

Fighting erupts between Morocco and Polisario in Western Sahara

Alejandro López
18 November 2020

Fighting between Moroccan military forces and the Polisario Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro) has broken out after Rabat sent troops to reopen a highway linking Morocco, the Western Sahara and Mauritania that was occupied by protesters. The fighting puts an end to a 1991 ceasefire, risking war between Morocco and Algeria in a region that is a powder keg after US and European imperialism started wars in Libya and Mali.

For the past three weeks, dozens of Sahrawi protesters had blocked the Guerguerat border crossing, cutting trade and traffic between Morocco and Mauritania to the south. They were demanding Morocco close a road in the U.N.-patrolled buffer zone and calling for the release of political prisoners. Rabat reacted instead by deploying a brigade of 1,000 men accompanied by 200 vehicles to the region, violating the terms of the ceasefire.

This deployment took place hours after US Major General Andrew Rohling met in Agadir with Lieutenant General Belkhir El Farouk, Commander of the Southern Zone of Morocco's Royal Armed Forces, which includes occupied Western Sahara. They were to discuss preparations for next year's African Lion military exercise, the largest training exercise involving US troops in Africa.

"War has started, the Moroccan side has liquidated the ceasefire," senior Polisario official Mohamed Salem Ould Salek told AFP. Sidi Omar, the Polisario Front's representative to the U.N., said of Rabat's action: "For us, it is an open war." The Sahara Press Service claimed Polisario had launched attacks for five consecutive days against the Royal Moroccan Army in the Western Sahara, "causing loss of lives and equipment and disrupting its military plans."

In an official statement, King Mohammed VI warned that Morocco "remains firmly determined to react, with the greatest severity, and in self-defence, against any

threat to its security."

Western Sahara is a former Spanish colonial territory established at the infamous Berlin Conference of 1884 to divide Africa into colonial spheres of influence. Mainly desert, it has a population of about 500,000. Eighty percent of the territory is controlled by tens of thousands of Moroccan troops behind a 2,700-km (1,700 mi) sand wall separating Moroccan-controlled areas to the west from a Polisario-controlled area to the east, the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic.

Additionally, for the past 40 years, an estimated 175,000 Sahrawis have lived in four camps of mud-brick and canvas across the border in the south of Algeria, Polisario's traditional military backer.

The military wing of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), Polisario was founded in 1973 to fight colonial rule by the Spanish fascist regime of Francisco Franco. In 1975, in secret talks between Madrid, Rabat and Washington, Spain relinquished control of the sparsely-populated territory to Morocco, who annexed it. The Sahrawis were never consulted, however.

Fighting ensued for 16 years between US-backed Morocco and Polisario, backed by Libya and Algeria. In 1991, the UN mission to Western Sahara was established to resolve the dispute. What was intended as a short-term mission to organise a referendum on the territory's future—to remain a part of Morocco, become an autonomous province or become independent—dragged on for decades. Morocco, backed by the US, France and Spain, continued to control the territory and benefit from its minerals, particularly phosphates, and from fishing rights.

Rabat expects support from US President-elect Joe Biden. *Newsweek* reported: "Biden will probably continue to support Morocco's proposal for Sahrawi autonomy under Moroccan rule, as did President Barack Obama." It has also received backing from capitalist governments in

the Middle East. Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Bahrain released statements defending Rabat's measures "to secure the commercial and individual movement on the crossing," in the UAE's communiqué.

The bourgeois states' and organizations' resort to war comes amid an upsurge of the class struggle and social protests and tensions now inflamed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are reports of intensifying repression by Morocco in Sahrawi towns under its control. From El Aaiún, Hassan Daoudi told *elDiario.es*: "All the streets are full of police. ... These last three days there have been clashes between youth and the Moroccan police. Since Friday morning, the Moroccans have started looting many Sahrawis' houses."

The Moroccan monarchy and the Algerian military dictatorship both are terrified of the growing movement of workers and oppressed masses across the region. Last year, millions marched against the National Liberation Front regime in Algiers, as strikes spread to mass transit, auto, education and the critical natural gas sector, demanding the fall of the regime. None of the conditions which provoked the "hirak" protests have been resolved.

In recent months, Morocco has faced strikes from teachers, nurses, doctors, and aeroplane pilots, as the unemployment rate climbs towards 15 percent. The trade unions have worked to suppress the struggles, with the Minister of Labor bragging recently that he managed to prevent more than 1,200 strikes over the past nine months. In other words, not only the military situation but also class conflict has turned the region into a powder keg.

Polisario is a bourgeois nationalist movement articulating the interests of a corrupt social elite skimming money from international aid and the Algerian regime. Like bourgeois nationalist movements internationally, it reacted to the Stalinist dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 by rapidly shifting to the right, abandoning its earlier, socialist pretensions. It advanced a "pro-business" constitution and appealed to imperialist states like Spain, France and the United States to support its calls for independence.

Mass discontent has also arisen in the Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, which lack electricity, latrines and reliable food supplies. Most people live almost exclusively from humanitarian aid. Last year, mass protests erupted in support of the Algerian workers' demonstrations.

Polisario reacted by deploying tanks against Sahrawi

protestors. *The North Africa Post* reported: "the pressure is building up on the Polisario leaders currently facing their worst ever nightmare. They are challenged by defiant sequestered Sahrawis who can no longer stand their lamentable situation, blockade and status quo, while the Algerian generals, who used to provide them with all kinds of support, are fighting their own demons, as the unprecedented hirak in Algeria has led to the fall of long-time ruler Abdelaziz Bouteflika and several of his associates."

Since then, the Algerian dictatorship ordered the Polisario's "Interior Ministry" to drastically reduce permits for cars or trucks to leave the camps. As a result, prices of primary consumer goods and fuel in the camps have soared.

The online newspaper *Yabaldi* said earlier this year: "Demonstrations have become recurrent in front of the Polisario buildings, whose leaders are widely insulted in social networks, and their law enforcement agencies lynched by the population."

Protests erupted this month after Algerian security forces burned two Sahrawi gold miners to death. After the men refused to emerge from a mining pit to avoid arrest, the Algerian officers doused the lining pit in petroleum and set it aflame.

The struggle for democratic rights of the Sahrawi people can succeed only if it goes over to an international struggle, transcending the national boundaries drawn by imperialism, uniting workers and oppressed masses across the region in a struggle against imperialism and war and for socialism.

The growth of the international class struggle in Algeria and Morocco as well as in Europe and the United States opens vast political horizons for workers in the region. The expropriation of the financial aristocracy by the working class on an international scale can place the economic resources needed to build a truly socialist and democratic society in the hands of the workers in Africa. But none of this can be accomplished on the basis of a nationalist programmes: rather, the struggle requires a decisive turn to socialism and the international working class.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact