

Sand Storms

Western Sahara's struggle for independence



Koen Bolhuis

When you ask someone to imagine the Saharan desert, he will probably come up with an oriental version of scattered dunes, a striking heat and a strong wind blowing, while nomads traverse the desert on camels in search for commerce. Though this hardly reflects the truth as it is, it seemed even further from reality when the Sahrawi nomads faced the Moroccan armed forces who invaded their camp in the Western Sahara in November 2010.

My journey to the Sahara

When I arrived in the main city of the Western Sahara, Laayoune, the camp was just being constructed. This protest camp is called Gdeim Izik, which roughly translates to 'the foothills', and is situated twenty kilometres

from Laayoune. It was set up by Sahrawi people to demand improvement of their civil and socio-economic rights and developed into a plea for independence from the Moroccan domination.

Traveling from Northern Morocco I planned to go further southwards to Mauritania and Senegal, but as I became interested in the story behind the camp of Gdeim Izik, I decided to stay a couple of days. I tried to get more information about the protest camp, its characteristics, goals and consequences.

History of the region

Enclosed by Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria, the Western Sahara comprises roughly 800 kilometres along the Atlantic coast of Africa. Until 1975 it was colonized by Spain.

During this period the liberationist group The Polisario Front started to protest against the Spanish repression and fought for independence of the Western Sahara. At the same time Morocco claimed that the Western Sahara was historically part of Morocco. In

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1975, November 6th, King Hassan II started his infamous Green March, leading 350 000 Moroccans into the Western Sahara. Spain's dictator, Franco, was severely ill at that moment and together with rising international pressure to decolonise, Spain withdrew from the Western Sahara in 1975.

Western Sahara

Western Sahara is a Territory on the north-west coast of Africa



507 160
inhabitants



\$2 500
GDP per capita



♂ 59yrs ♀ 63yrs
life expectancy



60 deaths
per 1 000 live births



?
doctors/10 000 people



Many Moroccans settled in the Western Sahara, attracted by the numerous job opportunities and tax exemptions. From that moment on, the Western Sahara prospered. The Moroccan government received severe criticism for its actions, from both the Sahrawi as well as the international community. The Polisario Front felt it was transitioned from one misery into another, first dominated by the Spanish and now overthrown by the Moroccans. The protests, demonstrations and guerrilla attacks were all violently knocked down by the Moroccan armed police.

The region today

Until today the Sahrawi operate from the Algerian border town Tindouf where they have set up a tent camp to shelter the approximately 20 000 Sahrawi refugees. The living circumstances in the camp are poor. According to the UN World Food Program, the majority of the tents do not have access to water and 32% of the children under the age of five suffer from chronic lack of nutrition. Overall malnutrition is omnipresent, resulting in frequent outbreaks of infectious diseases.

Several steps have been taken to find a solution for the situation. In 1991, a UN force was established in Laayoune, aiming to organise a referendum to decide what would happen to the Western Sahara: independence,

Many injured Sahrawi did not seek medical treatment, because of Moroccan police forces in front of the hospital

limited autonomy or full integration within Morocco. However, the referendum has yet to take place, enraging Sahrawi and human right activists, who blame the EU's and US's political-economic interests for not pushing the referendum through.

No progress

Fed up by the lack of progression, in November 2010 protesters of Gdeim Izik felt it was time to take matters into their own hands. Al Jazeera cited that for several weeks around 12 000 protesters lived in tents cut off from society, without electricity and running water. With several police check points along the route to the camp, it was difficult for the protesters to have access to basic food supplies and medical aid. The international press was denied access to the camp, so it was impossible to objectively cover what happened inside the camp.

On 9 November 2010, the Moroccan armed forces invaded Gdeim Izik with helicopters and water cannons in order to dismantle it. Again news coverage was sparse and contradictory, but the Paris-based magazine *Jeune Afrique* mentions in several articles that there were dozens of deaths and injured, others have gone missing after the invasion. According to an anonymous Human Rights Watch representative, injured Sahrawi were refused treatment by health centres. Moroccan

police forces awaited them in front of the hospital to not let them enter, so many injured Sahrawi did not seek medical treatment. Additionally, several nongovernmental organisations wanting to accommodate the injured were refused entry to the Western Sahara.

After the violent invasion of Gdeim Izik, international pressure on Morocco is rising to quickly find a realistic solution. There is no sight of a referendum in the near future, however, so the hope of self-determination for the Sahrawi seems far away. Until now, regrettably few steps have been taken to discuss disagreements. But certainly something has to be done, if another Gdeim Izik is to be avoided.

About the author

Koen Bolhuis is a Dutch fourth year medical student and intern at the Institute of Psychiatry in London. This year he has been travelling through southern Europe, the Maghreb region and Western Africa.

Further reading

- <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2010/11/26/western-sahara-beatings-abuse-moroccan-security-forces>
- <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2010/11/2010118211324842212.html>
- Sahara: après Laayoune, *Jeune Afrique*, 24 Dec, 2010