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Could the Western Sahara Blow Up? The African World By Bill Fletcher, Jr. BC Editorial Board

In the northwest corner of Africa, an on-going conflict against an occupation could be entering a new stage. The Western Sahara, known as the Spanish Sahara prior to the withdrawal of Spain, has been the site of a bitter struggle for national liberation. Currently led by the organization POLISARIO, a movement for the independence of the Western Sahara began to take shape in the 1960s and early 1970s. When Spain was finally forced to withdraw from its colony, there was open season for Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania, each country claiming that it should have possession of the territory.

Algeria was the first to end its claim to the territory, then turning to support POLISARIO. Mauritania eventually abandoned its claims. Morocco, on the other hand, set out to seize the territory, including the sending in of thousands of Moroccan settlers. After years of fighting a truce was called, but it has always been an uneasy one. Saharawis (the people of the Western Sahara) have been largely displaced from their lands, many living in refugee camps on the Algerian border or going into exile. Repeated efforts at finding a just and lasting solution to this crisis have largely been frustrated by Moroccan intransigence, an intransigence backed by Morocco's ally, France. At each moment when it has appeared that a peaceful settlement has been within reach, the Moroccans have undermined the effort.

Recent polls of Saharawi youth have set off alarms for all those willing and interested in listening. These polls indicate that Saharawi youth are increasingly dissatisfied with the stalemate and are tending to look for a renewal of the armed struggle. Despite being an armed

movement, most observers have indicated that POLISARIO has respected the truce, but the pressure from angry Saharawi youth may force a shift in the strategy of the national liberation movement.

Though many African countries, and even more African social movements, support POLISARIO and national self-determination for the Saharawi people, insufficient pressure has been brought to bear on Morocco to withdraw. Forcing a Moroccan withdrawal and respect for Saharawi national self-determination will necessitate not only pressure on Morocco, but an insistence that France cease its own level of interference. While the USA, in the 1990s, attempted to mediate a solution, it found itself confronting Moroccan obstinacy and was, itself, unwilling to put the right sort of pressure on its North African ally.

The northern and western regions of Africa are in considerable turmoil. The Libyan Revolution, hijacked by NATO, has led to a flood of arms into the region, promoting great instability (such as in Mali, and in Libya itself). Al Qaeda-aligned groups, sometimes supported by various governments in the region, have been destabilizing forces. Morocco has attempted to avoid dealing honestly and directly with the Saharawi by unsuccessfully painting POLISARIO as one of those terrorist or terrorist-aligned groups. The Moroccan government's refusal to address this question of their illegal occupation of the Western Sahara may result in further destabilization of the region and a return to all-out war. Such a prospect is more than Africa needs, but such a result will be completely understandable in light of the continuous frustrations experienced by the Saharawi people. This is a situation where there is a desperate need for both an "honest broker" as well as public pressure on both Morocco and France. Morocco has been very successful in hiding this issue from much of the world's population. It is time this cover is lifted.

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board member and Columnist, Bill Fletcher, Jr., is a Senior Scholar with the [Institute for Policy Studies](#), the immediate past president of [TransAfricaForum](#), and the author of "[They're Bankrupting Us](#)" - [And Twenty Other Myths about Unions](#). He is also the co-author of [Solidarity Divided: The Crisis in Organized Labor and a New Path toward Social Justice](#), which examines the crisis of organized labor in the USA. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Fletcher.



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