



General Assembly

Distr.: General
29 September 2020

Original: English

Seventy-fifth session

Agenda item 61

Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples

Question of Western Sahara

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, covering the period from 1 July 2019 to 31 August 2020, is submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [74/97](#). It provides a summary of the two most recent reports submitted by the Secretary-General to the Security Council on the situation concerning Western Sahara ([S/2019/787](#) and [S/2020/938](#)).



1. On 13 December 2019, the General Assembly adopted, without a vote, resolution [74/97](#) on the question of Western Sahara. The present report, covering the period from 1 July 2019 to 31 August 2020, is submitted in accordance with paragraph 7 of that resolution.
2. The Security Council addresses Western Sahara as a matter of peace and security, calling in successive resolutions for a “just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution, which will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara”. The Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee) of the General Assembly and the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples address it as a Non-Self-Governing Territory and an issue of decolonization.
3. Pursuant to Security Council resolutions [2468 \(2019\)](#) and [2494 \(2019\)](#), during the reporting period I submitted two reports to the Council on the situation concerning Western Sahara ([S/2019/787](#) and [S/2020/938](#)), on 2 October 2019 and on 23 September 2020, respectively. The reports describe the situation on the ground; the status of the political negotiations on Western Sahara; the implementation of the resolutions; and the existing challenges to the operations of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), as well as steps taken to address them.
4. Overall, calm prevailed in Western Sahara on both sides of the berm. While respect for the ceasefire agreement by both parties generally continued, there was a notable decline in compliance with the terms of military agreement No. 1, particularly east of the berm.
5. On 29 July 2019, King Mohammed VI of Morocco delivered an address celebrating the twentieth anniversary of his ascension to the throne. He reiterated the commitment of Morocco to the political process on Western Sahara, under the exclusive aegis of the United Nations, and stressed that a settlement, in his view, could be achieved only “through full Moroccan sovereignty” and within the “framework of the autonomy initiative”.
6. Speaking at the closing ceremony of the tenth edition of the Summer University of Sahrawi in Boumerdes, Algeria, on 7 August 2019, the Secretary-General of the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguía el-Hamra y de Río de Oro (Frente POLISARIO), Brahim Ghali, extended “the hand of peace, reconciliation, cooperation and good neighbourliness” to “brothers” in Morocco. That, he said, would “bring the two countries and two peoples, and the peoples and countries of the region, many more achievements” and would be “better than the consequences of following an unjust policy that violates legitimacy and history”.
7. On 27 September 2019, I met with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Morocco, Nasser Bourita, on the margins of the seventy-fourth session of the General Assembly, and on 10 February 2020 I met with Frente POLISARIO Secretary-General Ghali on the margins of the thirty-third ordinary session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union. I assured both of my commitment to appoint a new Personal Envoy for Western Sahara.
8. On 30 October 2019, the Security Council adopted resolution [2494 \(2019\)](#), in which it extended the mandate of MINURSO for a period of 12 months, until 31 October 2020. In that resolution, the Council paid tribute to former Personal Envoy Horst Köhler for his efforts in holding the round-table process, which had created new momentum in the political process. While emphasizing the need to achieve a realistic, practicable and enduring political solution to the question of Western Sahara, the Council encouraged the resumption of consultations. It also reaffirmed its

commitment to assist the parties to achieve a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution, based on compromise, which would provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara.

9. Following the adoption of the resolution, on 30 October Frente POLISARIO issued a press release regretting the “return to business as usual” and stating that it was “left with no option but to reconsider its engagement in the peace process”.

10. On 5 November 2019, during his annual address on the anniversary of the Green March, King Mohammed VI of Morocco stated that Morocco “will continue to work honestly and in good faith to achieve a political, realistic, practical, and consensual solution based exclusively on the political approach adopted by the United Nations Organization and the relevant Security Council resolutions”. He further said that the 2007 autonomy proposal of Morocco was “the only way forward towards a settlement guaranteeing full respect for the Kingdom’s national unity and territorial integrity”. In a statement on 7 November 2019, Frente POLISARIO stated that “the Sahrawi people will continue their struggle for freedom and independence”.

