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## Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee)

### Summary record of the 3rd meeting

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Wednesday, 6 October 2021, at 10 a.m.

*Chair:* Ms. González López ..... (El Salvador)

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*The meeting was called to order at 10.05 a.m.*

**Agenda item 63: Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples** (*Territories not covered under other agenda items*) (continued)

*Hearing of representatives of Non-Self-Governing Territories and petitioners*

1. **The Chair** said that, in accordance with the Committee's usual practice, representatives of Non-Self-Governing Territories would be invited to address the Committee and petitioners would be invited to take a place at the petitioners' table, and all would withdraw after making their statements.

*Question of the British Virgin Islands*

2. **Mr. Natalio Wheatley** (Deputy Premier of the British Virgin Islands) said that the autonomy of the people of the British Virgin Islands was under threat at a time when they were combating the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, were still recovering from the hurricanes in September 2017 and remained on high alert during the current hurricane season. Despite substantial gains in self-governance over the previous 71 years, the decolonization process remained incomplete. Relations with the administering Power had come under severe strain over the previous decade. The increasingly unfriendly posture of the United Kingdom towards its Overseas Territories in the Caribbean had been brought to the attention of the Special Committee on decolonization by the newly elected local Government in 2019. The relationship had subsequently deteriorated further, coming to a head in January 2021 when a commission of inquiry into supposed corruption, abuse of office and dishonesty had been launched by the former Governor, with no prior notice or consultation. The announcement of the inquiry had been coordinated to inflict maximum reputational damage, and its wide scope permitted the Commissioner, supported by a well-resourced legal team, to examine any area of government or time period. The Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) had expressed dismay at the non-transparent and non-consultative manner in which the commission of inquiry had been imposed on the Territory. CARICOM had also called for self-governance and the right to self-determination to be upheld and respected in the British Virgin Islands. Notwithstanding the questionable motives behind the inquiry and the disruption that it had caused, the public service and the locally elected Government had cooperated fully, diverting attention from hurricane preparedness and the COVID-19 response.

3. There were increasing concerns about the independence, conduct and focus of the commission, which had shifted from supposed corruption to the ability of the local Government to govern the islands. The commission had publicly shared confidential information provided in good faith, with the aim of intentionally misleading the public into believing that the local Government had made an irresponsible decision on a sensitive security issue. Concerns had also been expressed about the commission's legal team working in the jurisdiction without being admitted to the Bar of the British Virgin Islands, which constituted a criminal offence under the laws of the Territory. Suspicions had been raised as to whether the intent of the inquiry was to lay the groundwork for the local Government to be stripped of certain powers, for example, regarding immigration; to impose direct colonial rule through the suspension of the Constitution; or to roll back the autonomy of the British Virgin Islands by taking over the finances of the local Government. Circumscribing self-governance in the Territory would violate international law and the right of the people of the British Virgin Islands to self-determination.

4. The Territory's forthcoming constitutional review should reflect the need for a progressive relationship between the United Kingdom and the British Virgin Islands in order to support the sustainable development of the Territory and its advancement towards self-determination. The recent changes in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office of the United Kingdom presented an opportunity for that relationship to be reset. The United Kingdom support for the local Government's COVID-19 response demonstrated that a modern partnership was possible, and the British Virgin Islands stood ready to work with the United Kingdom as partners.

5. He reiterated the request for the Special Committee to dispatch a visiting mission to the British Virgin Islands in 2021. He was grateful to the United Nations system for the assistance received in connection with the COVID-19 response, building climate resilience and pursuing sustainable development. Under the leadership of the Secretary-General, the United Nations system was living up to the pledge to leave no one behind.

6. **Mr. Eliezer Benito Wheatley**, speaking in his personal capacity, said that the relationship between the British Virgin Islands and the United Kingdom had been strained since 2011, and political engagement had taken a negative turn, as reflected in the absence of an ongoing high-level political dialogue between London and the territorial Government and the launch of the commission of inquiry in the British Virgin Islands.

Rather than entertaining any proposals to suspend the Constitution of the British Virgin Islands and impose direct rule at the conclusion of the commission of inquiry, the United Kingdom should be entering into a dialogue with the territorial Government on the society's aspirations for the decade ahead, in line with the United Nations call for decolonization to be completed by 2030. Such a dialogue should pave the way for a constitutional review that reflected the wishes of the people of the British Virgin Islands, including the recommendation by some members of the local community to hold a referendum on the Territory's future political status within 10 years.

7. The United Kingdom should form a compact with the British Virgin Islands on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, as a high-level political dialogue had yet to be held on the subject. The current global focus on climate change provided an opportunity to begin such a dialogue.

8. In working to resume constructive dialogue, the United Kingdom and the British Virgin Islands could build on their cooperation on the COVID-19 response. The United Nations had a role to play in enabling that process. The request by the territorial Government for the Special Committee on decolonization to dispatch a visiting mission should be honoured; the British Virgin Islands had a right to receive such a mission, especially in view of the considerable changes to the social, economic and political landscape after two devastating hurricanes and the COVID-19 pandemic.

9. The United Nations had a responsibility to assist the Territory with an education campaign to help the people of the British Virgin Islands to better understand self-determination and the options available for their political future. It would be helpful if the United Kingdom, as the administering Power, resumed formal cooperation via the Special Committee to ensure an ongoing high-level political dialogue with the British Virgin Islands.

#### *Question of French Polynesia*

10. **Mr. Fritch** (President of French Polynesia) said that, in his several appearances before the Special Committee, he had shown that French Polynesia was not in a colonial situation or subject to oppression and that its natural resources were not being misappropriated. Its broad autonomy had enabled French Polynesia to craft its own health, economic and social response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since March 2020, the French State had provided full support, including by sending health workers and firefighters to reinforce the medical teams in French Polynesia, and the recent medical

evacuation to Paris of eight critically ill patients had provided relief to local hospital services. Owing to vaccine doses that had been received from the French State, some 70 per cent of Polynesians over the age of 12 years had received at least one shot. The Government of French Polynesia and the French State had raised more than \$1 billion in economic support for Polynesian businesses and families during the pandemic. Two loans totalling \$680 million, which would be used to finance emergency and recovery measures, had been guaranteed by the French State. Such actions were a concrete example of solidarity and strengthened the partnership between French Polynesia and the French Republic.

