



At the ready: members of the Polissario Front line up during training in the Sahara desert

Photo: REUTERS

Polissario ratchets Up oil pressure

RELATIONS between Morocco and the Polissario Front, which has led a three-decade struggle seeking independence for Western Sahara, have never been good and this week's announcement of an offshore licensing round by the Algeria-backed liberation movement will certainly up the ante.

The prospect of the Polissario resuming its armed struggle after a 13-year ceasefire is real and Emhamed Khadad, the Polissario's United Nations co-ordinator who unveiled the acreage offering, said little to discourage this view.

"This initiative is to prepare for the day when the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) will enjoy sovereignty over its rightful territory. This day will come, and it will come soon," he said.

"The resolution to this conflict is a question not of 'if' but 'when'. Morocco will never enjoy stability and the assurance of peace as long as the occupation continues," stressed Khadad.

The announcement came a few months before the 30th anniversary of the annexation of Western Sahara by Morocco and Mauritania after Rabat and Nouakchott did a deal with Spain's General Franco when the former colonial power pulled out of what was then Spanish Sahara.

Mauritania withdrew four years later but Morocco has continued to occupy the territory, deploying troops, encouraging settlement by Moroccans and forcing 170,000 Saharawis into refugee camps in neighbouring Algeria.

After 15 years of armed resistance, the Polissario and Morocco agreed to a UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991, deployment of a peace-keeping force and the establish-

Offshore licence round at centre of Western Sahara bid to shake up Rabat over independence

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ment of Minurso, the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara.

However, since 1992, Morocco has steadfastly refused, for a variety of reasons, to allow a referendum on independence to take place.

In 2003, the Polissario agreed to a peace plan put forward by James Baker, who quit last year as the UN Special Envoy to Western Sahara, but once again Rabat refused to countenance the proposal.

The Polissario's leadership is clearly becoming more and more frustrated at the 30-year impasse on the future of the territory, the lack of progress at the UN and what priority the Security Council is giving Western Sahara, given that Baker's replacement as special envoy, Alvaro de Soto, now has another role at the UN.

Two weeks ago, Khadad said that "if nothing happens within six months (the latest Minurso mandate ends on 31 October) we are ready to defend ourselves with military action" and that military exercises in the desert were planned for this month.

The licensing round is a further political lever designed to send a clear message to Rabat —

and the UN — that preparations for independence are under way.

Clearly, the Polissario hopes that if major US and European oil companies sign up for licences, their presence would help to bring Morocco back to the negotiating table via pressure from both Washington and Brussels.

The US government, currently distracted by its anti-terrorism agenda and Iraq, needs to bring its influence to bear on Rabat given that it does not even endorse Morocco's sovereignty claim.

Madrid can also be a key player in resolving a dispute that some Polissario officials believe has a direct parallel with East Timor, which was annexed by Indonesia after Portugal, the colonial power, withdrew in the mid-1970s.

After years of burying its head in the sand, Lisbon belatedly became a key player in ensuring East Timor's independence, and the Polissario wants Spain to play a similar role.

Madrid needs to persuade the European Union, particularly France, given it has close ties with both Morocco and Algeria, to recognise SADR as a legitimate state.

If a previously intransigent Jakarta can see the light over East Timor, surely Morocco's King Mohammed can swallow his pride and back a referendum on independence handled by the UN.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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