11. Between 18 December 2019 and 12 March 2020, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Gabon, the Gambia, Guinea, Liberia and São Tomé and Príncipe inaugurated “Consulates General” in Laayoune or Dakhla. In letters addressed to me on 3 July 2019, 20 November 2019, 7 January 2020, 17 January 2020 and 18 February 2020, Mr. Ghali defined these diplomatic representations as a “violation of international law and [...] breach of the international legal status of Western Sahara as a Non-Self-Governing Territory”.

12. From 19 to 25 December 2019, Frente POLISARIO held its fifteenth Congress in Tifariti, east of the berm, with more than 2,000 Sahrawi delegates and approximately 300 foreign guests reportedly participating. The incumbent, Brahim Ghali, was the sole candidate for the position of Secretary-General of Frente POLISARIO and was re-elected for another term.

13. On 22 January 2020, the House of Representatives of Morocco adopted two laws updating the limits of its territorial waters and of its exclusive economic zone, which included the waters off the coast of Western Sahara. On 22 January, Mr. Ghali wrote to me that Frente POLISARIO considered that the two laws represented “breaches of the international legal status of Western Sahara as a Non-Self-Governing Territory”.

14. On 1 April 2020, Mhamed Khadad, Frente POLISARIO Coordinator with MINURSO since 1997 and a member of the national secretariat of Frente POLISARIO, passed away. He was a key MINURSO interlocutor for most of the existence of the mission. His passing has left a void in the relations between Frente POLISARIO and MINURSO on the ground.

15. Morocco continued its infrastructure investment west of the berm. It announced, for example, the construction of a new port approximately 70 kilometres north of Dakhla. In a letter dated 19 September 2019 to my Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations and my Special Representative, the Representative of Frente POLISARIO in New York stated that the aim of this initiative was “to consolidate and normalize [the] military occupation and the illegal annexation of parts of Western Sahara”.

16. The situation in Guerguerat remained calm overall, with only sporadic demonstrations between October 2019 and March 2020 that did not affect the flow of commercial and civilian traffic. As in previous years, however, tensions rose considerably in early January around the passage of the annual Africa Eco Race auto rally competition through Western Sahara and Guerguerat from 11 to 13 January. MINURSO deployed a civil-military conflict prevention team to monitor the situation and prevent escalation. As a result, the race convoy was able to pass through the buffer strip without significant incident.

17. The impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on Western Sahara was moderate west of the berm. Following early and thorough preventive and containment measures by Morocco, this part of the Territory witnessed only a handful of cases until 30 May. At that point, a significant outbreak was detected in the area of Laayoune. As at 31 August 2020, the number of active cases in Laayoune was 41. Frente POLISARIO reported taking strict measures to prevent the spread of the virus east of the berm, where no cases were officially reported. In the Sahrawi refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria, three active cases had officially been identified as at 31 August.

18. From the third week of March, when the number of cases in Western Sahara and the rest of the MINURSO area of operation was still very limited, the Mission drastically reduced its footprint at Headquarters in Laayoune, adopting telecommuting for all staff and implementing a thorough set of preventative measures and protocols. As a result of these and measures adopted by the Moroccan authorities in Morocco and in the Territory west of the berm, no cases were reported among MINURSO personnel.

19. The overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on MINURSO operational activities was moderate. Logistical and maintenance activities had to be replanned and reorganized to accommodate the necessary reduction in movements. MINURSO was able to maintain its ceasefire monitoring activities at adequate levels, despite a reduction by 30 per cent in ground patrols and 10 per cent in air patrols. This was facilitated by significant reductions in military operational and training activities by both parties, and an increased use of satellite imagery by MINURSO. In agreement with the parties, special preventative measures and protocols were implemented.

