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**Special Political and Decolonization Committee  
(Fourth Committee)****Summary record of the 4th meeting**

Held at Headquarters, New York, on Thursday, 7 October 2021, at 3 p.m.

*Chair:* Ms. González López ..... (El Salvador)  
*later:* Mr. Nayan (Vice-Chair)..... (Philippines)

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*The meeting was called to order at 3 p.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 petitioners (continued)*

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

*Question of Western Sahara (continued) (A/C.4/76/9)*

2. **Mr. Sghayer**, speaking in his personal capacity, said that the people of Western Sahara had been failed by the Committee and other United Nations bodies seized with the matter. The Committee had failed to perform its sole task, namely, to ensure decolonization. He could not recall the last time the Committee had attempted to visit Western Sahara.

3. The ceasefire in Western Sahara had ended the minute that the army of the occupying Power had illegally entered the Guerguerat zone. To date, the Sahrawi liberation army had conducted more than 330 military strikes against Moroccan soldiers behind the separation wall of shame. Unlike Morocco, which was concealing its losses, the Sahrawi people proudly acknowledged its martyrs. For the time being, the occupied territory of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic remained under military siege; grave human rights violations continued, as did the plunder of natural resources.

4. The proclamation by the former United States Administration recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara had delighted the Moroccan regime but done nothing to alter the situation. Emboldened, Morocco had then used its own citizens to attempt to force Spain to echo the United States position on Western Sahara. The European Union, however, had condemned the occupying Power's rogue action. The Committee and the United Nations as a whole should follow suit and denounce the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara as colonization, something that the Secretary-General's predecessor had done. The Committee and the Security Council should set a date for the decolonization of Western Sahara so that its people could live freely in its land under the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.

5. **Mr. Zardini** (John F. Kennedy Argentine University) said that Moroccan women of Sahrawi origin living in the Tindouf camps experienced daily

human rights violations. Most had been subjected to serious violence and sexual abuse by the leaders and members of the armed Polisario movement. Many of the victims did not dare to report such events and were obliged to bear their hardship in silence. Others were separated from their children, who were sent to distant countries, notably to Cuba, where they underwent ideological indoctrination and military training without any contact with their families for many years. The armed Polisario movement had ordered early marriages and forced procreation in order to increase the birth rate in the camps and, hence, the humanitarian aid received from the international community. Young mothers were forced to undergo pregnancies and childbirth without proper medical assistance. The continued diversion of humanitarian aid caused dire food and health-care shortages, leaving women vulnerable to malnutrition and chronic illnesses.

6. The international community, particularly the United Nations, must assume its moral and legal responsibility to put an end to the humanitarian tragedy. The Organization must examine the abuses and violations committed by the armed Polisario movement and its sponsors, and press for immediate compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

7. **Ms. Hmyene** (Association for the Freedom of Women Sequestered in the Tindouf Camps) said that, for more than 40 years, the Polisario had violated international law and international human rights law in the Tindouf camps, with the support of a well-known State. Members of the Polisario who had fled the camps had borne witness to the indoctrination of children and sexual enslavement of women. The European Anti-Fraud Office had found that humanitarian aid intended for the residents of the camps had been systematically appropriated by the Polisario.

8. The Polisario had received training and weapons from members of Hizbullah, and the French Army had recently succeeded in killing Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, a Polisario member who had led an organization known as Da'esh in the Islamic Maghreb. Those facts showed that the Tindouf camps were a hotbed of terrorism perpetrated by the Polisario and indulged by the host country.

9. In contrast, residents of the southern provinces of Morocco had been able to elect their own representatives on 8 September 2021, in elections which observers from the European Union and the League of Arab States had found to be transparent and credible.

10. **Mr. Bendriss** (Association for the Support of the Moroccan Autonomy Initiative) said that the Security

Council had repeatedly welcomed the Moroccan autonomy initiative as a serious and credible means of achieving a definitive solution to the dispute. The initiative, which was fully compliant with international law and largely open to negotiation, would allow the people of the Moroccan Sahara region to manage their affairs with their own democratically elected legislative and executive bodies, under the sovereignty of a united Morocco. Any outcome other than autonomy would risk instability and prolong the suffering of the people living in the Tindouf camps.