11. French Polynesia was resolutely committed to fighting climate change, which remained the main threat to the Pacific islands and its peoples. It was implementing a plan focusing on climate, air and energy in order to achieve the target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 50 per cent by 2030. The large-scale production of solar energy was also being promoted. At the United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14 in 2017, French Polynesia had committed to classifying its exclusive economic area, measuring some 5 million km<sup>2</sup>, as a managed marine area, in order to preserve the blue Pacific continent. The Territory had called for the cessation of illegal fishing, as well as purse seine fishing and the use of drift nets, which were destroying marine resources. French Polynesia had worked with the member countries of the Pacific Islands Forum to develop and adopt a declaration on preserving maritime zones in the face of climate change-related sea level rise, with reference to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. All States should take all measures necessary to slow global warming and limit the temperature increase to less than 1.5°C.

12. In the light of the growing tension between the major powers, French Polynesia was very concerned by the possible threats to the region resulting from geopolitical and geostrategic confrontations in the Pacific. That issue was surely more urgent than the "decolonization of French Polynesia".

13. On the issue of nuclear tests in French Polynesia, work was continuing in partnership and consultation with the French State. A round table had been organized in Paris at the beginning of July 2021, and the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, had made announcements regarding the opening of archives and the compensation of victims. The French State and French Polynesia had a shared resolve to meet the expectations of French Polynesians in that connection.

14. French Polynesia was committed to the Sustainable Development Goals and had incorporated them into its public policies. It had transmitted to the Secretary-General and to the Decolonization Unit a report concerning its implementation of the Goals, and hoped that the report would be referenced in a paragraph in the resolution on the question of French Polynesia.

15. The people of French Polynesia wished to maintain its status as a country with broad autonomy within the French Republic. French Polynesia had sufficient powers to shape its future and the financial autonomy to pursue economic and social development. It played an active part in tackling regional and global issues. French Polynesians were present in all spheres and led and managed the country, whose population was 80 per cent indigenous. Independence might suit some countries but not others, and was not necessarily the basis for the dignity of a people. As mentioned in the Charter of the United Nations, other paths were possible, and the democratic fact must be accepted that the people of French Polynesia had no desire for independence. In closing, he renewed the invitation for the Committee to send a mission to French Polynesia to evaluate the situation in the country.

16. **Mr. Corbin**, speaking in his personal capacity, said that the self-governance assessment diagnostic tool, which had been developed by the Dependency Studies Project in 2011, used indicators derived from relevant decolonization, self-determination and human rights instruments to independently evaluate the level of self-government in island Territories. In an assessment of French Polynesia conducted in 2012, it had been concluded that the Territory's political status constituted a highly asymmetrical political power relationship that fell short of the minimum standard of full self-government and absolute political equality. That determination was consistent with the resolutions of the General Assembly, in which it was indicated that French Polynesia remained a Non-Self-Governing Territory within the meaning of the Charter of the United Nations.

17. Internal reforms did not constitute decolonization. Only a genuine decolonization process overseen by the United Nations could advance a Territory to self-government; but mandates for such activities as analytical studies and political education programmes had not been fulfilled. The General Assembly had adopted nine resolutions on the question of French Polynesia since 2013; however, the administering Power had not transmitted information to the Secretary-General, as was required under Article 73 *e* of the Charter. Such a failure to cooperate could impede and delay the decolonization process, thereby perpetuating – and even legitimizing – contemporary colonialism.

Non-Self-Governing Territory status had been intended only as a preparatory step towards full self-government. The time had come to start implementing the decolonization process for French Polynesia and other Territories.

18. **Ms. Galenon** (Tavini Huiraatira), speaking as an elected member of the Assembly of French Polynesia, said that the attempts by the representative of the current Government of French Polynesia to justify neocolonialism, and the refusal of the administering Power to comply with its obligations under Article 73 of the Charter, could not be allowed to delay self-determination. Thirty years of French nuclear testing in the Territory had brought devastating health and social consequences. As highlighted in a recent report published by scientists from France and the United States of America, the Government of France had downplayed the extent of the nuclear contamination. In order to limit the political damage caused by those revelations, a presidential round table had been held in Paris. In response, the Tavini Huiraatira party had held its own round table and an event dedicated to the victims of the nuclear testing. President Macron had acknowledged that colonization was a crime against humanity and that the nuclear tests had not been “clean”; but he had refused to apologize, and reparatory justice remained elusive. France had retained full control over the natural resources of the Territory, depriving it of significant revenue.

19. The debate over whether French Polynesia had the right to self-determination had long been settled. Legitimizing colonialism served only to draw attention away from a genuine self-determination process and to delay reparatory justice. Instead, a workplan for the decolonization of Ma'ohi Nui (French Polynesia) should be developed under the auspices of the General Assembly.

20. **Mr. Brotherson** (National Assembly of France) said that only the Ma'ohi people should decide, after a proper decolonization and self-determination process under the scrutiny of the United Nations, whether it wanted to remain a French territory or regain its sovereignty. It was troubling to see the administering Power taking a very different stance before the United Nations on two similar Territories: full participation and cooperation in Kanaky (New Caledonia), including United Nations missions to oversee all three referendums held there, contrasting with contempt for the General Assembly resolutions pertaining to Ma'ohi Nui.

21. The true limits of the so-called “autonomy” of the Territory had been revealed by the pandemic. It was the

French High Commissioner, not the President of French Polynesia, who had held a weekly press conference and made decisions regarding the opening and closing of borders and public health restrictions. When President Macron had visited French Polynesia, thousands of people had been allowed to gather publicly, despite the spread of the delta variant. A farce of a round table on the nuclear issue had been held in Paris, but the Ma'ohi people had yet to hear President Macron ask the victims of the tests for forgiveness. Instead, in the name of the "Indo-Pacific strategy", France was to use the Ma'ohi people, once again, to ensure its global power position. Colonized people deserved better than to be used as pawns.