20. MINURSO continued expanding the use of geospatial imagery and analysis obtained through bilateral support from the European Union, as well as other high-resolution satellite imagery, to guide and complement its observations from the ground and air. The use of satellite imagery has strengthened the Mission's observational effectiveness in the Territory.

21. Bilateral working and coordination mechanisms proposed with each of the parties continued, with the Royal Moroccan Army serving as a venue for dialogue to resolve violations of military agreement No. 1 and to address potential violations before they become formalized. The military leadership of Frente POLISARIO has yet to engage in the bilateral coordination mechanism, despite agreement in principle to its establishment in October 2019. Interaction with the Frente POLISARIO military forces is therefore limited to local liaison with MINURSO team sites and the Mission's Liaison Office in Tindouf. There has been a significant increase in unaddressed Frente POLISARIO violations.

22. Both parties regularly reported as major security concerns to MINURSO increases in illicit activities and illegal movements through the Territory, primarily narcotics smuggling and human trafficking. Both parties addressed communications to MINURSO team sites alleging that violations of military agreement No. 1 had been committed by the other party. MINURSO systematically investigated each allegation.

23. Landmines and other explosive remnants of war continued to pose a threat to MINURSO personnel and logistical convoys, which the Mission aimed to reduce through the activities of its Mine Action Service. As at 31 August 2020, 44 of the 522 known cluster strike areas and 24 of the 61 known minefields remained to be addressed east of the berm.

24. Since 1 September 2019, MINURSO, through its Mine Action Service, has conducted survey and clearance of 2,034,929 m² of land impacted by landmines and explosive remnants of war. A total of 1,179 kilometres of Mission patrol and logistical

routes were verified east of the berm, facilitating the monitoring of the ceasefire and ensuring the safe passage of United Nations personnel. A total of 1,461 items of explosive remnants of war were destroyed, including 1,026 cluster munition remnants and one anti-tank mine, increasing the safety and security of MINURSO military observers and the local population. The Royal Moroccan Army reported the release of over 253.5 million m² of land west of the berm and the destruction of 796 items, including 37 anti-personnel and anti-tank mines.

25. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) continued to provide international protection and, together with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP), delivered humanitarian assistance to Sahrawi refugees living in the five camps near Tindouf. The main challenge for humanitarian actors remained the resource shortfall and lack of predictable funding. In April 2020, UNHCR, WFP and UNICEF, with five non-governmental organizations, issued a joint appeal in response to the COVID-19 situation for approximately \$15 million of total immediate needs.

26. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) remained concerned about the continued trend of restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association in Western Sahara by Moroccan authorities. During the reporting period, OHCHR received reports of harassment, arbitrary arrest and sentencing of journalists, lawyers and human rights defenders. OHCHR also received reports about harassment, arrest and ill-treatment by Frente POLISARIO security forces of bloggers, doctors and nurses engaged in documenting COVID-19 cases in the Tindouf camps.

27. The confidence-building measures, pursuant to Security Council resolution [1282 \(1999\)](#) and subsequent resolutions, to allow family links between Sahrawi refugees in the Tindouf camps and their communities of origin in the Territory of Western Sahara remained on hold.

28. Personal Envoy Köhler was able to reinstate a much-needed dynamic and momentum in the political process, including through the round-table process he launched which brought together Morocco, Frente POLISARIO, Algeria and Mauritania. It is essential that the continuity in this political process not be lost. I remain committed to appointing a new Personal Envoy to build on the progress achieved.

29. Despite some of the challenges described in the reports, MINURSO has continued to fulfil its mandate and maintain an enabling environment for a political process to resume. The Mission's diligence in monitoring the implementation of the agreements related to the ceasefire, and its persistent attempts to engage with the parties to address potential sources of tension, fulfil a crucial conflict prevention role. I extend my deepest thanks to the women and men of MINURSO for their relentless commitment to the Mission and the goals and purposes of the United Nations, including in the face of challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.