abstentions by various Member States including the UK, France and US.
 2. The Saharawi people's right to self-determination remains unrealised despite the presence of MINURSO, which was established to organise a referendum on self-determination. Morocco continues its 34 year obstruction of the peace process.
 3. The US, the UK and the EU all condemn Russia's invasion and occupation of part of Ukraine and have imposed sanctions. But when it comes to Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara the silence is deafening.
 4. Morocco has increased illegal exports of phosphates from Western Sahara, and continues to profit from the territory's other resources, including renewable energy. Meanwhile the Saharawi people are not represented in the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process and face rising climate hazards.
 5. The Polisario remain committed to a limited military strategy and political solution, but support for a more aggressive position is rising among the younger generation of Saharawis.
 6. Numerous evolving time-sensitive crises contribute to the rising urgency of the situation.
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Rising Urgency of the Situation

The Saharawi people—particularly those in the Tindouf refugee camps—are at severe risk of the looming threat of climate change. Those in the camps already suffer from long droughts interspersed with brief but dramatic rainfall, leading to consistently severe flooding. These difficult conditions, alongside the steady depletion of groundwater, will only become more severe as the earth continues to warm. The international community needs to address the plight of the Saharawi refugees before climatic conditions in Tindouf grow even more dire and the camps become uninhabitable.

Since Morocco's illegal breach in Guerguerat in November 2020, which constituted a violation of the existing ceasefire and Military Agreement No. 1, the Saharawi people have been engaged in active conflict. This daily violence is a result of the failure of the international community to pursue a just resolution.

The further escalation of violence—potentially embroiling Morocco in a wider regional conflict—is inevitable without action from the UN. Moroccan drones are killing civilians from around the region¹. Younger Saharawis, frustrated by the lack of progress and the lack of international pressure for a political resolution, are increasingly supportive of escalating the military conflict: a pro-escalation candidate won 30% of the vote in last year’s SADR presidential elections.

As time passes, Morocco continues to cement its presence in occupied Western Sahara, intensifying its occupation and hindering the establishment of an independent Saharawi state. The government offers tax incentives for Moroccan citizens to move into the occupied Saharawi territory. It implements marketing campaigns aimed at cementing its ‘Southern Provinces’ as a global tourism destination. Through these efforts, the Moroccan government aims to diminish the potential of the international peace process and secure its claim over Western Sahara.

Each year that passes without progress toward a just resolution of the conflict in Western Sahara represents the further compounding of intergenerational trauma and socioeconomic disparities among the Saharawi youth. Empirical evidence suggests that refugees suffer from significant trauma, and hundreds of thousands of Saharawi children grow up knowing nothing but the sands of Tindouf and a future in limbo.

Additionally, the inconsistent quality of health and educational services in the refugee camps means that Saharawi children inevitably fall behind on numerous elements that are crucial for future success. Even if the Saharawi people were to be granted sovereignty and control over the whole of Western Sahara *today*, they would lag behind their contemporaries in various socioeconomic respects for generations.

Thus, the international community must push for a solution *now* in order to mitigate these inevitable and serious effects as much as possible.

Political Process and renewed armed conflict

The UN Secretary General’s Personal Envoy Staffan de Mistura has been active in meeting with the Polisario Front and Morocco, and with other regional powers. The Security Council must firmly support Mr de Mistura’s efforts, or Morocco will simply obstruct all possibility of peace.

Armed conflict has continued in the territory, as it has since Morocco’s illegal breach of ceasefire positions at Guerguerat in 2020. Saharawi forces regularly shell Moroccan positions on their military wall (the ‘berm’).

Morocco is using drones to attack both Saharawi forces, and civilians in the liberated territory of Western Sahara. Many civilians have been killed by Moroccan drones, including many from Mauritania and some from Algeria, Mali and Sudan who were travelling through the territory. These drones, supplied by Israel, Turkey and the US, clearly pose a lethal threat to civilians in the region.

¹ Annual Report 2024, Saharawi Mine Action Coordination Office; Secretary-General’s latest report (A/80/290) to the General Assembly, dated 31 July 2025.

The “autonomy plan”

Morocco continues to insist that any negotiations must be about its “autonomy plan”. But this plan is not a recipe for peace. It is a device to underpin its military occupation of much of the Western Sahara and its ongoing campaign to eliminate Saharawi national and cultural identity. Morocco cannot grant autonomy to Western Sahara and its people as Morocco does not have any internationally recognised sovereignty over the territory. Nor does the Moroccan autonomy proposal satisfy international norms of autonomy; the Moroccan king would control decisions. It would involve the Saharawi people accepting the authority of the Moroccan security forces that have spent much of the last 50 years persecuting them. It is not a realistic proposal.

The plan is incompatible with upholding resolutions 658 (1990) and 690 (1991) of the UN Security Council, which determined there should be a referendum of the Saharawi people through which they would choose between independence and integration with Morocco. This is the right of the Saharawi people to self-determination, as citizens of a Non-Self-Governing Territory. No solution that is imposed can lead to lasting peace in the region.

