

# Western Sahara:

## No longer a low intensity frozen conflict

Conflicting reports have been emerging regarding the violence that broke out in a protest camp near Laayoune, Sahara's main town, when Moroccan forces moved in at dawn to dismantle it. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro (POLISARIO) is reporting 11 dead and over 700 wounded while Morocco set the figure to 8 dead among its security forces. What has been considered until now a 'frozen conflict' since the UN-brokered cease-fire in 1991 has definitely become volatile. The violent clashes coincided with the resumption of the UN mediated informal direct talks between Morocco and POLISARIO in Manhasset, New York this Monday. The sketchy footage which came out of the conflict zone, thanks to mobile phones in the absence of international media correspondents, showed chaotic scenes proportionate with the heavy loss of lives of 20 dead in a single day.



The Moroccan Foreign Minister Taieb Fassi Fihri explained to Reuters that the use of violence was inevitable following failed negotiations with the representatives of the Sahrawi protest camp, set up about a month ago to demand improvement of the living conditions of the Sahrawis in towns within the Moroccan-controlled territory of Western Sahara. These events (which are developing as we put this to print) come just two weeks after Al-Nagem Al-Qarhi, a 14-year old Sahrawi boy was shot dead by Moroccan security forces outside the same protest camp; and for which Amnesty International has called for an immediate investigation in the circumstances of the killing.

Western Sahara, which is about the size of Britain and mostly controlled by Morocco since its annexation exactly 35 years this month, is rich in phosphates, enjoys a long fishing coastline and probably oil and gas reserves. The region has been dubbed 'Africa's last colony', whose fate continues to be hostage to the geopolitics of the interests of regional and international actors namely, Morocco, Algeria, France, Spain and the US. The question in the minds of most observers is now: Did King Mohammed VI deliberately aim to abort this week's informal talks in Manhasset, NY, by deploying his forces literally as the politicians were about to sit down at the negotiating table? After all, the King could have delayed the operation a day or two until the two-day negotiations were over. Or did Rabat misread the situation and hence make the tactical mistake that could turn into a strategic blunder?



*Moroccan Foreign Minister Taieb Fassi Fihri*

Morocco has been pushing a diplomatic offensive in the last few years promoting its large autonomy solution for the Western Sahara conflict: a sort of a compromise between total annexation of the territory and the self-determination referendum demands of the POLISARIO in conformance with the UN resolutions. Rabat has been active in Washington and the key EU capitals presenting its proposal as a courageous concession to which the other parties (POLISARIO and Algeria) should meet halfway and agree for a 'third way' solution framework where the Sahrawis would benefit from self rule. The sticking issue in the negotiations is POLISARIO's insistence that self-determination should be an option in any solution proposal, and that is exactly what Rabat refuses. King Mohammed VI set the scene for the talks with an inflammatory speech last weekend, on the occasion of the 35th anniversary of the Green March (the annexation of Western Sahara in 1975) in

which he reiterated Morocco's right over the Sahara and, in what has become a ritual on this occasion, blamed Algeria for the deadlock in the negotiations rounds which were started in 2007. Rabat's blame for Algeria's support of POLISARIO and hosting of the Sahrawi refugees in Tindouf, across the border in Algeria is not new. What is new is the unprecedented tone and anger expressed by the King this year which is causing discomfort in Algiers.

The Algerian leadership has always insisted that the Western Sahara issue is a decolonisation relic which should be resolved within the framework of self-determination in accordance with the UN resolutions and the international law. Morocco's large autonomy proposal has been gaining some momentum within the corridors of the UN and key members of the EU have seen in it a workable roadmap which would legalise their fishing licences off the coast of Western Sahara, which are now in breach of the international law; the same goes for the phosphates trade contracts. Nevertheless, there have been three developments in the three years which are causing anxiety in Rabat and seem to be leading to some political confusion that is translating into blunders such as those in Laayone this week, compounding Rabat's awkward situation at a time when new elements have entered the geopolitical game in the region.

- The protest camp demanding better living conditions for Sahrawis within Moroccan-controlled territory flies in the face of Rabat's efforts to lure Sahrawi refugees in the Tindouf Camps in Algeria to come back 'home', undermining the large autonomy proposal which promises Marshall Plan-esque investment in the would-be autonomous territory. If the excessive use of ground and air force was aimed to provoke POLISARIO into boycotting the talks on the same day, then the plan has backfired. Rabat has now unwillingly drawn the international community's attention to the human rights conditions in the territories it controls and POLISARIO may use the incident to harness more support for their demands to include a human rights monitoring obligation to the MINURSO mandate.
- The 'bread protests' themselves are indicative of the economic burden Morocco is undergoing fuelled by Rabat's attempt to match Algeria's military spending, especially since 2007 when Russia's Vladimir Putin visited Algeria and \$7bn worth of defence contracts were signed. More aircraft and missile purchases have been concluded since then, sparking a regional arms race, SIPRI reporting that Algeria's military purchases rose from \$471 million in 2007, to \$1,518 million in 2008, consolidating at \$941 million in 2009, moving Algeria from 21st position in the world's top military spenders in 2007 to 3rd in 2008 and seventh last year. While oil-rich Algeria can afford it, Morocco cannot. This is keeping the leadership in Rabat awake while squeezing public spending which in turn fuels social unrest in Morocco and the Western Sahara territories it controls.
- Meanwhile, Washington is growing impatient with the deadlock as a new international security threat in the nearby Sahel becomes real through the operations of the Al Qaeda in the Maghreb, AQIM. Algeria has more cards to offer and indeed play in this issue; that is why a Pentagon delegation headed by Joseph McMillan, Assistant Secretary of Defence, is in Algiers today in talks with his Algerian counterparts. Rabat understands that the price that Algiers could ask in return from Washington could lie in Western Sahara. The EU could follow suit, with Catherine Ashton, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs, visiting Algiers in the next few weeks and scheduled to report back to Brussels on the situation in the Sahel before the end of the year.

## Lakhdar Ghattas

Lakhdar Ghattas is a Stonex PhD Scholar with LSE IDEAS.