11. **Mr. Elaissoui**, speaking in his personal capacity, said that the Polisario had unlawfully militarized the Tindouf camps, turning them into training grounds for militias, including through the forcible recruitment of children and young people. Children in the camps were subjected to all forms of exploitation and abuse by the Polisario militia, in violation of human rights and humanitarian principles. The international community should no longer tolerate the separation of children from their parents by Polisario mercenaries, which deprived them of the right to education and exploited their innocence.

12. The Tindouf camps had become breeding grounds for terrorist organizations recruiting new members among marginalized and disenfranchised children and young people. The connection between Polisario mercenaries and terrorist groups in the Sahel was increasingly clear. For as long as the Polisario militia retained control, the threat of the emergence of hundreds of terrorists from the camps would be a ticking time bomb.

13. **Mr. El Baihi** (La Ligue du Sahara pour la démocratie et les droits de l'homme) said that the inhabitants of the Tindouf camps were subjected to repression, poverty, hunger, illness, terror, and physical and psychological torture. The camps had become a breeding ground for extremism and violence, providing a steady supply of fighters and weapons for terrorist groups in the Sahel and Sahara regions. By ending the farce in the Guerguerat area, the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces had thwarted the plans of their real adversaries, who had dreamed of establishing a foothold on the Atlantic coast. The Polisario leadership was now claiming to wage a devastating war against Morocco in order to impose absolute control over the camps and quash opposition to its grave human rights violations, especially the recruitment and training of child soldiers. Deep down, however, it sensed that the game was up, and that it would need to secure funds for a comfortable retirement. He had witnessed first-hand the criminal diversion of humanitarian assistance, having been tasked by the Polisario with escorting the vehicles

delivering that assistance for years. Following the important developments in the Saharan question, in particular, the recognition by the United States of America that the Sahara was Moroccan and the decision by several countries to open consulates in the Saharan provinces, the Polisario leaders were losing their nerve and lashing out at the residents of the camps.

14. **Mr. Leon** (Fundación Global Chile Marruecos) said that refugee men, women and children in the Tindouf camps had been taken hostage for political reasons. The population was under military control, and Algeria had prevented a census from being held. However, given that no legal framework was enforced in the area, the Polisario was unaccountable for its extensive human rights violations. The Human Rights Committee had expressed deep concern about the de facto delegation of powers by Algeria to the Polisario, something that ran counter to its responsibilities as a State party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

15. **Mr. Bennani**, speaking in his personal capacity, said that the situation of the children living in the Tindouf camps was deeply concerning. The host country had devolved its powers to the Polisario militias, in violation of international law, turning the camps into lawless zones where inhumane practices took place, including enforced disappearances, illegal detention, torture and extrajudicial executions. Instead of enjoying their rights to education, leisure and recreation and building a dignified future, children in the camps were exploited as slaves, groomed to join terrorist groups and enrolled in the Polisario militias. Some were abducted and enslaved, and girls were often subjected to rape and forced marriage at a very young age. The international press and several non-governmental organizations had repeatedly denounced and documented such inhumane practices. The so-called leaders of the Polisario should be held responsible for their crimes against humanity; they were directly involved in such practices, as almost all of them owned child slaves. As long as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was prevented from conducting a census of the population, that situation would continue.

16. **Mr. Ichimi** (Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Lagos) said that Morocco had implemented multisector development and investment programmes and schemes for economic empowerment and jobs creation in the Moroccan Sahara. The region now had some of the highest human development rates in the country, in such areas as health, education and access to critical support infrastructure. Nonetheless, the people living in the Moroccan Sahara continued to be affected by war. The international community could no longer

stand aside; so long as the conflict persisted, the region was degenerating into an incubation site for existential threats to international peace and security. The 2007 Moroccan autonomy initiative offered a template which, with modifications, could be used to reach an amicable solution to the conflict in the Moroccan Sahara. Morocco, the Polisario Front and all of the interested parties should remain committed to a peaceful and mutually beneficial settlement plan.

