

UK explorers woo Polisario

By **Anthea Pitt**

Six UK companies are in talks with Western Sahara's independence movement, the Polisario Front, about licences to explore off the disputed territory, a representative for the movement said today.

Kamal Fadel said the UK players were small and medium sized, listed and unlisted, and added that none of the big E&P players, such as Shell or BP, were involved.

"We are in a very advanced stage of negotiations. We have initial agreements with these companies, and we will make an announcement either in the next month or the first week in March," Fadel told Reuters in a telephone interview.

Morocco seized Western Sahara in 1975, immediately after the territory gained independence from Spain.

Rabat has already issued exploration rights off Western Sahara to US outfit Kerr-McGee. The company has come under pressure from investors and campaigners for its involvement. The UK outfits would not be able to explore while Morocco remained in control of Western Sahara, Fadel said, but they would have gained a head start on rivals.

United Nations peacekeepers have tried for 14 years - without success - to stage a referendum on independence in Western Sahara. The Polisario supports a vote, but Morocco has ruled out any such move.

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[back to story](#)