

## **"With the Sahrawi People: An Interview with Zahra Ramadane and Teresa Smith"**

**Q:** The Western Sahara Conflict has been around for quite some time. Would you care to give us a brief history of the conflict?

**A:** Zahra Ramadane: Yes, first of all I would like to thank you, on behalf of the Sahrawi people for giving us this opportunity to speak directly with Americans and Africans concerned about African issues. The war in Western Sahara has been going on since 1975. My people are at war resisting the illegal occupation of our country by the Kingdom of Morocco. The conflict still continues because the Kingdom refuses to implement the peace plan adopted by consensus by the United Nations and the Organization of African Unity, supported as well by the Movement of Non-aligned Nations.

This conflict is a matter of decolonization. This is a United Nations and African issue because the Western Sahara is an African country. Morocco is one of the founders of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). But, when it invaded the Western Sahara it violated one of the most important norms of the OAU. That is, Morocco violated the principle of the sanctity of the African borders inherited from the colonial period. To return the region to peace, all Heads of State and Government adopted, by consensus, the peace plan known as OAU Resolution 104. It calls for a cease-fire in Western Sahara, and negotiations between the two belligerents, the Kingdom of Morocco and the Polisario Front. The negotiations will establish the ways and means for the holding of a referendum on self-determination for the people of Western Sahara without any military or administrative constraints. Yet the Kingdom of Morocco is not respecting the right of the Sahrawi people to express themselves democratically. Instead it is escalating the war. It is a very dangerous precedent in African history.

**Q:** What claims are there for Morocco to annex Western Sahara? Are there any cultural or ethnic ties that connect Western Sahara to Morocco in the sense that Morocco could say that it is their long-lost territory?

**A:** (ZR) One of the reasons that this is an expansionist war is that King Hassan has, at one time or another, wanted to annex all of west Algeria, the entire Western Sahara, Mauritania, and the Senegal River. For example, Mauritania became independent in 1960, yet Morocco did not recognize Mauritania as an independent state until nine years later. Morocco went to war with Algeria during the period of 1962 to 1963 in order to force its claims over western Algeria. This is the expansionist dream of Morocco: to construct an empire known as the Grand Maghreb.

(TKS) Let us have a look at international law on this issue. The International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on Western Sahara is a landmark decision. The Court went further than its 1972 Namibia opinion and laid down the ground work on procedures and questions of self-determination and decolonization. The interesting part of the Western Sahara case is that it establishes that self-determination is a right that belongs to a people. The people are part of a territory, and there exists a linkage between the people and the future of the territory. This equation is explicitly outlined in the court's decision on Western Sahara. The Court dismissed the principle of "historic" title whereby one country could lay claim to another parcel of land by alleging that it possessed ownership of some sort over that land at some time in the past. The Court ruled that the governing principle in international law would be self-determination. The tragedy is that Morocco clearly defied the World Court by marching into the territory beginning October 31, 1975.

**Q:** For King Hassan to get the support of the western world, especially America, he must be doing something for them. How do you think he is "minding the store" for America?

**A:** (TKS) The United States has, in the wake of the loss of the Shah of Iran and Sadat, looked for a very close ally in the Middle East. When our policy makers settled on Hassan, they pinpointed an ally not only in the Arab world, but also in Africa. But what kind of ally is King Hassan, really?

Certainly King Hassan does things for the United States and the West that other countries will not do in the Middle East and African arenas. Morocco has an alliance with South Africa. The Kingdom of Morocco and the Republic of South Africa are the only two states in Africa that are not in the OAU. In addition, when South African ships need to make port calls in the North Atlantic, they may run into trouble by calling in some ports of Europe but they are openly welcomed at the Casablanca port facility. South Africa supplies Morocco with Ratel and Panhard tanks to be used in the war in Western Sahara. In return, Morocco assists South Africa's ally, UNITA. Jonas Savimbi has a foreign headquarters in Rabat, Morocco. The Moroccan military has helped train UNITA forces. While the United States was prohibited, before the summer of 1985, from sending assistance to UNITA directly, it passed aid through Morocco. The United States continues to pass aid to UNITA in this way. Moroccan troops were used as regional gendarmes and instruments to suppress the uprising against President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire in 1977 and 1978. Moroccan troops were air-lifted on American Hercules C-130 planes to southern Zaire where they were used to crush the Shaba rebellions. Morocco is also key to the Central Command. In the event of an "emergency" in the Middle East, the U.S. Rapid Deployment Force would take off from the southeastern United States, land in Morocco, transit to Kenya, and jump off to respond to the "emergency". The bases and landing privileges for the United States in the Kingdom of Morocco were signed under this administration on the 11th of May, 1982. Currently, the United States appears to be building a new base in Kamina, Zaire, right in the heart of Shaba region. Perhaps the new formulation, in the event of an "emergency" in South Africa, will be for U.S. forces to be transited through Morocco and Zaire.