17. **Ms. Basinet**, speaking in her personal capacity, said that the notion that the rich and famous were equipped to solve the problems of the Sahrawi people was to their detriment. The world must become inclusive, putting the voices of those in the Sahrawi refugee camp on terms of equality with those of celebrities. Social media presented versions of previously created content, as no protections were in place. Free access to the intellectual property of others had a detrimental effect on women's rights, confused consumers and served to silence independent voices, with both destructive and divisive results. Young Sahrawi people must be allowed the opportunity to represent their people and plead their case.

18. **Mr. Gain** (African Institute for Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation) said that the provocative actions of the Polisario undermined the efforts of the international community to find a political solution to the regional dispute concerning the Sahara. The militias' flagrant criminal acts encouraged terrorism and trafficking, and their breach of the ceasefire by the Polisario constituted a real threat to peace and security in the region.

19. In his report to the Security Council on the topic (S/2021/843), the Secretary-General aligned himself with Morocco, which had ceaselessly called on the Security Council to redouble efforts to find a prompt and definitive end to the acts of intolerable and destabilizing provocations by the Polisario. The report had confirmed that armed militias of the Polisario had been in Guerguerat in October and November 2020, something that justified the intervention of Morocco, which had been consistent with international law. It highlighted the international recognition of the legitimate rights of Morocco through the opening of consulates in Laayoune and Dakhla; the support of the United States for the full sovereignty of Morocco over its Sahara; and the economic and infrastructural development of the region.

20. A political, realistic, pragmatic and lasting solution based on compromise should be reached in accordance with the Security Council resolutions adopted since 2007, which had established the autonomy initiative as the only serious and credible

solution to the regional dispute over the Moroccan Sahara. While Morocco was committed to a peaceful solution, the Secretary-General had urged the Polisario to immediately stop violating the ceasefire and obstructing the work of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO).

21. **Ms. Lodico** (Grace Initiative Global) said that the achievement of self-determination for the Sahrawi people now appeared even more remote than when MINURSO had been established. The 1991 ceasefire had broken down owing to the resumption of armed attacks by Polisario against Moroccan forces, stemming from the absence of a viable peace process and the strengthened hold of Morocco over the Territory. Diplomatic inaction had been compounded by the lack of a Personal Envoy for Western Sahara since May 2019. She therefore welcomed the recent appointment of the Secretary-General's new Personal Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, and urged the United Nations and the Security Council to provide their full support for a mutual agreement to ensure dignity for the Sahrawi people and consent from Morocco.

22. The issue of self-determination remained unresolved both politically and legally. Although a series of United Nations envoys had pressed for a referendum, the Security Council had not forced the issue. It was time for the Security Council to put its political weight behind a strengthened MINURSO, so that Western Sahara could be removed from the list. It was inconceivable that a peacekeeping mission in the twenty-first century did not have a human rights component; MINURSO must also receive a mandate to report on human rights violations.

23. **Mr. El Ouali** (African Forum for Research and Studies in Human Rights) said that, by opening consulates in Dakhla and Laayoune, several countries had sent a clear political and diplomatic message that they officially recognized the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco over its Sahara. The inauguration of the United States consulate was particularly significant; its recognition of the Sahara as Moroccan was a historic turning point that was already having an impact.

24. The international community should take note of the number of African countries that supported the territorial integrity of Morocco. In January 2017, a vote had been held on the return of Morocco to the African Union; only six countries had stubbornly opposed the move, and even they had eventually relented in the hope of saving face. Given that the overwhelming majority of African countries rejected separatism in the Moroccan Sahara, the fact that a spurious separatist entity

continued to be a member of the African Union was a flagrant anomaly. The ejection of that interloper was surely only a matter of time.

25. **Mr. Coulibaly** (University of Bamako, Mali) said that the areas under the control of the Polisario had become a hub for international organized crime, including trafficking in drugs and humans, illegal migration, financial and economic delinquency, cybercrime, money laundering and hostage-taking. Transnational crime was the principal source of insecurity in the Sahel, preventing social, economic and cultural development, fostering corruption and negatively affecting political stability in the countries of the subregion. Such crime was abetted by border control services.

