



Human Rights Threatened, Self-Determination Deferred: The Status of Western Sahara

**Wednesday, March 23, 2016
10:00 AM – 12:00 PM**

Opening Statement:

The Commission will come to order –

- The Co-Chairman will recognize himself for an opening statement
- I'd like to thank my distinguished Co-Chair, Mr. McGovern, and the distinguished Commission Member, Mr. Conyers, for collaborating on this important hearing on the status of human rights in Western Sahara
- In 1975, Spain began to withdraw from the territory of Western Sahara, handing over control of the region to Mauritania and the Kingdom of Morocco while failing, despite U.N. encouragement, to take into account the wishes of the people of Western Sahara. That same year, mass migration of Moroccan citizens into Western Sahara, organized by the Moroccan monarchy, sparked violence. For sixteen long years afterwards, from 1975 to 1991, the Sahrawi people fought for the right to determine their own future.
- In 1991, a U.N. brokered ceasefire formally put a halt to hostilities and the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, or MINURSO, was formed. It's objective, to usher in a referendum whereby the people of Western Sahara would choose between independence and integration with Morocco, should have been completed by 1992

- Almost 25 years later, this referendum has yet to take place, and tens of thousands of Sahrawi's have been left to live in refugee camps while they await an opportunity to vote on their future
- That's why this hearing comes at a critical time for the people of Western Sahara
- Not only are we quickly approaching the 25 year anniversary of the ceasefire, but in the coming weeks the United Nations Security Council will likely meet once again to re-authorize the U.N. Mission in the territory
- The Members of the Council will have to address the lack of progress of the mission thus far, the unusual lack of a human rights monitoring component for the mission, and several alarming recent developments that may have put the ceasefire itself at risk.
- Over the weekend, Morocco expelled 83 U.N. staff from the U.N. Mission and reiterated its promise to cut \$3 million dollars of funding for MINURSO. These actions threaten to completely disrupt an already stalled process and will only diminish the chance of fulfilling the Sahrawi people's right to self-determination.
- Yet the right to self-determination, embodied in the charter of the United Nations and provided for in many other international treaties, is just one of the many rights that this hearing must examine today.
- The most recent State Department report on human rights in Western Sahara cites a long list of concerns, including "limitations on free speech, press, assembly, and association" as well as the use of "arbitrary and prolonged detention to quell dissent".
- Independent human rights groups report of heavy-handed crackdowns by Moroccan security forces on Sahrawi protestors. Detained or imprisoned activists are subjected to terrible conditions and regularly report being tortured at the hands of Moroccan officials.
- Meanwhile, journalists are prevented from accessing the territory and even those with a desire to cover human rights abuses rarely do, for fear of reprisals by Moroccan officials.

- All of these actions have effectively created a climate of fear, backed by force, which actively suppresses the rights of the people of Western Sahara and regularly derails any progress towards a referendum. While initiatives and pledges by Morocco to improve conditions are certainly welcome, these pledges fall short of addressing the many abuses to which I've just referred.
- I must also note with regret that despite repeated invitations to appear the United States State Department declined to testify at this hearing, citing a variety of justifications. It is my sincere hope that the State Department will carefully review the information provided by today's hearing and redouble U.S. efforts to protect the fundamental human rights of the Sahrawi people.
- I look forward to the testimony from our witnesses here today and hope we can explore sound solutions for these substantial challenges.
- With that, I yield to my distinguished Co-Chair, Congressman McGovern.