#### *Question of Gibraltar*

22. **Mr. Guerrero Liston** (Representative of the Government of Gibraltar in the United States of America), speaking on behalf of the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, said that, over a period of more than 300 years, immigrants had arrived from places as diverse as Italy, Malta and India to create a small, unique population of Gibraltarians, who were separate and distinct – ethnically and culturally – from the administering Power. The people of Gibraltar must be the ones to freely and democratically determine their own future, and the United Nations had a duty to ensure that they attained full self-government and decolonization. Gibraltar had been listed as a Non-Self-Governing Territory since 1946 and wished to follow in the footsteps of those countries that had achieved political emancipation and decolonization. Over many decades, Gibraltar had supported international efforts to eradicate colonialism. The first three Decades for the Eradication of Colonialism had failed in their main objective partly because of a collective failure to learn the lesson that one size did not fit all. Gibraltar wanted to work with the United Nations, and the Committee should urge the Special Committee on decolonization to accept the invitation to send a visiting mission to Gibraltar.

23. Gibraltar was proud to have been the first country in the world to vaccinate its entire adult population, which it had achieved with a free supply of vaccines from the United Kingdom. It had also vaccinated many thousands of frontier workers of different nationalities and had provided them with support in the form of regular cash payments during the pandemic.

24. The conflictual relationship between Gibraltar and Spain stemmed from the latter's outdated territorial claim. The borders of Europe could not be redrawn to reflect what they had looked like 300 years prior. The well-being and aspirations of the people of Gibraltar

must be the first priority. On 31 December 2020, the Governments of Gibraltar, the United Kingdom and Spain had reached a political agreement on a new treaty on the future relationship of Gibraltar with the European Union. The Council of the European Union had recently authorized the commencement of negotiations. Gibraltar remained committed to an outcome based on the terms of that agreement, which would be in the interests of both Gibraltar and Spain, but was also preparing for a scenario in which no negotiated outcome was reached. Gibraltar continued to make a positive economic contribution to Spain, in terms of Spanish residents who worked in Gibraltar and significant imports of goods from Spain.

#### *Question of Guam*

25. **Mr. Tenorio** (Lieutenant Governor of Guam), speaking on behalf of Governor Lourdes Leon Guerrero and the Government of Guam, said that decolonization was a priority for his Administration. Despite decades of bipartisan initiatives, the leaders of the administering Power showed no interest in addressing the desire of Guam to change its political status. The territorial Government had been prohibited by United States courts from organizing a non-binding referendum on the political status of Guam, in decisions that were consistent with the long-standing practice of the administering Power of selectively applying domestic policy to Guam in certain situations and treating it as foreign in others. The United States had long designated Guam as being outside its customs and quarantine zones. For example, Guam and the other United States Territories were classified as foreign destinations by the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in its regular assignment of pandemic risk levels and the issuances of travel advisories, despite those Territories being subject to its domestic directives and requirements.

26. On a more positive note, Guam had generally been afforded a pro rata share of pandemic relief assistance programmes, including direct assistance to individuals and families, which, combined with the inclusion of Guam in allotments of COVID-19 vaccinations and treatments, had been life-saving during the pandemic. Several domestic aid programmes on access to health care and addressing poverty, which previously had limited coverage in or excluded Guam and the Territories, had been extended temporarily, and there was some hope that they might be extended permanently.

27. Nevertheless, it was disappointing that, despite the need for a specialized approach citizens from the Territories had not been appointed to positions with

responsibilities for developing and administering United States programmes for the “insular areas”. The administering Power must actively engage people from the Territories in that process at the highest levels.

28. Guam had been long supportive of the United States, and its people had made significant sacrifices, for example, during the Second World War. More recently, they had provided direct assistance at the beginning of the pandemic by evacuating the service members aboard *USS Theodore Roosevelt* and providing them with refuge in the civilian sector of the island. The Governor had also volunteered Guam as an evacuation point and haven for United States-affiliated Afghans and their families during the withdrawal of United States forces from Afghanistan, a role that Guam had previously performed for United States-affiliated Vietnamese and Kurds.

29. It was no surprise that the administering Power was focused on the strategic position of Guam. Geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific region had resulted in significant military expansion in Guam and the investment of billions of dollars in the island’s defence and civilian infrastructure. Even though the Government of Guam was committed to its role in pursuing a free Indo-Pacific and the expansion had brought significant benefits to certain sectors of the island economy, it had also placed a significant burden on the people of Guam and the natural environment. For example, the general application in Guam of United States immigration policy, which was averse to foreign labour, had caused a housing crisis. The administering Power would authorize foreign labour only to support military projects, resulting in much higher construction costs. The people of Guam were thereby priced out of home ownership and a residential rental market dominated by military housing rentals and rental subsidies.

30. With regard to the militarization of Guam, three special rapporteurs of the Human Rights Council had written a joint letter to the Government of the United States expressing concern regarding potential serious human rights violations suffered by the indigenous Chamorro (CHamoru) people, including allegations regarding the impact of the increased military presence in Guam and the failure to protect the CHamoru people from the loss of their traditional lands, territories and resources; serious adverse environmental impacts; the loss of cultural artifacts and human remains; and the denial of the right to free, prior and informed consent and self-determination. To date, the administering Power had not responded to a request to discuss the allegations with the Government of Guam. The allegations also merited the attention of the United

States Congress, in whose hands the status of Guam remained. In order to encourage a full review and resolution of the matter, he requested the Committee to include reference to the special rapporteurs’ joint letter in its draft resolution on the question of Guam, and that the draft resolution be amended to recognize the efforts made by Guam to counter the challenges posed by global warming, poverty, rapid globalization and militarization.

31. The Government of Guam had formally adopted the Sustainable Development Goals through the establishment of the Guam Green Growth initiative, which included an action framework incorporating all 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The initiative had resulted in innovative practices and projects that embraced sustainability and sought to recover traditional knowledge. The Government had worked collaboratively with other island communities around the world on a number of initiatives, such as the Micronesia Challenge, to reduce poverty, expand education and economic opportunities, build resilience and strengthen the resolve to serve as stewards and guardians of the environment.

