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State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2011 - Western Sahara

Informal talks between the Moroccan government and the Polisario Front (the independence movement of Western Sahara) continued in early 2010 in New York, following an April 2009 UN Security Council Resolution urging the parties to engage in this way. The two sides have been involved in a decades-long dispute over the region, with the Moroccan position being that the Saharawi people should accept autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty. The Polisario Front backs the UN decision calling for a referendum on self-determination, which includes independence as an option. The February 2010 talks ended in impasse.

Before another round of talks began in November, violent clashes occurred when Moroccan security forces attempted to break up a protest camp in the disputed territory. According to the BBC and other media, at least five people were killed, and fighting spread from the camp to the streets of Laayoune, the capital of the territory. Witnesses told the BBC that security forces used 'helicopters and water cannon' to force people to leave. The Gadaym Izik camp held around 12,000 people and was erected in September/October 2010 in protest against Moroccan rule and Saharawis' living conditions. In a November report, HRW said authorities repeatedly beat and abused those they detained after the camp-closing incident, and that civilians had also been attacked.

Thousands of Saharawis also live in refugee camps in Tindouf province, Algeria. Some have been there since the start of the dispute over 35 years ago. The camps are

controlled by the exiled government of the self-proclaimed Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) which is based in one of the camps. It is estimated that around 150,000 plus people live in the camps, and rely on aid from Algeria and international agencies. A 2010 UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) report states that women and children make up 80 per cent of the camps' population. Because of lack of fresh food, anaemia affects around 1 in 10 women there. NGO reports from the camps have highlighted the entrepreneurial spirit of the women in the camps, who are in charge of the day-to-day running of the camps, and have prioritized education. Many have started micro-businesses despite the harsh conditions they face.

Many in the camps were separated from their families by the conflict in Western Sahara, and have not seen them for many years. UN-facilitated flights seeking to unite people were temporarily put on hold in March 2010 and resumed in early September. But in mid-September, passengers on a flight from Western Sahara were prevented from disembarking by the Polisario Front when the plane landed in Tindouf.

When the November talks between the two sides closed, the UN Special Envoy to the region Christopher Ross said that although both parties continued to reject each others' proposals, they had agreed to meet in December and again in early 2011. One positive outcome was that both sides agreed to resume family visits by air and to speed up visits by road, it was reported.

Despite this progress, HRW, Amnesty International and other NGOs continue to highlight the detention and abuse of Saharawi activists by Moroccan authorities. Women activists have reported being detained and subjected to beatings and torture. In December 2009, when leading Saharawi human rights activist Aminatou Haidar was permitted to return to her home in Western Sahara after a month long hunger-strike in Spain, she was placed under house arrest. She remains under constant surveillance.

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