

Distr. RESTRICTED

PRS/2022/CRP.43

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

FORTH INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR THE ERADICATION OF COLONIALISM

Pacific regional seminar on the implementation of the Fourth International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism: advancement of the Non-Self-Governing Territories through the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and beyond

Castries, Saint Lucia

11 to 13 May 2022

STATEMENT BY

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(WESTERN SAHARA)

Regional Seminar of the Committee of 24, 11-13 May 2022
Statement of Mrs. Ghalla Bahiya,
Vice-President of the Dakhla Oued-Eddahab region

Madam Chairperson,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to congratulate you Madam Chair and the other members of the Bureau on your re-election and leadership. I thank warmly the Government and People of Saint Lucia for hosting us during this seminar.

Following the last general elections - legislative, regional and communal- held on September 08, 2021 throughout the whole national territory, including the Moroccan Sahara, I was reelected as Vice-President of the Dakhla Oued-Eddahab Region, an office that I have assumed since 2015, with the main objective of representing the interests of the local population of this region.

Thus, it is the occasion today for me, as during the previous years, to give a first-hand testimony on the latest developments in the Moroccan Sahara, in the context of the ongoing positive dynamics, both on the ground and in the UN and internationally.

The momentum in favor of the Moroccan Autonomy Initiative is actually giving hope to the population of the region that a political solution to the regional dispute over the Sahara is closer than ever, bringing to an end a situation that has lasted for far too long.

It is important to recall that Morocco presented the Autonomy Initiative for the Sahara in 2007, as the only serious and credible basis to move forward in the process of resolving this artificial regional conflict and to overcome the deadlock. The preeminence of this Initiative is consecrated in all Security Council resolutions since its presentation in 2007. It is the realistic, practicable, enduring and compromise solution to this dispute.

The growing recognition by the international community of the legitimacy of Morocco's rights on its Sahara and the preeminence of the autonomy Initiative have been crowned by the very large support to this initiative by the majority of African, Arab, European and other countries and regions, as well as the inauguration of (25) General Consulates in the Moroccan Sahara. The last one was the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States as a regional organization.

Spain's recent decision to unequivocally support the Moroccan Autonomy Initiative for the Sahara, as the most serious and credible basis for the settlement of this regional dispute, constitutes a historic milestone that the United Nations and this Committee must consider to end this regional dispute.

The sovereign and strong decisions on the part of United States, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Romania and Spain, most Arab countries and a huge number of African countries to support the Autonomy Initiative as the only option to this regional dispute respond to this reality on the ground, far from the ideological dogmatism still practiced by a handful of countries.

All these elements converge to create the reality of the inevitability of the Moroccaness of the Sahara and of the Autonomy Initiative as the only endpoint of the political process of the United Nations on the Question of the Moroccan Sahara.

**Madam Chairperson,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

As a woman democratically elected official in the Moroccan Sahara, I am part of a generation of Moroccan women that play key roles in designing and implementing national development policies, in the framework of the High Vision of His Majesty Mohammed VI for gender equality as the foundation of a modern, democratic society.

As in other regions of the Kingdom of Morocco, women in the Moroccan Sahara play an active role on an equal footing with men in representing the population of the Moroccan Sahara and managing its affairs democratically through elected regional and local Councils, in the framework of advanced regionalization.

The last elections, held on 8 September 2021, during which an exceptional turnout of 66 per cent, the highest in Morocco, was recorded in the Moroccan Sahara. This was yet another milestone in the context of the ambitious democratic reforms undertaken by Morocco. The election of young women like myself during these elections demonstrated the great strides achieved in strengthening gender equality and promoting women's political participation at the local, regional, and national levels.

These elections also demonstrated the commitment of Sahrawis to their Moroccaness and to the democratic endeavor launched by His Majesty King Mohammed VI.

Unfortunately, at a time when women in the Sahara are enjoying their full human rights, women in the Tindouf camps, in Algeria, continue to suffer in silence the worst forms of abuse, including sexual violence, whereas their children continue to suffer forced displacement to third countries, with the active complicity of the host country.