32. It would be useful for the work of the Special Committee on decolonization and the Fourth Committee include a focus on the status of each of the 17 remaining Non-Self-Governing Territories in the context of sustainable development as a measure of decolonization. There was a clear connection between sustainable development, environmental justice, self-determination and decolonization. The ability of Guam to implement effective policy to protect the environment and combat threats to sustainability would remain limited as long as its political status remained unresolved.

33. The current United States Administration had made clear its commitment to environmental justice and sustainability and had rejoined the Human Rights Council. In the light of those promising developments, there was an urgent need for the United States to approve a United Nations visiting mission to Guam to assess the progress made in sustainable development efforts and the potential effect of decolonization on those policies. A visiting mission would also allow the United States to address the alleged human rights violations in Guam and engage with the local Government in a meaningful way.

34. **Mr. Won Pat-Borja** (Commission on Decolonization, Government of Guam) said that Guam had become a possession of the United States in 1898 through the Treaty of Paris. Under the terms of the Treaty, the civil rights and political status of the native

inhabitants of the Territories ceded to the United States were to be determined by Congress. Unfortunately, the United States judicial system had been used to interfere with the advancement of the political status of Guam and the internationally recognized rights of its indigenous people. For more than 120 years, the colonized people of Guam had fought to attain a full measure of self-government but, owing to the inaction of the administering Power, had made only incremental improvements. Collectively, the Charter of the United Nations, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples contained in General Assembly resolution 61/295 and the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples provided adequate support for Guam to attain a full measure of self-government; but without the engagement of the United States, its political status remained unresolved. Accordingly, the Government of Guam had consistently advocated for a United Nations visiting mission to Guam, and it was important for the Committee to continue to engage with the administering Power for that purpose.

35. Although the draft resolution on the question of Guam addressed many relevant concerns, its blanket reference to “the people of Guam” failed to distinguish between those who had been colonized by the United States and those who were residents as a result of the colonial relationship. The right to decolonization existed as a response to inequitable and oppressive relationships between nations, particularly between Non-Self-Governing Territories and administering Powers; yet the United States continued to assert that all the people in Guam had the right to determine its political status. In the draft resolution on the question of Guam, reference should also be made to recent joint letter from the three special rapporteurs.

#### *Question of Western Sahara*

36. **Mr. Omar** (Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguía el-Hamra y de Río de Oro (Frente POLISARIO)) said that the illegal occupation of Western Sahara by Morocco since 1975 and the attempts by the occupying State to obstruct its decolonization were an insult to all that the Committee stood for. Frente POLISARIO had made tremendous concessions in order to advance the peace process towards the ultimate objective of holding a free and fair referendum for the people of Western Sahara, which had been accepted by both parties and endorsed by the Security Council. However, Morocco had disregarded the resolutions concerning Western Sahara and, in the absence of decisive action by the United Nations, had felt emboldened to persist with full impunity in its colonial practices. The United Nations

must take a firm stand against such unspeakable brutality.

37. Frente POLISARIO remained fully committed to finding a peaceful and lasting solution regarding the decolonization of Western Sahara. The people of Western Sahara would never give up its inalienable right to self-determination and would continue to use all legitimate means to defend its rights. The time had come to take concrete measures to speed up the decolonization of the last remaining colony in Africa for the sake of justice and peace and security in the entire region.

38. **Ms. Huff** (Teach the Children International) said that she had once had respect and admiration for the Polisario, but events over the years had revealed them to be misplaced. In 2014, the European Anti-Fraud Office had released a report detailing how humanitarian aid intended for the Tindouf camps had been diverted by the Polisario and sold on the black market for the benefit of Polisario leaders, who had not been held accountable. Moreover, human rights activists had repeatedly informed the Human Rights Council that the Polisario militias had violated the rights of children in the camps and subjected them to forcible recruitment. In November 2020, during clashes with Moroccan forces, the Polisario had used women and children as protective shields.

39. Honest negotiations were successful only when done in good faith among all parties concerned. If those who were to speak with authority were revealed to have no concern for the welfare of the people they led, any settlement supposedly reached would be suspect from the start. She asked the United Nations to adopt the Moroccan autonomy initiative, which would be the most humane, expeditious and peaceful resolution possible to the issue.

40. **Ms. Hardin** (Priority PR Group and Literary Agency) said that, although Sahrawi children in the camps could go to Spain to stay with host families, many had been forcibly detained by Polisario on their return and had their passports taken. Some faced extended periods of confinement, forced marriage and coerced pregnancies to compel their return to the camps. Sahrawi children lived in unthinkable difficult conditions in the camps, while Polisario leaders were able to live in luxury. Recently, the testimonies of Sahrawi victims of Polisario abuse had drawn the attention of international human rights organizations and evidence of kidnappings, imprisonment, forced labour, torture and rape had come to light. The Committee should investigate the members of Polisario and carefully consider the consequences of supporting oppressors. Moreover, by conducting a census – which

Polisario had rejected – the United Nations could show its impartiality and boost its credibility when inviting the parties to the negotiating table.

41. One might well ask which governing body upheld the rule of law in the Tindouf camps, and whether the camp leadership followed the laws of the host country. An investigation was needed into the accusations of abuse in the Tindouf camps, where State sponsors of terrorism held the Sahrawi population hostage while withholding the aid intended for them.

42. **Ms. Eads** (Capitol Hill Prayer Partners) said that, over many years, she had visited members of the United States Congress to request support for the autonomy plan proposed by Morocco as a viable and credible solution for a quick, economically sound and politically workable solution to the conflict over Western Sahara. In her discussions with government officials, she continued to express deep concern for the youth in the camps. Without a timely resolution, another generation of Sahrawi youth that had been educated in the Tindouf camps would be polarized. Coming from a background of hate, they would lack the interpersonal skills needed for engaging in conflict resolution. The lack of resolution also drove young people towards clandestine activities, such as the smuggling of arms, people and drugs via old desert trade routes. Instead, they should be self-reliant and capable of cultivating positive relationships. If Sahrawi young people could see themselves only as victims, there was little hope for progress towards the peaceful settlement of the issue of Western Sahara.