**Q:** Regarding U.S. support of Morocco, would you agree that on record U.S. policy towards Africa has always supported what has generally been called the "wrong horse"? I'm sure the U.S. as a super-power has a useful role to play in bringing about a resolution to the conflict in Western Sahara?

**A:** (TKS) Unfortunately, over the last 12 years the U.S. has shown itself to be on the wrong side in Africa. The United States has, on other occasions, supported the principle of self-

determination. This is the guiding legal principle in Africa. It is how, with few exceptions, Africa has moved from being a continent of colonial possessions to independent nation states. It is a real tragedy that the United States has openly embraced a dictatorial monarch who reigns in one of the last kingdoms on earth, instead of supporting a true and tested democratic principle. There could be peace in Northwest Africa today, and prosperity in the region, if foreign countries had not provided to King Hassan of Morocco the military means to continue the war.

King Hassan is a clever tactician who knows how to cultivate friendships. In this sense he is not unlike the apartheid regime of South Africa which shows its guests beautiful game reserves and lovely hotels as representing the real South Africa. King Hassan has invited potential friends to the court and palaces, sand dunes and seashores of Morocco. Often, when the guests return home, they become the champions of Morocco. Some of those guests have been high level administration figures in the governments of the United States and France.

Officially, the U.S. policy on Western Sahara has been to support a negotiated political solution to the conflict based on the principle of self-determination, and to foster a respect for and observance of human rights in the region. However, the United States, since 1974, has provided to one of the parties of the conflict, the Kingdom of Morocco, US\$1.9 billion in U.S. arms sales and military aid. This is while disappearances, torture, and other human rights violations have continued unabated inside Morocco and under the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara. So, while our policy purports to be in alignment with the United Nations and the Organization for African Unity position, our actions and record prove otherwise.

**Q:** What kind of resources are to be found in Western Sahara?

**A:** (TKS) The natural resources include uranium, high-grade phosphates, natural gas, oil, and one of the world's richest fisheries. Western Sahara is also strategically located. It is directly across the Atlantic from the State of Florida, and very close to the Canary Islands, one of the main entry points for trade with all of West Africa.

The fishing bank off Western Sahara boasts sport fish, as well as luxury commodities, namely lobster, shrimp and crab.

In terms of agricultural potential, Western Sahara undoubtedly would be able to meet its own food needs. People think of the desert and they think no one is growing food. Yet one of the world's largest fresh water supplies is underneath the soil of Western Sahara. Currently, in the refugee camps just across the border, the Sahrawis have combined old desert practices with modern technology and now have over 100 hectares under cultivation. Generally, the indication is that the land of Western Sahara holds great potential and that its economy could be very viable.

In terms of mineral resources, the argument could be raised that Western Sahara is not unlike any other country in Africa, rich in resources but poor in the ability to utilize them. Western Sahara, however, has the infrastructure necessary for the extraction of its mineral wealth already in place. At the close of the Spanish colonial period, the longest conveyor belt in the world was laid down. It runs phosphates from the mines at Bu Craa to the port facility near the capital where they can be washed and prepared for export. Regarding natural gas, Western Sahara's reserves were mapped in the early 1960's by the multinational concern ESSO, which is now EXXON.

The Sahrawi people are very literate and highly skilled. During the war they have been involved in organizing and in training themselves and their children. While most of the men are involved in the resistance, the women are learning all sorts of new things denied to them during the colonial period. Women are now exercising political power as governors and mayors in camps, and providing health care and education as doctors and teachers. The children receive basic education in the camps and are taught to read and write in both Arabic and Spanish.

An independent Western Sahara could be the Kuwait of Africa with an annual per capita income of \$17,000. This is possible not only because of its substantial resources but because that wealth would be distributed among fewer than one million people living in an area about the size of Colorado.

