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Diplomacy for a deserted people

Trapped in desert exile for more than 30 years, the indigenous Saharawi people of Western Sahara are still waiting for the United Nations to deliver on its 1991 promise of a referendum to determine, once and for all, and through the will of its people, the international status of their territory.

Like East Timor before it, Western Sahara was invaded illegally by its bordering neighbour (Morocco) following the 1975 unilateral withdrawal of the colonial power (Spain). But unlike East Timor, the UN Mission for Western Sahara (MINURSO) has thus far been unable to fulfil its mandate to hold a referendum, hindered by a stubborn and abusive Moroccan occupation and a UN Security Council unwilling to intervene.

In November, ID's Western Sahara project leader Dean Bialek travelled to the Saharawi desert refugee camps, where he met President Mohamed Abdelaziz, Parliamentary Speaker Mahfoud Ali Beiba and a variety of political interest groups to help forge a diplomatic strategy to break the current political impasse. Key pillars of the strategy include how to make progress in the UN-led talks between Morocco and the Saharawi leadership, bringing an end to the illegal exploitation of Western Sahara's natural resources, and ensuring international monitoring of human rights violations in the occupied territory, as recently documented by Human Rights Watch.


A diplomatic strategy that highlights these issues for international decision-makers can help bring the generation-long wait of the Saharawi people in the desert to an end. This is precisely the work ID has set out to do.



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