26. MINURSO must prioritize the security of individuals, without abandoning the political process. Several issues were at stake, concerning peace, security, democracy, human rights, natural resources and regional integration. The United Nations must adopt the solution proposed by the Kingdom of Morocco, as it offered a path forward that was in the interests of the populations living in southern Morocco.

27. **Ms. Erb** (Erb Law) said that when the Tindouf camps had been formed in 1975, the Polisario had assumed complete control with no internal or external oversight. That situation distinguished the Sahrawi camps from most other refugee camps under United Nations supervision. The lack of oversight had allowed for the mistreatment of residents, the misuse of funds and mass diversion of humanitarian aid at all levels of distribution. For over 40 years, humanitarian aid had been donated to the Tindouf camps based on inflated numbers given by the Polisario. Even though excess humanitarian aid intended for the residents of the camps had been found in many North African countries, the United Nations had still failed to insist on a census to determine the number of camp residents requiring aid. By refusing to provide a head count, the Polisario had shown a lack of transparency and credibility, posing risks to the lives of the camp residents.

28. By governing the camps for decades with no accountability, the Polisario had been able to present itself as a State. The Polisario did not even have observer status at the United Nations; yet its leaders met with heads of State and sometimes gained support by claiming to represent a separate country that had lost its legal rights. It was in fact a non-State group without any legal status, and its leaders had no legitimate authority.

29. **Mr. De La Vega** (Asociación Ecuatoriana de Amistad con el Pueblo Saharaui) said that the situation of the Sahrawi people was urgent. Some lived in refugee

camps in Algeria; most were subjected to systematic and generalized human rights violations by the Moroccan security forces in the occupied Territory of Western Sahara. Some four decades had passed since Morocco had first stated its willingness to participate in a referendum on the question of independence; yet Western Sahara was still one of the 17 Non-Self-Governing Territories.

30. The current state of political and diplomatic limbo had been contributed to by MINURSO, which lacked a human rights component, and by the ceasefire between the Kingdom of Morocco and the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguía el-Hamra y de Río de Oro (Frente POLISARIO), the sole legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people. The breakdown of the ceasefire in November 2020 had intensified the oppression of the Sahrawi civilian population in occupied Western Sahara by the Moroccan armed forces. He urged the Committee to express concern at that situation and, in particular, the case of the Sahrawi activist Sultana Khaya.

31. **Ms. Emhamed** (Peace and Justice Center, Decorah, Iowa) said that, despite the annual hearing of petitioners, the Committee had taken disappointingly little action to resolve the decades-long conflict in Western Sahara. She hoped that members would reverse that trend and take a stand for justice and freedom. As long as her country was under Moroccan occupation, she and many other Sahrawis would remain refugees. Young Sahrawis had lost hope in the United Nations and were willing to make any sacrifice necessary to resolve the situation, even if that meant going back to war with Morocco.

32. There was a human rights crisis in occupied Western Sahara. Moroccan forces were arresting and torturing protesters, imprisoning political activists, raping women and harassing international journalists, denying them access to Western Sahara. The activist Sultana Khaya and her family were under house arrest and were subjected to daily mental and physical abuse. The presence of MINURSO was pointless unless it could implement a referendum and prevent human rights violations.

33. **Ms. Barca** (Karama Sahara) said that, having grown up in the refugee camps, she had previously admired the United Nations, but had become aware of its lack of impact. Sahrawis were allotted four minutes to speak before the Committee; but the United Nations had given itself forty years to resolve the question of Western Sahara, and during that time, it had done nothing but prolong the suffering of the Sahrawi people. Some petitioners had accused the Sahrawi people of terrorism; but Moroccans, not Sahrawis, had taken parts

in the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the Madrid bombings of 11 March 2004. Those petitioners who had made accusations regarding slavery should be mindful that freedom was preferable to paid speech.

34. **Mr. Rodriguez** (John Jay College of Criminal Justice) said that while the question of Western Sahara was being discussed as a question of decolonization, the current situation was actually one of invasion. The Committee should draft a resolution recognizing the problem for what it was, and calling on the Security Council to resolve it once and for all. One might well ask for how long economic interests would be placed above human rights, and for how long the Organization would be used as a bureaucratic mechanism to avoid reaching a solution.