Some Security Council members are showing interest in the plan. Unsurprisingly it was France, Morocco’s long-term patron, that was the first to support it publicly. President Trump’s recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in December 2020 reversed decades of foreign policy following Israeli pressure. More recently, the UK, in the context of negotiations mainly focused on trade deals (including arms sales), has regrettably changed its longstanding position and said that it considers the autonomy plan to be “the most credible, viable and pragmatic basis for a lasting resolution of the dispute”.

However, the UK is also clear that Western Sahara is not part of Morocco; and that any solution must be “mutually acceptable to the relevant parties” and support the principle of respect for self-determination. The UK has also had a ministerial meeting with the Polisario Front for the first time.

As to the UN: MINURSO retains ‘self-determination’ as a fundamental component of its mandate – in keeping with the UN Charter. Still, Morocco insists that it would not recognise the legitimacy of any vote with independence as an option. Of course, this stands in stark contrast to the insistence by Moroccan ministers that many Saharawi favour Moroccan rule. In reality, Saharawi living in occupied Western Sahara face repression, human rights abuses and economic inequality.

Human Rights

All UNSC resolutions pertaining to Western Sahara since 2018 have emphasized the need for compromise, suggesting that compromising on the human rights of a subjugated people robbed of their right to self-determination is morally and legally just. This sentiment must not be allowed to continue.

For nine years Morocco has refused requests from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR) to visit occupied Western Sahara. This denial of access to a UN body is sadly typical of the contempt with which Morocco has treated the Saharawi people and international law over the last 50 years.

The human rights abuses committed by Moroccan forces in Western Sahara are disturbing and unacceptable in their own right. They also threaten the work of MINURSO, and hinder a peaceful resolution of the conflict, by deepening mistrust of Morocco and perpetuating a climate of fear among the Saharawi people. The Saharawi are unable to consider any outcome while human rights abuses continue. It is clear that a human rights mandate, one that ensures the rights and well-being of the Saharawi people, would directly advance MINURSO's core mandate.

Morocco routinely bars journalists from entering occupied Western Sahara in order to shield itself from international criticism of its violations of Saharawi's political rights². Amnesty International notes that Saharawi human rights activists are subject to "intense surveillance" by the Moroccan government³, making it difficult for them to avoid arrest. These arrests are sometimes brutally violent, and activists are regularly sentenced to long prison terms in unfair trials. Crucially, international human rights lawyers looking to aid Saharawi political prisoners are expelled from the country, making resistance to Moroccan injustice nearly impossible.

Natural Resources and Climate

Morocco continues to systematically and illegally extract natural resources from occupied Western Sahara. Morocco remains one of the world's top producers of phosphates and has increased its exports from Western Sahara in recent years⁴. It also exports agricultural produce from Moroccan companies growing tomatoes in Western Sahara, and fish processed by Moroccan companies.

The decisions taken by the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU), including the judgements of 4 October 2024 whereby the CJEU annulled the EU-Morocco trade and fisheries agreements involving Western Sahara, have made it unequivocally clear that any economic agreement or activity involving the Territory, which lacks the genuine and freely given consent of the Saharawi people, will be unlawful under international and European laws.

Western Sahara President Brahim Gali has called for Western Sahara to be admitted to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. At present, the territory is accounted for under Morocco, who uses Saharan sun and wind towards its Nationally Determined Contribution to slowing climate change.

The UN's failure to solve the conflict in Western Sahara has thus resulted in the exclusion of the Western Sahara government from global climate governance and finance mechanisms. Meanwhile, the Saharawi people - many living as refugees in one of the most inhospitable parts of the Algerian desert as a consequence of Morocco's brutal occupation - are increasingly exposed and ever more vulnerable to worsening climate hazards to which they have hardly contributed themselves.

² Secretary-General's latest report (A/80/290) to the General Assembly, dated 31 July 2025.

³ Morocco/Western Sahara: UN Must Monitor Human Rights In Western Sahara And Sahrawi Refugee Camps. Amnesty International, Public Statement, 10th October 2018.

⁴ P is for Plunder 2024, Western Sahara Resource Watch. <https://wsrw.org/en/news/the-phosphate-exports>

Conclusions

Morocco's obstruction of the peace process, violations of human rights, and illegal extraction of natural resources in Western Sahara continue to foster instability in the territory. The denial of the Saharawi people's right to self-determination continues to exacerbate feelings of tension, frustration and discontent, fuelling the flames of conflict.

Despite Saharawi civilians being at risk of state violence for simply believing in self-determination, peacekeeping troops stationed in Western Sahara are not empowered to take any action. This is indefensible; MINURSO must be granted a mandate to monitor and maintain human rights.

The UN must reassure the Saharawi people that international law and human rights will be respected in Western Sahara, as the absence of such assurances has facilitated the renewal of conflict in the territory.

In October this year, 50 years will have elapsed since Morocco occupied and forcibly annexed Western Sahara. Morocco's aggression has constituted a clear denial of the right of the Saharawi people to self-determination and an enduring violation of fundamental norms of international law.

If the United Nations and international community are committed to a rules-based order, they must make every effort to put an end to fifty years of military occupation, oppression and denial of basic human rights in Western Sahara.

The UN Security Council must follow the steps outlined in this briefing to save lives and stave off further deterioration in Western Sahara.