43. **Ms. Njapau-Efrati** (Women Investment Network of Zambia) said that the issue of Moroccan Sahara, as the natural continuation of the country, was in no way a question of decolonization. The Moroccan Sahara was the most prosperous, stable and advanced region of Africa, thanks to the new development model for the southern provinces launched in 2015 by King Mohammed VI with a budget of more than \$8 billion. The local representatives who had been democratically elected on 8 September 2021 were the only legitimate representatives of the population of the region. They were responsible for managing the local affairs of the Moroccan Sahara and implementing the new development model. The new dynamic triggered by the model, attracting national and international investments, would make the region a hub of economic exchange and cultural and human connection between Morocco and the sub-Saharan African countries. The Moroccan Sahara would be the next main port platform in Africa, through the construction of the Dakhla Atlantic Port, and a major transit point for international trade. The

Moroccan Sahara hosted 24 consulates general of several countries in Africa, the Americas and Asia.

44. The new development model was aimed at promoting democracy to guarantee sustainable development; support the production sector, including small and medium-sized enterprises; boost social development; and promote Hassani culture. Those who were still thinking in terms of division should take stock of the latest developments on the ground, which only confirmed the Moroccan character of the Sahara.

45. **Mr. Huff** (Safety and Security Instructional Services) said that the Sahrawi people had been trapped in a desperate situation for more than 45 years and had been used for political and criminal gain. Military organizations that had established training bases in the Tindouf camps located in the Sahara/Sahel were continually seeking recruits among the vulnerable youth in the camps, drawing them into a life of terrorism, including drug and arms smuggling and human trafficking. Since the Arab Spring, militant jihadist groups and Latin American drug cartels had partnered to transport drugs, arms and humans across the Sahara Desert. Groups such as Al-Qaida and Al-Shabaab were extending their reach throughout the African continent, and some had infiltrated the Sahrawi refugee camps. The United States Drug Enforcement Administration offices in Africa had noted an escalation in cocaine trafficking from South America to Europe via established routes in Africa, which was used transit storage location. The threat also included heroin produced in Afghanistan and destined for the United States and Europe. A cartel member, David Cardona-Cardona, had been arrested and charged with arranging to trade cocaine for surface-to-air missiles and other advanced weaponry as part of a plan to move drugs to Europe via the Sahara Desert. He had stated that the intended purpose of the missiles was to shoot down aircraft belonging to the United States and its allies.

46. As had been documented by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, countries in the region with ambitions in the Sahel had backed Polisario forces with the ultimate goal of destabilizing the area and threatening the integrity of Morocco. Swift and decisive action should be taken to adopt the autonomy plan proposed by Morocco and allow Sahrawis to return to their homeland in order to give hope to future generations.

47. **Mr. Aboui** (University of Rwanda) said that, in its resolution [2548 \(2020\)](#), the Security Council had called upon the parties to resume negotiations under the auspices of the Secretary-General. The Sahara question was being considered under the exclusive auspices of the Security Council with the agreement of the parties



and, under Article 24 of the Charter of the United Nations, there was no room for parallel processes. Throughout the previous half century, the host country of the Tindouf camps had played a role in intensifying the conflict. It had provided the Polisario with food, shelter, weapons, equipment, training, financial support, diplomatic support and even a camp on its soil. It was thus a party to the regional dispute, and the Security Council required it to engage seriously through the political processes until a successful outcome had been reached.

48. Under the autonomy initiative proposed by Morocco, the populations of the region would democratically run their affairs through legislative, executive and judicial bodies, would have financial resources to contribute to the development of the region, and would participate actively in the economic, social and cultural life of the Sahara and of Morocco as a whole. The autonomy status of the Moroccan Saharan region would be negotiated and submitted to the populations concerned for consultation. The initiative, which was based on a compromise, was in conformity with international law, the Charter and resolutions of the General Assembly and the Security Council, as well as with the right to self-determination. Since 2007, the Security Council had described the proposal as serious and credible and recognized that negotiations were the only way to achieve a realistic, practicable and enduring political solution. All parties must continue to participate in the round-table process, building on the achievements of the first two rounds that had been held in Geneva, in order to find a solution and ensure the security and stability of the region.

49. **Mr. Gomes** (Valor Económico) said that the Moroccan Sahara faced a number of security threats, such as terrorism and arms, drug and human trafficking, all of which had intensified significantly over the previous decade. The countries of the Sahel/Sahara region continued to face complex, multi-faceted challenges exacerbated by insecurity and violent extremism. Those threats caused economic degradation, weakened the social and political fabric, and undermined peace, security and stability in the region. Morocco had worked to combat the threat of terrorism in the region and beyond; but security and stability would not be possible without regional and international cooperation, coordinated stabilization efforts and the economic development of all the countries of the region. It was therefore essential to find a political solution to the dispute based on the Moroccan autonomy initiative.

50. Under the new development model for the southern provinces, the Sahara was becoming an economic hub and vector of stability in the Sahel/Sahara

region. The populations of the region ran their own affairs democratically through their elected representatives. According to the most recent report of the Secretary-General (S/2021/843), the continued implementation by Morocco of the new development model had had a positive impact on the whole continent. The elections held in 2021 demonstrated that the Sahara was a positive example of democratic governance in the Sahel.

51. **Mr. Lygeros** (University of Lyon) said that the claim of Morocco over the Moroccan Sahara was longstanding and unwavering and had been established at both the international and national levels. Shortly after its independence, Morocco had claimed sovereignty over the region, long before the inception of the Polisario. The latter was not representative and did not have the capacity to represent the Saharan Moroccans in the southern provinces, who participated freely and actively in local and national elections. The elections held in Morocco in September 2021 had been historic for three reasons: they were held to elect representatives at three levels simultaneously; they were held in optimal conditions despite the pandemic; and the results confirmed the attachment of Moroccan Saharans to their country, once again demonstrating their civic engagement. The high rates of participation in Laayoune and Dakhla had far surpassed the national average. The region had the powers to govern a significant proportion of local affairs, participate in the implementation of national policies and develop specific territorial plans through its parliamentary representatives. Morocco thus offered participatory democracy to Moroccan Saharans with full enjoyment of their civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, whereas the Polisario offered no such alternative.