35. Western Sahara had its own territory, population and political structure, which were all the elements it required to be recognized as a country and nation. If there was any doubt in that regard, MINURSO should ask the Western Sahara population how it wished to be governed, enabling the people to decide between foreign occupation and their own sovereignty. Unfortunately, however, human beings were suffering because the objectives of the Committee remained unfulfilled.

36. **Ms. Ezaoui** (African Forum of Research and Studies in Human Rights) said that the significant multisectoral development in the Moroccan Sahara had placed the region among the most developed not only in Morocco, but also on the African continent. Sahrawi women had made effective contributions to the decision-making processes across the institutional landscape. A new development model for the Moroccan Sahara had been adopted after discussions with the local population, with the participation of civil society organizations, social and economic stakeholders, trade unions and elected bodies, attracting several large investment projects to the region. Saharans had an unwavering commitment to improving the socioeconomic lives of all, including those in the Tindouf camps.

37. Unfortunately, many people remained confined in the Tindouf camps illegally run by the armed militia of the Polisario. Saharan women in the Tindouf camps were vulnerable to rape, slavery and forced confinement, procreation and marriage. If they became pregnant outside marriage, they could face systematic imprisonment. The international community could not remain silent at the distress of those in the camps; it must save them from the horrors of the Polisario so that they could return to their home country, Morocco.

38. **Ms. Perino**, speaking in her personal capacity, said that the claims by Morocco that the Sahrawi camps

were dangerous and that the Sahrawis were denied freedom of movement were completely untrue. For many years, the Sahrawi people had tried to reach agreements using peaceful means; however, they could no longer stand by and watch their people suffer. When Morocco had violated the ceasefire agreement, leading to the outbreak of war, Sahrawis had not fled; instead, many of those who lived abroad had returned to the camps in order to fight for their liberation.

39. The illegal occupation of Western Sahara by Morocco had forced many Sahrawis to live outside their homeland as refugees for over four decades. Despite their hardships and lack of resources, the Sahrawi refugees were resilient and self-sufficient. That strength was demonstrated by the National Union of Sahrawi Women, who were working for the political and social integration of women, particularly in the area of peace and security. Both in occupied Western Sahara and in the refugee camps, women played an essential role in working towards the independence of the Sahrawi people. For more than 40 years, Sahrawis had been waiting for the referendum promised by the United Nations. They must be allowed to decide their future and to live in peace and freedom in their homeland.

40. **Mr. Fall** (Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA)) said that, in spite of a growing body of international law on the question, enshrined in the pronouncements of the Security Council, the African Union and the General Court of the European Union, the Moroccan military occupation continued to plunder the natural wealth of Western Sahara. Those States that condoned and profited from the Moroccan occupation were complicit in international crimes, such as altering the Territory's demographic composition by encouraging settlement activity. That situation had been exacerbated by the resumption in November 2020 of hostilities between the occupying Moroccan forces and Frente POLISARIO, the sole legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people. The Moroccan occupying forces had taken advantage of the outbreak of war and the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic to perpetrate more crimes against Sahrawi civilians, human rights defenders and political prisoners, including the illegal deportation of prisoners to Moroccan prisons outside Western Sahara.

41. The United Nations should set a date for a just, free and fair referendum in order to enable the Sahrawi people to exercise self-determination. The stranglehold on Western Sahara and, in particular, on the family of Sidi Brahim Khaya must be lifted, and all Sahrawi political prisoners must be released. A stop must be put to crimes against humanity and war crimes perpetrated by the occupying Moroccan forces. A United Nations

human rights entity should be established to protect Sahrawi civilians. Lastly, the illegal plunder of Sahrawi resources must cease, and a United Nations entity should be established to administer those resources until the Sahrawi people was able to decide its political future.

42. **Mr. Maliha**, speaking in his personal capacity, said that he was part of the third generation of Sahrawis who had been born into the violent realities of life in the occupied Western Sahara. The Territory was divided by a wall fitted with landmines; settlers were being imported with a view to altering the demographic composition of the Territory; and national resources were being stolen. Collectively, those realities amounted to crimes against humanity. The fate of his people now rested with the Security Council, many of whose members had actively participated in the occupation of Western Sahara. The General Court of the European Union had recently confirmed that Frente POLISARIO, rather than Morocco, had the legal capacity to represent and defend the interests of the people of Western Sahara. Despite such progress, the Committee and the United Nations remained silent and complicit; but failure to secure a peaceful resolution would only undermine their credibility and fuel instability and extremism in the region.

