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Images of peacekeeping in Western Sahara

UN mission promotes political settlement

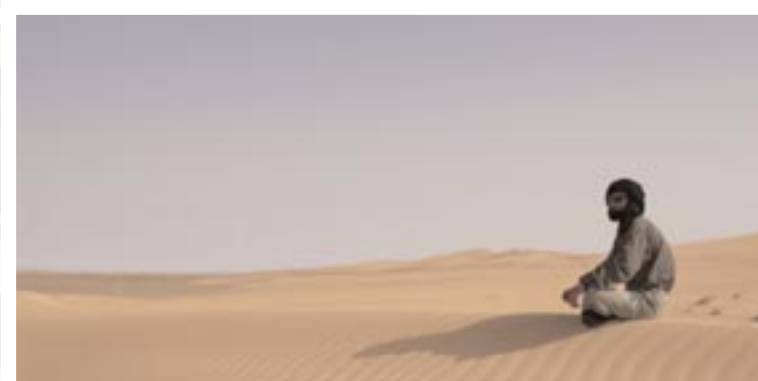
One of Africa's oldest conflicts is in the Western Sahara, a territory in northwest Africa claimed by both the Moroccan government and pro-independence rebel forces. Serious fighting first erupted more than a quarter-century ago, when Spain, which formally ruled the territory, decided to pull out in 1976. Morocco — and at that time, Mauritania — sought to divide the area between them, but were resisted by the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Sagua el-Hamra y de Río de Oro, known as the Polisario Front. In 1979 Mauritania gave up its claim, with Morocco then extending its demand for sovereignty over the entire territory.

In the mid-1980s, the United Nations, in cooperation with the Organization of African Unity, initiated a mediation effort. This yielded settlement proposals that were accepted by both Morocco and the Polisario Front in 1988. A major element was agreement on a referendum to let the residents of Western Sahara decide whether they wished to be independent or belong to Morocco.

Three years later, in 1991, the UN Security Council created the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). Its tasks include monitoring the ceasefire, facilitating the exchange of prisoners of war, aiding the repatriation of refugees, identifying and registering qualified voters and eventually organizing and ensuring a free and fair referendum. As of January 2004, there were 228 military observers and troops from 31 countries participating in MINURSO.

After some early difficulties, the ceasefire has been holding in recent years. Secretary-General Kofi Annan reported in January that "there have been no indications on the ground that either side intends to resume hostilities in the near future."

Differences between the two parties remain, however, especially over who will be eligible to vote in the referendum. MINURSO's Identification Commission has completed its work in identifying



and registering eligible voters, but both sides dispute some of those identifications and differ on the repatriation of refugees and other aspects of the settlement plan. In a positive sign, the Polisario Front released 300 Moroccan prisoners of war in November 2003, the largest group of Moroccan prisoners ever liberated (although more than 600 others remain in detention).

Meanwhile, MINURSO and other UN entities continue to provide food and medical care to refugees and displaced people, remove land mines and establish phone and mail links between Western Sahara and the Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria. The Secretary-General's new special representative for Western

Sahara, Mr. Alvaro de Soto of Peru, has been meeting with various parties in Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania to further advance the settlement process. ■

