

Saharawi Women's March for the Liberation of Western Sahara

Saharawi women, accompanied by women from all over the world, are marching on the 04th April 2015 in the name of the liberation of their homeland, Western Sahara. Organised through the National Union of Saharawi Women, the march is an act of solidarity with all Saharawi families that continue to live divided lives.

The march is to follow part of the course of the Moroccan Wall. Also known as the Berm, this is a 2,700km long Moroccan-constructed sand fortification that divides the disputed territory of Western Sahara into the part controlled by Morocco, the occupying power, on the West and the fragment controlled by the POLISARIO, the liberation movement representing Western Sahara, on the East.



Three metres in height, the Berm consists of a series of sand and stone walls guarded with bunkers, barbed wire fencing and electronic surveillance equipment; Moroccan military bases, artillery posts and airfields are spaced at regular intervals. The wall, well camouflaged, is barely visible, and so are the 10 million landmines that surround it. Its main function is to protect the occupied territory from POLISARIO fighters, its main victims are civilians. The landmines, both many and strategically placed, regularly claim lives and limbs, particularly of the Saharawi nomads passing through the region.

The Berm was built in 6 stages (1980 – 1987) during the 16 year conflict over the territory of Western Sahara between the POLISARIO Front and Morocco; a war that arose when in 1975, Spain, Western Sahara's former colonial power, Morocco and Mauritania signed the Madrid Accords. This was a treaty that 'authorized' the annexation of the territory of Western Sahara by the two African nations; a treaty that was endorsed regardless of promised independence and a ruling of the International Court of Justice confirming the Saharawi's right to self-determination. Regardless of the UN-backed ceasefire agreed upon in 1991, the conflict remains unresolved and Western Sahara continues as Africa's last colony.

The Berm, a symbol of this unresolved conflict, serves its purpose well for it not only divides Western Sahara but it separates its people; they call it the 'Wall of Shame'. On both sides of the Berm there are mothers who have not seen their daughters for thirty years, brothers who do not know their sisters; on both sides of the Berm, the Saharawi are suffering.

Moving eastwards away from it and across the Algerian border, one arrives at refugee camps located in the Hamada region of the Sahara desert, an area known to be amongst the harshest



Smara Camp. (Photo by Mirjam Hirzel)

on earth. Currently, and for the past 33 years, these camps have been the 'home' of an estimated 165,000 Saharawi refugees who fled the Western Sahara conflict. They comprise the camps of Smara, Ausserd, Dakhla and Aaiun in which conditions are far below a standard of living that is capable of sustaining human dignity.

To the west of the Berm the Saharawi who remained in Western Sahara face constant oppression and segregation under the occupation. There, the violations of basic human rights, in particular the rights to freedom of movement, expression and association form a daily struggle.

The repressive actions of the Moroccan authorities often translate into torture, arbitrary detention and imprisonment; forced disappearances of Saharawi individuals are not uncommon.

Saharawi women have lived these struggles closely; their resilience and support have in many ways been a reliable backbone for their society. Having resisted separation, exile and oppression for more than three decades, they are now repeating their call to the international community to listen to their voices as they march for their right to self-determination, the liberation of Western Sahara and the reunion with their families.



Women marching at Fisahara 2008, Dakhla Camp. (Photo by Mirjam Hirzel)

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