43. While the appointment of the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy was welcome, concrete and meaningful measures were needed, including international mechanisms to protect Sahrawi civilians and human rights defenders in occupied Western Sahara; a mandate to protect and monitor human rights; the release of political prisoners; investigations into the cases of disappeared Sahrawis; and the creation of an international legal mechanism to manage natural resources in the Territory.

44. **Ms. Charradi** (Association féminine pour le développement durable) said that as a Saharan living in the Moroccan Sahara, where her family had been based for generations, she enjoyed the full exercise of civil, political and economic rights enshrined in a democratic Constitution, before which all citizens were equal. Moreover, ethnocultural diversity was a fundamental component of Moroccan identity, of which Saharans had been an integral part for centuries. That historical legacy of belonging would not be erased by the falsehoods and machinations, informed by Cold War rhetoric, deployed to undermine the territorial integrity of Morocco.

45. Those who claimed to represent the Sahrawi people would do well to recall that the overwhelming majority of Saharans were based in the Moroccan Sahara, where they elected local officials through broad

participation in transparent, democratic electoral processes. The same could not, however, be said of the Saharans detained in the Tindouf camps. Since 1975, the same cast of characters had inflicted their sadistic rule and grave and systematic violations of human rights on the inhabitants of the camps, as was the wont of Communist organizations such as the Khmer Rouge. Those violations, including enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, torture, enslavement, child recruitment and rape, took place in a legal vacuum created by the host State. All the while, the vast majority of Saharans continued to make great strides toward development and participatory democracy.

46. **Mr. El Ahmadi**, speaking in his personal capacity, said that the recent local, regional and legislative elections in the Sahara were an undeniable example of the exercise of the right to self-determination. They had also signalled the approval of a governance model that granted territorial integrity to the Kingdom of Morocco and empowered Saharans to manage their own affairs through the democratically elected bodies. Supporters of the "polisario" had mobilized vast funds and blocked the emancipation of the Sahrawis in the Tindouf camps in order to serve their own regional agenda, to the detriment of stability and integration in the Maghreb region. However, the record turnout in the elections proved that Saharans rejected separatist agendas and signalled the collapse of the sclerotic "Polisario" leadership.

47. The fact that 25 countries had opened consulates in Laayoune and Dakhla indicated their recognition of the sovereignty of Morocco over its Sahara. In a significant move, the United States had recognized that the Sahara was Moroccan and that the autonomy initiative was the sole solution to the regional conflict in the Sahara. Saharans had placed their trust in the ability of the United Nations to find a solution to the regional dispute, delegating their democratically elected representatives to take part in round-table negotiations in line with the relevant Security Council resolutions. The Committee should support the political process in order to reach a realistic, pragmatic and lasting solution, based on compromise.

48. **Ms. Bahiya** (Conseil Régional de Dakhla-Oued Eddahab) said that she had been elected by the population of Dakhla-Oued Eddahab in the 8 September 2021 elections in Morocco, in which a record-breaking 66.94 per cent of the population of Laayoune and 58.03 per cent of the population of Dakhla had participated. She was therefore the legitimate representative of that population, whose high turnout underscored its commitment to its Moroccan identity. In contrast, the separatist Frente POLISARIO had imposed

itself forcibly on the residents of the camps. It had no right to speak on behalf of Saharans, the vast majority of whom lived in the southern provinces of Morocco and had ignored its frenzied appeals for a boycott.

49. More than a technical or an administrative measure, the move towards advanced regionalization had as its ultimate aim the development and modernization of State structures. Accordingly, it had been enshrined in the 2011 Constitution, which provided for the election of regional entities by direct ballot. Advanced regionalization served as training in civic participation with a view to ensuring the success of autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty.