Morocco is interested in the mineral wealth and potential of Western Sahara. If one were to add the phosphate

reserves of Western Sahara to those already possessed by Morocco, the result would be a virtual monopoly, giving King Hassan the power to control both its supply and price at whim. In addition, Morocco has its eye on tapping the oil and gas in Western Sahara in order to stem its own high import bill for petroleum. Morocco, of course, has no reserves of oil or natural gas.

Morocco seeks to complicate the exercise of self-determination and eventual independence of Western Sahara in the same way South Africa has delayed independence for Namibia. South Africa extracts uranium from Namibia and harvests its lobster. It has also invited foreign multinationals to invest and establish a presence in that colony. While they are agreed upon peace plans for both Namibia and Western Sahara, the occupying powers in both countries have used every maneuver possible, including economic prizes, to delay the process of independence.

Q: How many refugee camps are there, and how are they organized?

A: (ZR) The refugee camps are located in southwest Algeria where more than 165,000 Sahrawis are living. Most men are fighting in the Polisario Army against the Moroccan forces in Western Sahara. The refugee camps are divided into four principal divisions, and each is named after one of the most important cities of Western Sahara. In each division there are six to seven tent cities, also named after small localities inside Western Sahara. During the 12 years of war we have built hospitals, schools, vegetable gardens and so on.

Q: In that respect, would you agree that the camps are democratically organized?

A: (ZR) Of course, we are democratically organized. Each year we hold congresses and elect representatives for each tent city. Every three years a national congress elects the leadership of the Polisario and the Saharan government. These democratic traditions are not new to us but rather stem from the councils that were in practice prior to and even through the Spanish colonial period.

Q: What kind of assistance do the Polisario Front and the Sahrawi people receive? Where do they receive military

assistance, especially in major fighting with the Moroccan occupying forces?

A: (ZR) The Sahrawi people receive assistance from all over the world. The Organization of African Unity assists us politically and diplomatically on the international scene. We have had humanitarian assistance from the West, namely Europe and Canada. In the early years, humanitarian organizations helped us because our civilian population had been strafed with napalm and artillery bombardments by the Moroccan Air Force. Currently, more than 165,000 Sahrawis who live in refugee camps in southwest Algeria continue to require assistance from abroad.

(TKS) Some assistance for the benefit of the Sahrawi refugees takes the form of support from international humanitarian organizations. These include the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), although it did come late to the Western Sahara problem, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the World Food Program.

Now the UNHCR has an office in Algiers from which it directs multinational assistance to the Sahrawi refugee camps. The UNHCR annual program for the Western Sahara, at some \$4,000,000 annually is channeled to the Sahrawi Red Crescent. A fine example of this United Nations assistance is the agricultural program in the Sahrawi refugee camps. Deep water wells sealed with concrete, pumps, irrigation systems and seeds have enabled the Sahrawis to grow food. Bear in mind that this agricultural experiment is being undertaken in a barren area where not even a bird lived before the arrival of the Sahrawis. What we have here is a self-supporting food program with broad implications for the entire Saharan/Sahelian region of Africa, made possible by the United Nations and the persistence of the Sahrawis.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has sent a very important fact-finding mission to refugee camps in 1985 where it assessed the needs of the refugee population. On the basis of that mission, the ICRC channeled important assistance to the camps during 1986 through an appeal issued to 15 national societies of the Red Cross, (14 from Western Europe and 1 from Canada). Unfortunately, the American Red Cross has never assisted the Sahrawi refugees. Part of Zahra Ramadane's mission here is to pay courtesy visits to various

chapters of the American Red Cross. Perhaps, as Americans begin to understand the events in Western Sahara, there may be a possibility of American Red Cross assistance to Sahrawi refugees.

Finally, perhaps the most important element is the humanitarian assistance network of private, smaller humanitarian organizations that assist the Sahrawi refugees. Among those are: Volkshilfe in Austria, Terre des Hommes in Switzerland and Germany, Oxfam Belgium, War on Want in Great Britain, Recontre et Developpement in Algeria, and other small church groups and support committees throughout Europe, Latin America and Africa.

