

## Australian companies asked to keep off Western Sahara

[afrol News](#), 5 June - The government of Australia has urged national companies to stay away from investments in Western Sahara or importing goods from the Moroccan-occupied territory unless the legality of such transactions has been assured. Canberra thus is in line with the US government, which has excluded Western Sahara from its free trade agreement with Morocco, in contrast to the European Union (EU).

According to reports from the Algerian state press agency APS, the Australian Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade on Saturday recommended national companies to "request a legal opinion" before any importation of products from what it called the "non-self-governing" territory of Western Sahara.

"The Australian Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Trade consider that the non-self-governing status of the Western Sahara, and the international law must be considered when it is a question of exporting the natural resources" from this territory, the official website of the Ministry indicated, according to APS. "We recommend to the companies to ask the legal council before importing such products", the Australian Ministry had added.

The insistence of a "legal opinion" has its background in an earlier conflict over potential oil production in the territory. The UN Security Council's legal Bureau had issued an opinion in January 2002, which referred to the "non-self-governing" status of Western Sahara. The territory has been registered this way by the UN 1963 in the list of the UN, awaiting decolonisation - first from Spain, and since 1976 from Morocco.

The Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara is not recognised by any state, and the exiled Sahrawi government is a founding member of the African Union (AU). The occupied status of the territory, according to the UN, makes natural resource exploitation here illegal if it not directly benefits its original inhabitants.

Moroccan resource exploitation in Western Sahara nevertheless remains ample, with the main beneficiaries being Moroccan authorities, companies and settlers. Western Sahara is rich on phosphates and fish and might have large offshore oil and gas resources, some seismic studies indicate. Oil explorations off the Sahrawi coast by international companies with a Moroccan licence cause massive international protests, causing these companies to withdraw.

The "non-self-governing" status of Western Sahara has also been effectively

recognised by the United States. As Washington in July 2004 signed its Free Trade Agreement with Morocco - the first ever with an African country - the territory of Western Sahara was expressively excluded.

This contrasts the European Union (EU), which has had a series of four-year fisheries agreements with Morocco; the latest being approved of last month. Despite the strong protests from the exiled Sahrawi government and pro-Sahrawi activists worldwide, the waters off Western Sahara were included in the fisheries agreement.

Some European countries however do not accept this policy. The government of Sweden strongly objected to the inclusion of Western Sahara in the EU-Morocco fisheries deal, but economic interests in Spain and France triumphed over Swedish principles.

Also the government of Norway during the last few years has had a similar approach as Australia, at least officially. Oslo authorities "discourage" national companies to engage in Western Sahara, but in practical terms, Norwegian companies are getting more and more deeply engaged in the territory, especially when it comes to supply the booming Moroccan fisheries sector here.

***By staff writers***

© afrol News