52. As was indicated in the most recent report of the Secretary-General, the Polisario had organized the large-scale misappropriation of humanitarian aid intended for the inhabitants in the Tindouf camps. Since its inception, the Polisario had worked on a fallacious basis and sought to destabilize the region. Its outdated structure had no future. The true representatives of the Sahara were its locally elected representatives, whom the Special Committee on decolonization had invited to participate in its work since 2018.

53. **Mr. Conway**, speaking in his personal capacity, said that he had visited the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) in Laayoune several times, and that the dedication of its personnel was admirable. He hoped that the Committee would reflect on the best way to move forward, particularly to improve conditions in the camps, and that the Secretary-General would endeavour to build on the

two round-table discussions in Geneva with the participation of all the interested parties.

54. In 17 resolutions adopted since 2007, the Security Council had welcomed the serious and credible efforts of Morocco as exemplified in the autonomy initiative, which was a win-win and compromise-based solution that had the support of most Member States. Morocco had already begun to devolve central government powers. The high turnout in the elections held in 2015 and 2021 demonstrated the deep and sincere commitment of the Sahara's population to democracy and its unfaltering will to participate in the development of its country, Morocco. The concept of autonomy was not new: there were at least 70 examples of it around the world, whereby a defined region had true political power without undermining the territorial integrity and the national unity of existing States. The Moroccan autonomy initiative had been prepared through inclusive consultations at the local and national levels, by local people, political parties and national representatives.

55. Critics of Morocco accused it of exploiting the resources of the Moroccan Sahara, yet for every \$1 generated in the southern provinces, a further \$7 was invested by the Moroccan central treasury. A sum of \$8 billion had already been invested, resulting in a remarkable improvement in the economic, social and educational provisions in the area.

56. Under international humanitarian law and United Nations resolutions, the host country of the Tindouf camps had an obligation to register and conduct a census of their inhabitants. He had been told by families in the camps that, in order for them to obtain a permit to leave a camp, one family member must remain to ensure the others' return. The Committee should consider how humanitarian aid to the camps was distributed and accounted for in the light of its use by the "polisario" to stall progress. The political process could move forward, but a crucial first step must be stopping any abuse of international aid.

57. **Mr. Dart Richert** (DEC Projects) said that he was disgusted by the actions of Morocco and the silence and complacency of the United Nations. The current situation in occupied Western Sahara was well known. The peacekeeping force had no human rights mandate. Massive human rights violations were being perpetrated, free speech was being suppressed and journalists were being indiscriminately imprisoned. Courts of law from the European Union to South Africa had invalidated trade agreements made by Morocco that ran counter to international law. The evidence presented by other speakers did not stand up to scrutiny. The issue at hand was not two-sided: there was a clear wrong and

a clear right, and the current rationalization of colonialism by some speakers was akin to the historical rationalization of slavery. The issue was to be decided not by Morocco, but by the Sahrawi people, who had lived under occupation and been subjected to abuse for nearly 50 years. The Committee had not fulfilled its duty to fight for justice; but it still had the chance to stand on the right side of history by ensuring that the rights of the Sahrawi people were recognized and that a referendum on self-determination was immediately held.

58. **Mr. Yelpi Aguilar** (Fundación Global África Latina) said that, from a political, legal and cultural perspective, the bond between the region and the Kingdom of Morocco was undeniable. During the decolonization process, the only sovereignty claim over the Sahara had been that of Morocco. During the Green March, Morocco had recovered the Sahara and made it known that the region was an integral and non-negotiable part of its territory. Frente POLISARIO had subsequently been brought in to sabotage the building of democracy in Morocco under the surreptitious direction of Algeria. It should be noted that Frente POLISARIO had not existed until 1973, when Algeria had sponsored its creation for political and strategic reasons, leading to the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. The latter was an illusion and a fabrication of the cold war. It was characterized by totalitarianism; in cases of dissent, individual freedoms and the universality of human rights were disregarded.

59. Only Morocco was in a position to guarantee the development and well-being of the area, as it had shown with improved human development and urbanization in such places as Dakhla and Laayoune. The Moroccan autonomy plan was thus the only possible path towards a peaceful solution, within the framework of respect for the territorial integrity of the Morocco and fundamental guarantees under international law. That outcome would also contribute to peace, development and combating terrorism in the region.

60. **Mr. Biyogue Bi Ntougou** (Omar Bongo University) said that the delays in addressing the question of the Moroccan Sahara entailed major risks. Clashes could take place between the armed militias of Polisario, supported by the neighbouring State, and the Moroccan army. The Tindouf camps could become a locus of arms and drug trafficking and a base for terrorist groups operating in the Sahel. The question of the Moroccan Sahara should be reinstated as a Security Council priority. The neighbouring State should be prevailed upon to discontinue its support for Polisario separatists; resume negotiations, in the light of the increased diplomatic support for the Moroccan position;

protect the populations of the Tindouf camps from abuses at the hands of Polisario; and support the autonomy plan proposed by Morocco, which was fair, equitable and consistent both with universal values and with historical, sociological, cultural and legal reality.

61. Failing to support the Moroccan character of the Sahara meant once again dividing up the African continent. The proliferation of fragile States undermined the stability of the continent and exacerbated tensions that generated significant work for the United Nations. That outcome would awaken the dormant separatist tendencies in certain States and would jeopardize the chances of building the long-desired African unity. The Moroccan proposal should be supported by all those involved in the process of building a fair, safe and prosperous world.

62. **Mr. Nguimbi**, speaking in his personal capacity, said that, in resolution [2548 \(2020\)](#), the Security Council had clearly identified the true parties to the dispute and expressed its exasperation regarding the erratic behaviour of certain actors. The role of the host country of the Tindouf camps had been highlighted, which had not been the case in previous resolutions. The Security Council had reiterated its commitment to a realistic, practicable and enduring political solution based on compromise. In his most recent report, the Secretary-General had confirmed that the political process under the aegis of the United Nations was guided by resolution [2548 \(2020\)](#).