50. The autonomy initiative had the potential to resolve the artificial conflict and bring security, stability and democracy to the greater Maghreb region. She called on her brethren in the Tindouf camps to agree to a solution that would be acceptable to all, enabling Saharans to move on and rebuild their country in a spirit of unity and solidarity. The conflict would continue to claim more casualties unless and until real Saharans in the Tindouf camps were given the right to decide their future; unfortunately, that decision was not yet theirs to make.

51. **Mr. Mohamed** (Human Rights Defenders) said that he had been abducted and tortured in a secret detention centre for five months in reprisal for exposing the Polisario leadership's theft of international humanitarian assistance and grave human rights violations including enforced disappearance, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrest, torture, enslavement and rape.

52. Petitioners from the Tindouf camps were few and far between; their right to speak for themselves had been hijacked by the many foreign petitioners, whose statements were intended to whitewash the actions of the armed militias. Meanwhile, the situation in the camps grew worse by the day. With assistance from the security forces of the host country, the Polisario militias had burned two young men alive on the outskirts of Dakhla camp. In addition, 47 people had been arrested; 13 remained in detention, while the others had been illegally forced to sign an affidavit agreeing to abstain from demonstrating.

53. The camps faced a severe shortage of basic goods. As attested by the reports of the Secretary-General and the European Anti-Fraud Office, the shortage was the result of the theft and resale of humanitarian assistance by the Polisario. Recently, the number of trucks bringing food and medication to the camps had increased significantly; profits from the resale of their cargo through smuggling networks in the Sahel and Sahara regions were being used to fund terrorist groups, which

had free rein to radicalize Sahrawi youth in camp mosques.

54. A Polisario leader had recently been prosecuted in Spain after entering the country with false documents like a common criminal. That scandal had sparked a political crisis for the Polisario leadership. The ensuing strife had adversely affected the human rights situation in the camps, with a spike in arrests of and threats against journalists, activists and bloggers. Moreover, the violation of the ceasefire by the Polisario demonstrated the strong link between Polisario militias and regional terrorist groups, whose leaders had appeared in videos declaring that they had joined the Polisario to wage jihad against Morocco.

55. *Mr. Nayan (Philippines), Vice-Chair, took the Chair.*

56. **Ms. Johns**, speaking in her personal capacity as a former political affairs officer with MINURSO, said that Laayoune was a city under foreign occupation. The Moroccan flag was ubiquitous, even obscuring the entrance to MINURSO headquarters, whereas graffiti of the Frente POLISARIO flag on the streets were systematically covered up by Moroccan police. She had witnessed an incident in 2010 in which Moroccan policemen had stood aside as two Moroccan individuals threatened violent assault outside a Sahrawi house, which had subsequently been burgled. Morocco was willing to use all means necessary to fulfil its quest for legitimacy, to which it had no right.

57. **Mr. Esparza Machín** (Asociación de Amistad y Cooperación Canario-Marroquí) said that the Sahara had always been an integral part of the territory of Morocco. In recent years, the conflict in the Sahara had become more complex with the emergence of new actors in the region, including Al-Qaida and Islamic State, in addition to terrorism for economic purposes and religious fundamentalism. The Tindouf camps were one of the most high-risk areas; the host State's refusal to allow a census had made possible the systematic misuse of aid and severe human rights violations.

58. Ensuring broad autonomy for the Sahara was the only realistic, pragmatic, lasting solution based on compromise, and would ensure stability, prosperity and development for the Maghreb and the Sahel. In 2007, Morocco had announced its autonomy proposal, which was recognized as serious and credible by the Security Council. That proposal had since led to the holding of consultations, four round tables and nine informal meetings.

59. Since its foundation, the methods of the Polisario had been at odds with its stated objectives. Its members were branded traitors if they questioned its actions, and



any dissent in the Tindouf camps was repressed with the active complicity of the host State. However, there was now a powerful alternative to the Polisario in the form of the *Movimiento Saharaui por la Paz*. Immediate relief was needed for the almost 30,000 Sahrawis who were suffering in the camps. The time had come for an agreement between the parties, the only solution being the autonomy initiative in the context of the full territorial sovereignty of Morocco.

