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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Il Cenacolo, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[6 February 2022]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only. The views expressed in the present document do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its officials.



## **Unprotected Sahrawi Children on the Algerian Territory**

Sahrawi Children in Tindouf camps are caught up in a humiliating environment on the Algerian soil, where they live under physically and psychologically horrifying conditions on a daily basis. They go through life-threatening situations such as forced labour and exile, military recruitment and ideological indoctrination. They often find themselves destitute and without knowing what the future holds for them, being under the capture of the Polisario, and deprived of their basic rights.

### **Forced displacement to Brainwashing Camps Overseas:**

The abduction of children against their will or the will of their families, either temporarily or permanently and without a valid reason, is unlawful under international law. It can constitute a serious breach of the Geneva Conventions and in some cases constitutes a war crime and a crime against humanity.

Mindful of these provisions, thousands of Sahrawi children have been abducted at a young age, and deported to countries overseas, where they were exposed to all forms of ill-treatment, far from the love of their parents. Forcibly taken from their parents, children in the Tindouf camps have often been sent to ideological indoctrination centres and paramilitary training camps, where speech of hatred and violent attitudes against a presumed enemy are inculcated in their minds. These children are also exploited in sugar plantations, cigar factories and fruit and vegetable picking<sup>1</sup>, and are subjected to sexual harassment on an ongoing basis.

By accepting these acts committed against Sahrawi children on its territory, Algeria violates Article 35 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which stipulates that “States Parties shall take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent the abduction, sale or trafficking of children for any purpose and in any form”.

The helpless Sahrawi children are used as a means of coercion to keep their parents under the capture of the Polisario in Tindouf camps, which implies a denial of their fundamental right to freely determine their personal future. They are not allowed to have contact with their parents nor to practice their Islamic faith, keeping them completely cut off from their relatives, who are under perpetual siege in the camps.

The magnitude of the violations of the rights of Sahrawi children is compounded by the consequences associated with their abduction from their families, which also leads to other acts constituting serious violations against them, in particular their recruitment and use in the Polisario armed groups, rape and other forms of sexual violence.

### **Sahrawi Children Forced to Foster Families:**

Sahrawi children are also being forcibly taken to foster families to Spain, within the framework of “Holidays for Peace” program that the Polisario introduces as a humanitarian initiative, whereby children are given to Spanish families, under a tacit agreement between the Polisario, the supporting organizations and the Spanish families to switch the travel for vacation or hospitalization to permanent-residence displacement, without the consent of the biological families of these children.

Forcing Sahrawi children to foster families in Spain engenders major psychological complications and deep effects on the growth and health of these children. Keeping them away from their families causes a lot of damage to their mental health. For this, it is of paramount importance to ensure that psychosocial support of children and their families is well resourced and fully integrated as essential component of all humanitarian responses provided in Tindouf camps.

## **Denial of access to humanitarian aid**

The diversion of humanitarian aids by the Polisario has devastating effects on nutrition, as it threatens livelihoods and compromises food security, health and the ability of mother to provide for children. In the camps, cases of acute malnutrition are usually common among children, particularly cases of nutritional deficiencies due to the insufficient food rations given to the families.

The Algerian authorities, who prefer to provide military support to the Polisario, are indeed violating Principle 8 of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which stresses that “the child must, in all circumstances, be among the first to receive protection and assistance”.

With that in mind, denial of access to humanitarian aid engages criminal responsibility from the Polisario and the Algerian officials who cover the embezzlement of the aids addressed to Sahrawi children in the camps.

Equally important, water, sanitation and hygiene are key to ensuring the health, development and well-being of children. Inadequate access to safe water and sanitation services, combined with poor hygiene practices, causes deaths and childhood illnesses in Tindouf camps. Water, sanitation and hygiene are also linked to school attendance and performance, particularly among girls. However, continue to turn their back to the calls from human rights defenders to give priority to these basic needs, instead of arming the Polisario militias.

## **Teaching Hatred:**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child places paramount importance on the right of children to education. This right is also reflected in international and regional legal instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), which address also the right of all persons to the enjoyment of "the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health" and the right of every child to an education.

The Polisario has set up schools in the camps to institute a complete and utter distortion of the noble message of teaching, by raising generations of young Sahrawis on speech of hatred. The manipulation of Sahrawi children in schools run by the Polisario is part of a long process of ideological indoctrination undertaken in the camps.

The Polisario undermines the important role of the school to play not only in the cognitive development of children, but also in their social and emotional development. Indeed, Sahrawi children are deprived of their right to the development of a myriad of skills and the realization of their potential.

Human rights defenders raise the alarm about the extent of the phenomenon, denouncing the incitement of teachers to inculcate hatred towards Morocco, and use the school calendar for activities loaded with political ideology. All the textbooks and school materials are designed to serve the Polisario violent ideology. Chanting military songs by children violates the nature of schools as civilian institutions that often provide shelter and protection, and provide for the needs of children.

## **Protecting Sahrawi Children is a Necessity:**

The UNHCR should establish effective child protection systems in Tindouf camps, which are to be based on policies, regulations and services spanning all sectors, particularly education, health, security and accountability, to support preventing and combating risks that might undermine the protection of Sahrawi children.

Addressing child protection in the camps on a systemic basis helps fill identified gaps in interventions targeting specific issues. For instance, schools in the camps should not stay under the influence of Polisario, and need to be comply with the international norms that guarantee a safe educational system for Sahrawi children. Such interventions will contribute

to a coherent application of standards that will protect them from any instrumentalization for political purposes.

A successful UNHCR-led protection of Sahrawi children should be approached from a holistic perspective, by considering the broad contexts and history of camps, and by looking at the different dimensions of the human rights situation in these camps, to give more equitable attention to the various forms that violence, abuse and exploitation takes.

Protection interventions from the State of all people on its territory are grounded in international norms and standards, especially those relating to the child, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Algeria should guarantee the rights set out in the Convention to every Sahrawi child within its jurisdiction. Under this Convention, Algeria is obliged to respect the rules of humanitarian law applicable to Sahrawi children in the camps, to ensure the care and protection of these children put under the grip of the Polisario, and to take all appropriate measures to ensure their physical and psychological and social wellbeing.

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AFORES (AFRICAN FORUM FOR RESEARCH AND STUDIES IN HUMAN RIGHTS).AIPECT (African Institute for Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation).LSDDH (La Ligue Du Sahara Pour La Démocratie ET Les Droits De L'Homme), NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.

1. a documentary on Sahrawi children taken to Cuba:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LU3vuG8eU1I>