63. In resolution [2414 \(2018\)](#), the Security Council had called upon the Polisario to refrain from any actions that could destabilize the situation or threaten the political process. In response, the Polisario had violated the ceasefire and tried to create the illusion of a war in the Sahara. In the recent elections in the Moroccan Sahara, the people had expressed their connection to their country. At the international level, the majority of Member States supported the Moroccan autonomy initiative, and 24 countries had opened consulates general in the Moroccan Sahara. Secessionist tendencies went against the building of a united Africa in a globalized world, and could not be condoned. Security Council resolution [2548 \(2020\)](#) formed the basis for the resolution of the question of the Moroccan Sahara and validated the efforts of Morocco to engage in dialogue and compromise and to pursue, with the consent of the population and in response to needs on the ground, development for the region, with the growing support of the international community.

64. **Mr. Gakwaya** (Rwanda Media Commission) said that, after Morocco had recovered the Moroccan Sahara, certain neighbouring States had opposed the completion

of the territorial integrity of Morocco. Following its establishment in 1976, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic had not been recognized by the United Nations or other entities; but it had been accepted as a member of the Organization of African Unity, the precursor to the African Union, in flagrant violation of article 28 of the Charter of the Organization of African Unity and international law. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic could not be considered a State, as it did not have any of the three constitutive elements required: a territory, a population or capacity to exercise power. The African Union should suspend its membership, designate it as a non-State separatist entity, and recognize that the Morocco had always had a tie of sovereignty over the Sahara, as had been confirmed by the International Court of Justice. In so doing, the African Union would rectify an injustice and be able to play a credible role in supporting the political process under the aegis of the United Nations. The Moroccan autonomy initiative constituted an opportunity to further the negotiations with a view to finding a definitive solution to the dispute consistent with international law and the Charter of the United Nations.

65. **Mr. Grimblatt** (Scanner International) said that, following the United States proclamation regarding the Moroccan character of the Sahara, the autonomy proposal, presented to the Security Council in 2007, could be the only framework for a political solution to the dispute. Consultations on the proposal had been held at all levels of the Moroccan nation, as well as with the population and the elected representatives of the Sahara. The proposal represented a fair compromise: the State would preserve its sovereignty and territorial unity while transferring some of its powers to the local population, which would run its own affairs democratically. The autonomous region of the Sahara would have its own powers and a local government led by a representative of the Moroccan State who would be elected by the parliament of the region. The regional parliament could establish a court system to rule on disputes arising from the application of laws issued by the bodies of the autonomous region. Their independent decisions would be issued in the name of the King. The regional government, parliament and courts would govern, legislate and judge in accordance with the autonomy statute. The creation of bodies specific to the region did not affect the right of the population to representation in Parliament and other bodies. As one of its prerogatives, the autonomous region could introduce taxes to finance its development, and it would receive income from its natural resources. While the State would retain control over certain elements linked to sovereignty, such as the flag, the currency, security and

national defence, it would take a more balanced approach with regard to some government functions.

66. Negotiations on the proposal would culminate in a free referendum for the populations concerned. Measures, including a general amnesty, would be taken to ensure that returnees were reintegrated into the national community, guaranteeing their dignity, safety and the protection of their property. A transitional council would provide support for the repatriation and the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration of armed elements located outside the Sahara, as well as any other action connected with the adoption and implementation of the autonomy statute.

67. **Mr. Sánchez Serra** (Federación de Periodistas del Perú) said that the Moroccan autonomy initiative was the only basis for a realistic and viable political solution. The proposal of holding a referendum was obsolete, unenforceable and unattainable, and had been abandoned by the Security Council some 20 years before. Meanwhile, the Sahrawi population in Tindouf was being held hostage in subhuman conditions without fundamental freedoms, in sharp contrast with its kin in the Moroccan Sahara. Neither the Polisario nor its patron, which had significant hydrocarbon potential, had provided access to electricity or water. Moreover, the Polisario was misappropriating humanitarian aid and would not allow a census to be conducted, as required by the United Nations.

68. The question of the Sahara had been brought before the Committee at the request of Morocco in the 1960s in an endeavour to restore its territorial integrity. The autonomy proposal of Morocco was a realistic, credible, serious and practical initiative and the only solution that would put an end to the artificial conflict in the Sahara, which had been created by an unfriendly neighbour and a separatist militia. In the recent elections in Morocco, Moroccan Saharans had turned out in force to vote for their representatives in the southern provinces. The autonomy initiative and the advanced regionalization model fitted perfectly into the framework of democratic choice in Morocco, as well as reflecting the principles of independence and territorial governance, which, pursuant to the Constitution, guaranteed the participation of the local population in managing its own affairs. By taking decisive action, the Committee had an opportunity to make history.

69. **Mr. Dahi** (Labour Inspectorate, Ministry of Employment, Laayoune) said that the development project announced in 2015, with a total budget of some \$8.5 billion, had brought tangible benefits to the inhabitants of the Saharan provinces. Despite the exceptional circumstances brought about by the

COVID-19 pandemic, significant progress had been made. Windfarms and a desalination plant had been constructed, and two dams were being developed. A 1,055 km highway connecting Tiznit to Dakhla was nearing completion. A road from Dakhla to the centre of Guerguerat had been planned with a view to facilitating trade. A commercial maritime route would soon open between Dakhla and Casablanca, and ferries now connected Laayoune to the Canary Islands. The development project also had social and cultural components, including equal opportunities guarantees, the creation of 120,000 local jobs, high-quality social services, a university clinic in Laayoune and a technology hub in Fom El Oued. Far from misappropriating the natural resources of the Saharan provinces, Morocco had invested considerable funds in the region since recovering it in 1975.