**Q:** Are there any specific American private voluntary organizations assisting the Sahrawi Refugees?

**A:** (TKS) To this date, no American private voluntary organization has assisted the Sahrawi refugees, save one instance in January, 1985. At that time, there was near-starvation in the refugee camps attributed to the "marriage" between King Hassan and Qaddafi in August of 1984. A good deal of Qaddafi's support for the Sahrawis had taken the form of humanitarian assistance. Following the union, Libyan food assistance ceased, causing the depletion of basic food stocks some months later in the refugee camps. On the basis of that emergency, Catholic Relief Services did direct food aid to the Sahrawi refugee camps, but made it clear that it was a one-time program, and that it would not be repeated. The Catholic Church in Algeria, however, does receive donations from Caritas (Catholic Charities) Branches the world over.

The organization I represent, the Western Sahara Campaign, does maintain a refugee appeal aimed at assisting Sahrawi refugees. We have made two shipments already. Through our program, humanitarian assistance in kind may be shipped from the eastern seaboard of the United States to the Sahrawi refugee camps without any transportation or storage costs.

**Q:** When and how did Western Sahara Campaign, USA, come into being in the first place?

**A:** (TKS) Western Sahara Campaign, USA, is a non-governmental organization that is concerned with human rights and humanitarian issues in all the countries of

northwest Africa. Our primary focus is on the armed conflict in the Western Sahara and how that war impacts the rights of people in the region. Therefore, we examine developments not only in Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco but in Mauritania and Algeria as well. One recalls that Mauritania, the country to the south of the Western Sahara, was once a party to the conflict. Currently, Algeria hosts some 165,000 Sahrawi refugees. The Campaign came into being following a discussion held in Los Angeles at the 1984 African Studies Association meeting where a number of journalists, authors, professors and persons interested in the Western Sahara case finally had an opportunity to meet. Each had individually demonstrated some concern for events in the region over the last decade. We decided that a collective effort should be undertaken. It was on this basis that a few months later, on April 12, 1985, we formed an organization to keep Americans informed, to the best of our ability, about the war in Western Sahara and how militarization has impeded peace and development in the entire sub-region of Africa. We note that Africa, through the Organization for African Unity, is calling for respect for the most fundamental right of the Sahrawi people; that is, for the exercise of self-determination through the OAU's peace plan. Our organization has been the first to speak out in international fora on the human rights aspect of the question of Western Sahara and, in particular, on what life is like under Moroccan military occupation. We share the same concerns of other African affairs organizations, believing that there will be no real economic development while military expenditures continue to escalate in West Africa.

Certainly, in this area economic development and peace will only commence when the King of Morocco agrees to show respect for the will of Africa and the world, implement the peace plan and withdraw from Western Sahara. Fundamentally, as in other post-colonial situations, the Sahrawi people must be provided the opportunity to exercise self-determination.

**Q:** What about the Israeli connection with Morocco?

**A:** (TKS) Well, there was not a lot of publicity on this in terms of the angle of Western Sahara. There was scarce evidence of this until December, 1986, when the Jerusalem

Post reported that the Israeli Military Command along with Moroccans and Americans devised the strategy of building the sand walls in Western Sahara. The Jerusalem Post revealed that Israeli generals have been involved in making many trips into Western Sahara. Bearing in mind this level of cooperation, it is not surprising that King Hassan hosted Shimon Peres in Morocco.

### Part I: The Nature of African Colonialism

— Peres Ekhe's fundamental thesis upon which he elaborates is the pervasive nature and continued effects of colonialism on contemporary Africa. Colonialism, a structural, social reality, made for unique social formations (i.e., institutional arrangements that could not be terminated by legal declaration (Ekhe 1973:5-6). The use of such terms as neo-colonialism and decolonization become misrepresentations with this line of thought. Additionally, the colonial experience provided the framework for the unique culture of post-colonial African politics (Ekhe 1973:93). The political actors have changed, but the post-colonial period is an extension of the colonial era (Ekhe 1973:304).

In the historical context, 19th century colonization represented the "classic form" whereby Europeans rendered surplus value extractable by local socio-political and economic conditions in order to be finished by their home countries. In this way, the Americas and Australia were conquered and settled. The next major wave of colonization, "neo-classic", took place in the 19th and 20th centuries. At this time, Asia and Africa were ready to accommodate surplus capital. By opening new markets and providing the opportunities necessary to European capital expansion (Ekhe 1973:12). For Ekhe (1983:17), the distinction between the "classic" and "neo-classic" waves of colonization is not in the degree of violence or the degree of economic transformation. A relationship of dependency was established in contrast, neo-colonialism is defined by