60. **Ms. Botero Vargas** (Derechos Humanos Sin Fronteras) said that the Sahara region had been the epicentre of a conflict which Morocco wished to resolve through negotiations, by implementing concrete actions to ensure truth, justice, reparation and the guarantee of non-recurrence for victims. Those actions were comprehensive, addressing the economy, infrastructure, politics and the allocation of responsibilities, and demonstrated a desire for peace on the part of the Government of Morocco.

61. Nonetheless, political and diplomatic actions by third parties with interests in the area threatened the stability of the entire region and the safety and well-being of its population. For example, the European Parliament had recently nominated for the Sakharov Prize the Sahrawi activist Sultana Khaya, a proponent of armed conflict. The majority of the real victims no longer felt represented by Frente POLISARIO, 25 of whose leaders stood accused of crimes against humanity before the Spanish courts. Frente POLISARIO was limiting the scope for a census of the inhabitants by the United Nations, was restricting the rights to freedom of association and assembly in the camps, and had failed to report over 300 cases of disappeared Saharans. Governments must go beyond making statements and ratifying human rights instruments; they must also act to address the systematic human rights violations in the region.

62. **Mr. Moraga** (Rehabilitación y Esperanza) said that the conflict in the Sahara was an artificial one waged by actors who had no international standing and were being prosecuted in Spain for crimes against humanity. The conflict was fuelled by a country in the Maghreb region that ignored its obligations as a State Member of the United Nations, opting instead to sponsor such paramilitary groups as the Polisario, which held its dissidents in secret prisons.

63. The solution to the so-called crisis in the Sahara already existed: it consisted of the regional autonomy initiative presented by Morocco, which had been recognized by the vast majority of Member States. The vast majority of Saharans in the southern provinces had participated in the recent elections held in Morocco,

electing their own representatives to the parliament and to regional and local governments. In view of the high turnout, the election was effectively a referendum. In the light of the support extended by Algeria to Chilean democrats during the Pinochet era, it was disheartening that the country was now led by a group of generals whose proxies lied to conceal their crimes, misappropriated humanitarian aid for refugees, raped and confined women, and rejected all avenues towards a realist, fair and dignified solution.

64. All parties must participate in finding solutions, including the *Movimiento Saharaui por la Paz*, which had emerged from within the Polisario, and the countries genuinely involved in the conflict, recognized by the United Nations as Morocco and Algeria. The countries that were complicit in the violations must answer for their failure to fulfil their human rights obligations; but they could also be part of a solution to offer hope to the victims.

65. **Mr. Besnard**, speaking in his personal capacity, said that the recent legislative, regional and local elections in Morocco underscored the healthy democratic life of the southern province of the Sahara, which was a testament to the success of the decentralization of Morocco at the institutional level; the vast investment by the Moroccan Government in the sustainable development of the Sahara; and the sense of a shared future within the sovereign Moroccan nation. The polling had been conducted under optimal democratic conditions in the presence of a large number of national and international observers. By turning out in such large numbers, the population of the Saharan southern provinces had expressed their Moroccan identity and their support for the democratic process. In short, the elections had demonstrated that the Sahara was irreversibly Moroccan. The population of the Sahara supported the territorial unity of Morocco and the will of the Moroccan Government to reach a definitive political solution based on the autonomy initiative. Only under Moroccan sovereignty could it exercise political, economic and social self-determination.

66. **Ms. Fernández Palacios** (Cuba) said that her delegation was highly offended by, and rejected in the strongest possible terms, the statement made by the petitioner Mr. Zardini, who had mentioned Cuba in connection with the notion of ideological indoctrination, which had no relation to the educational system in her country. The petitioner might have been referring to the study programme which had been offered by Cuba for over 20 years to scholarship holders from non-autonomous territories. That programme was well known to the United Nations, not because of any alleged

indoctrination but rather because it offered training to professionals based on humanism and solidarity, which were essential values for the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals. The statement demonstrated a thorough ignorance of the highly acclaimed study programmes available in Cuba. The hearing of petitioners should not be used to make selective, manipulative and politicized comments about countries which, moreover, were not the subject of the discussion. Her delegation took note of that unfortunate incident in relation to the future work of the Committee.

*The meeting rose at 5.20 p.m.*