70. **Mr. Douihi** (Association sahraïe contre l'impunité aux camps de Tindouf) said that the facts set out in the report of the Secretary-General underscored the legitimate character of the Moroccan intervention to reopen roads in Guerguerat, which had been blocked by gangs armed with heavy weapons. Similarly, reports of an open war were categorically refuted; in fact, separatists had been opening fire at random near the Algerian border. Polisario militias were described as hindering the work of MINURSO and denying access to convoys. It was clearly stated that a solution to the artificial conflict in the Saharan region should be based on the Security Council resolutions adopted since 2018. New, realistic parameters were set out for that purpose, and the pivotal role of Algeria in the conflict was emphasized. The development projects conducted by Morocco in the Saharan region were acknowledged, and attention was drawn to the alarming situation in the Tindouf camps, where Polisario militias and host country armed forces had carried out grave human rights violations, including the immolation of two young Saharans. It was thus clear from the report that the Polisario and its backers were responsible for the mounting insecurity in the region.

71. **Mr. Sassi** (SKC) said that the Sahrawi people wanted only to live in peace and harmony in an independent State alongside its neighbours. Ever since Spain had left its former colony without seeing the United Nations-mandated decolonization process through to fruition in 1975, Morocco had maintained a blinkered colonialist attitude, refusing to countenance any talk of the right to self-determination or independence. Instead, its only aim had been to sow tensions in the region.

72. Renewing the mandate of MINURSO would compel the two parties to abide by the ceasefire

established in 1991 under United Nations auspices and allow the Mission to fulfil its mandate of organizing a referendum on self-determination for the Sahrawi people.

73. In 1976, Frente POLISARIO had proclaimed the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, only to be marginalized in its own land by an increasingly aggressive settlement policy. The gradual military escalation orchestrated by Morocco was steadily undermining regional security and stability. Meanwhile, Sahrawis living in refugee camps, frustrated by 40 years of diplomatic stalemate and feeling forgotten by the international community, had lost faith in negotiations. The Security Council, for its part, had not commented on the recent escalation, let alone taken action to address the situation or alleviate Sahrawi suffering. A new Personal Envoy of the Secretary-General for Western Sahara should be appointed, as the post had been vacant since 2019.

74. The occupying Power indiscriminately tortured and arrested human rights defenders, denied access to international organizations and expelled foreign journalists. The many advantages given to Moroccans who relocated to Western Sahara were upsetting the demographic balance and would soon make Sahrawis a minority in their own land. In order to break the stalemate, the international community should support the establishment of national Sahrawi institutions, even though much of the Sahrawi people was in exile. In so doing, it could buttress the Sahrawi people's claim to independence in its territory and silence the steady drumbeat of war.

75. **Ms. Lenz** (Not Forgotten, International; International Faith and Peace Dialogue) said that she had been introduced to the Sahrawi people in the Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria in 1999 and that the echo of their lives and words was ever present in her daily life. While the Committee sat in comfort, the Sahrawi people lacked food, transportation and clothing. It desperately longed for its rightful, beloved homeland by the sea, where its stories, history and traditions had originated. Its seemingly impossible dream was to live freely in its own homeland, which had been taken from it. The Sahrawi people had no doubt regarding the question of Western Sahara; the Committee ought to ask it directly what should be done.

76. **Mr. Boulon**, speaking in his personal capacity, said that, as a native of the Sahara region, he was one of many citizens to live in peace and harmony under Moroccan sovereignty, having witnessed all aspects of the conflict as a child. The southern provinces were receiving an unprecedented level of investment and had

one of the fastest growing economies in Morocco, with large-scale infrastructure projects under way. There was an unwavering commitment to social justice in the region, which had the lowest poverty rate in Morocco. The region ran its own affairs, as evidenced by the recent free and fair elections. If those Sahrawis who had been taken against their will to live in the camps were given the freedom to choose, they would return to Morocco, where they could speak, move and live freely, have greater access to health care, education and jobs, and enjoy dignity and prosperity. Indeed, there had been a steady stream of new arrivals from the camps. It was inherently unjust and unfair for the politically motivated aspirations of a few to supersede the will of the Sahrawi people. The Committee should not treat majority rule and minority rights as mutually exclusive. There was no need to wait to establish an autonomous region under the banner of Morocco or to end the suffering of the Sahrawi people.

77. **Mr. de la Vega García** (Banco de Alimentos) said that the Constitution of Morocco of 2011 contained provisions on undertaking a regionalization process, which had proved to be successful in economic terms. In September 2021, elections had been held throughout Morocco, including in the Sahara. Despite the pandemic, some of the highest turnout rates in the country had been recorded in the Sahara, demonstrating the will of the people to participate in the democratic process in their country, Morocco. In addition, the electoral process had been open to all women in the region, and women candidates had won a number of seats. Morocco had involved the inhabitants of the region in a normalized democratic life, and the question under discussion could be resolved through a democratic election process. Some 24 consulates general had been established in the region, which was an implicit act of recognition. Retaining the region on the agenda of the Fourth Committee would not contribute to local development, peace in the region or the achievement of the second Sustainable Development Goal, zero hunger. The integration of the representatives of the region in the national parliament would help actively to preserve a part the collective identity of the Moroccan people.

78. There was, unfortunately, no legal framework governing the living conditions in the Tindouf camps, which was an unprecedented situation in international law. Even the location of the camps was illogical, and there was a pressing need for a census of the population of the camps. The Committee should echo the Security Council in its call for a mutually acceptable political solution.

79. **Mr. Pali**, speaking in his personal capacity, said that the decolonization of Western Sahara had been obstructed when Morocco had invaded and occupied the territory in 1975, in violation of United Nations resolutions and the advisory opinion issued by the International Court of Justice that same year. In line with the norms of international law, the Organization had never recognized, and had indeed denounced, the illegal occupation and annexation of parts of Western Sahara by Morocco.

80. Occupied Western Sahara had undergone a massive demographic engineering process. The indigenous population was now hugely outnumbered by settlers, whose mass migration had been sponsored by the occupying Power, in violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention. The territory was thus the only Non-Self-Governing Territory under illegal military occupation by a third country and, since the withdrawal of Spain, the only one without an internationally recognized administering Power. The same Western countries that defended democracy far and wide remained silent before Moroccan oppression in Western Sahara. It was time for the United Nations to take tangible steps to enable the people of Western Sahara to decide its own future freely and democratically.

*The meeting rose at 1 p.m.*