**Madam Chairperson,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Aware of its responsibility towards all its citizens, Morocco has undertaken significant efforts to achieve the United Nations 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) and to ensure the resilience of its Southern Provinces.

Today, I am proud to report that Morocco's development strategy in the Sahara provinces is a model of solidarity and a real engine of local, regional, and continental development. Its development process is open to addressing future challenges and opportunities.

The New Model for the Development of the Southern Provinces Launched By His Majesty King Mohammed VI in 2015, with a total budget of 8 billion dollars has nearly achieved 80% of its socio-economic and structural projects at the regional level, such as the Dakhla Atlantic Port which will be the largest in deep waters in Africa.

The region has achieved concrete economic and social development, particularly in the fight against poverty and social inequalities. Social indicators highlight that access to basic services, including water, sanitation, electricity, health, education, exceed the national average.

On the economic and social levels, the State have taken concrete steps toward the emancipation and resilience of women in the Moroccan Sahara, namely through the promotion of local production and micro-enterprises.

The ultimate goal is for the Moroccan Sahara to be fully involved in this dynamic of growth, which Africa enjoys, not only on the continental dimension but also on the international scale. The Moroccan Sahara is emerging as a regional African economic hub. The region saw the organization of the Morocco-United States of America Investment Forum on March 8 and 9, 2022, and the opening during the same month of the Moroccan-Brazilian Chamber of Commerce in Dakhla, confirming the privileged economic position of the region.

Unlike the Tindouf Camps in Algeria where large scale embezzlement of humanitarian funds and assistance have been proved by international organizations such as UNHCR, WFP and the European Anti-Fraud Office, many programs have been implemented to build better future for the young people in the Moroccan Sahara to enhance their political participation and to promote economic inclusion, with view to support employment, entrepreneurship, and improvement of incomes.

**Madam Chairperson,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

The Sahara region is marked by stability, calm and socio-economic development, contrary to the fallacious allegations fabricated by the other parties. The population of the Moroccan Sahara, like other regions, benefit from the guarantees enshrined in the constitution and the international human rights instruments to which Morocco is not only a state party but makes it a point of honor to fully apply their provisions.

In terms of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the Southern Provinces, more than 4400 NGO's are working on the ground in different areas. The right to life and security, as well as property and personal safety are guaranteed. The right to move, to leave the Sahara Provinces or to settle in them are fully exercised without restrictions, which is not the case for the populations in the Tindouf Camps, in Algeria, who are sequestered against their will for more than 45 years.

The Regional Commissions in Laayoune and Dakhla of the National Human Rights Council monitor the human rights situation in the Sahara, and are in charge of investigating complaints of human rights. It is appropriate to point out that the report of the UN Secretary General to the Security Council on October 1st 2021, noted that many foreign delegations (diplomats, journalists NGO's) conducted field visits in the Moroccan Sahara. The report reflected the realities both on the ground and in the political process, away from the false propaganda disseminated by "polisario".

While other parties do not hesitate to use any method to instrumentalize the human rights issue to undermine the positive momentum created by Morocco's autonomy initiative, I am deeply alarmed by the increasingly violations of human rights, especially those of women, girls, and children in the Tindouf camps, in Algeria.

In this regard, many Human Rights NGO's have expressed a concern about the brutal human rights abuses against women, girls, and children in the Tindouf camps, in Algeria,

including the widespread use of sexual violence, rape, torture, slavery, enrollment of child soldiers, and deprivation from the freedom of movement.

I would like to recall here that the UN Human Rights Committee has expressed its concerns over the effects of the *de facto* devolution of powers by Algeria, the host country of the Tindouf camps, to “polisario”, a non-State armed group.

The protection of populations in the Tindouf camps requires an urgent action of the international community. Therefore, I call upon this UN Committee not to ignore the suffering of the Sahrawi women, girls, and children, and to take concrete actions to break the silence imposed in the Tindouf camps, in Algeria, in violation of the United Nations Security Council resolutions and the International Humanitarian Law.

I thank you.