



ISS round-table seminar

Western Sahara: Understanding the roots of the conflict and suggesting a way out

Pretoria, Monday 8 December 2008

10h00 – 13h00

Presenters:

Dr. Abdelhamid El Ouali: Professor of International Relations and International Law at the Faculty of Law, Hassan II University, Casablanca, Morocco.

Mr Mhammed Khadad: Chief Negotiator with MINURSO and spokesperson of the Polisario negotiating team at the UN talks

Chair: Mr. Issaka K. Souaré, Senior Researcher, African Security Analysis Programme

Rapporteur: Leruo Moremong, Intern, African Security Analysis Programme

With the myriad of post-colonial conflicts that have and continue to afflict the African continent, it is seldom known that the longest running of these is that between Morocco and the Polisario Front on Western Sahara. The objective of the seminar was to examine the roots of the conflict and think about some sort of solution acceptable to both sides. With the roots of the conflict dating back to the 1970s, it would seem that an inevitable hardening of positions has developed, rendering any possible solutions to the crisis distant. This however, did not deter the organiser and chair for the event, Mr. Issaka Souaré, from bringing together representatives from the protagonists in the conflict.

Mr. Souaré began the proceedings by charting the history of the conflict, which began shortly after the withdrawal of Spain from what was called Spanish Sahara and the subsequent annexation of the territory by Morocco and Mauritania. Originally constituted in 1973 in opposition to Spanish colonisation of Western Sahara, the Polisario Front then directed its armed struggle to Rabat and Nouakchott. Since 1976, several events have occurred that have added to the complexities of the conflict. Thus, introducing the two speakers, Mr. Souaré expressed hope that they would be able to provide analysis of these events in order to arrive at some consensual point with regard to the future of the conflict.

The seminar was divided into three sessions, with each looking at a different stage of the conflict. To add an element variety to the proceedings, the format of each session was such that the speakers were given 10 minutes each to present on the particular subject, after which each was given 5 minutes to respond to the other's exposé. The floor would then be open for 15 minutes to allow questions from the audience.

The first session looked at the roots and genesis of the conflict, from about 1970 to 1990. Among the various reasons offered by Mr. Mhammed Khadad for Moroccan reluctance to relinquish total control of Western Sahara, one was the discovery of phosphates in the country. Dr. Abdelhamid El Ouali was quick to counter this suggestion by speaking of Morocco's own deposits of phosphates in the North of the country. Furthermore, he dismissed the logic of the claim, suggesting that social and economic indicators in the territory today portray Morocco in positive light.

After the question and answer session with the audience and a brief intermission, the second session followed. It looked at the period between 1991 and 2004, focusing in particular on the ceasefire agreement, peace plans and referendum. Dr. El Ouali, the first to present, stated that Morocco has, for the past fifty years, been seeking a solution to the conflict, which accords with the principles of classical international law. Arguing that Morocco has been open to the idea of territorial autonomy for Western Sahara and seeks only democratisation for the entire region, Dr. El Ouali stated that the major impediment to the achievement of a resolution has been external interference of Spain and Algeria. On the subject of the referendum on independence, which was one of the principle pre-requisites for the establishment of a cease-fire between the Polisario and Morocco on 6 September 1991, Mr. Khadad suggested that numerous attempts to stall the process indicate the fear by Morocco of the challenge posed should the outcome of the referendum be unfavourable to it.

Citing the Manhasset negotiations that began in June 2007 as a way of breaking the stalemate between the two parties, Mr. Khadad lamented Morocco's refusal to entertain the proposals of the Polisario to a referendum as the reason behind their collapse. While the Polisario had agreed to incorporate the option of autonomy onto a referendum ballot, he argued, Morocco has reneged on prior agreements to incorporate the option of independence on the ballot. This, he opined, is in contravention of the terms of Security Council Resolution 1754 (2007) of 30 April 2007, which calls for direct and unconditional negotiations to reach a mutually acceptable political solution. Mr. Khadad took the opportunity to indicate a willingness by the Polisario to accept the outcome of any referendum as the will of the people and in the interests of peace, stability and democracy.

Session three of the seminar was titled 'towards a settlement,' and sought to address the possible future of this crisis. Mr. Khadad was upbeat about the future of the crisis, suggesting the unwavering belief of the Saharawis in the achievement of self-determination. Calling for a referendum, he spoke of the Polisario's willingness to negotiate without preconditions as according to UN resolution 1754. He was also eager to caution that Morocco's relations with certain Western countries, particularly France, from

whom it receives backing, was based not on mutual concern, but the pursuit of natural resources such as phosphates and fish. In closing, Dr. El Ouali reiterated Morocco's position, which proposes an autonomy-based solution to the problem.

With both sides occupying somewhat unyielding positions, the conflict looks set to continue for sometime to come. The Institute will soon publish a Situation Report based on the seminar and written contributions of the two speakers, with some introductory and concluding remarks by the Chair.