

Spain and Morocco agree to rail tunnel under Gibraltar strait

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The governments of Spain and Morocco have taken a further step towards the building of a rail tunnel that will connect Europe and Africa, in what will be a historic technological feat. The Spanish Minister of Development Francisco Alvarez Cascos was quoted in Arabic News.com as stating that this tunnel will be “in the 21st century what the Suez Canal was in the 19th century and what the Panama Canal was in the 20th century.”

By the time such a tunnel is in place a continuous rail link between the north of Scotland and Africa would be possible.

The agreement signed by Cascos and Moroccan Minister of Equipment and Transport Karim Ghellab is for a programme of engineering tests and studies and it is believed that digging under the strait could begin in five years time. According to the Spanish Transport Minister 27 million euros will be invested in this preliminary stage of geological survey by each of the two countries over the next three years.

It is thought that the tunnel will be 24 miles long, of which 17 miles will lie under the narrow and turbulent waters of the strait that connects the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. It will descend between 100 and 300 metres under the sea. The most suitable route has initially been established as that between Punta Paloma, 40 kilometres west of Gibraltar, and Punta Malabata, near the Moroccan city of Tangiers. A shorter route to the east that would be only about 12 miles has been dismissed, as it would require boring 900 metres below sea level. The final route and depth will be decided only after detailed geological studies.

The tunnel will be made up of two rail tunnels and one service tunnel in the middle connecting the two, similar to the Channel Tunnel running between Britain and France. The service tunnel will be the first to be built and work could begin in 2008. Spain has already bored an experimental tunnel 560 metres long. Core samples of the

rock beneath the strait will be taken in order to develop a picture of its geology. A similar experiment on the Moroccan side was sunk to 300 metres.

A joint committee was set up at the beginning of December between the two nations, which approved the 2004-2006 action plan and the budget of 27 million euros. Estimates of the final cost of the tunnel vary between three and 10 billion euros. Morocco and Spain will seek financial assistance from the European Union for research and infrastructure.

The project to build a rail tunnel linking Europe and Africa was first discussed between Spain and Morocco in the 1980s and several meetings have taken place since, some under the auspices of the United Nations. The linking of the two continents would be a major achievement that would enable the development of communications, trade and cooperation to an unprecedented level. However, this is not a project intended to benefit humanity: it is a commercial enterprise. As such, all manner of new conflicts between the nations involved and those who will want to be involved will emerge, particularly over control of the Arab Magreb, a union of Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Mauritania and Algeria, by the European countries.

Tensions between Spain and Morocco have a long history, particularly over the sovereignty of Western Sahara, a Spanish former colony, which Morocco annexed in 1975. Morocco accuses Spain of supporting the Polisario Front independence movement and it is blocking the UN from approving Morocco's claim to sovereignty. Morocco insists on the principle of territorial integrity, while Spain supports a referendum on self-determination.

These tensions have intensified in the last few years, with continuing disputes about immigration, farming and the sovereignty of the two Spanish enclaves on African soil, Ceuta and Melilla, as well as some small islands. Just a year and a half ago there was an armed exchange when

Spanish marines forcibly evicted some Moroccan soldiers from the island of Perejil, which both countries claim. Diplomatic relations came to a halt when Spain withdrew its ambassador and then Morocco withdrew its ambassador.

In addition Spain wants to prospect for oil in the waters between Morocco's Atlantic coast and the Spanish Canary Islands. Spain also blames Morocco for the collapse of the European Union Agreement that allowed Spain to fish in Morocco's rich waters.

The two countries have made an effort to improve their relations. Some weeks ago a Spain-Morocco summit took place in Marraquech, which was attended by a delegation from Spain headed by Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar. The summit reached what was described as "the biggest economic cooperation agreement in Spain's history". Spain provided \$476 million, \$279 million of which will be used to finance projects by Spanish companies. Spain is the second biggest market for Morocco's exports after France and its second biggest investor.

Two other agreements were signed concerning employment and the reestablishment of cultural relations. This was followed this month by an agreement on joint patrols against illegal immigrants and for Spain's right to deport hundreds of unaccompanied minors held in detention centres back to Morocco, as well as cooperation against terrorism.

Already rightist forces are beginning to air their opposition to the tunnel, spreading fears of Spain being overtaken by "illegal immigrants", citing Britain's problems over the Channel Tunnel. It is believed that half a million people attempt to cross the strait every year into Spain as a route to the rest of Europe. Many of them drown when the small badly constructed boats capsize.

Additionally, racist objections are voiced about the danger of Spain being invaded by terrorists, as the tunnel will connect directly with a Muslim country.



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