

WESTERN SAHARA

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Time: GMT (5 hours ahead of Washington, DC during Standard Time.)

Background: Morocco virtually annexed the northern two-thirds of Western Sahara (formerly Spanish Sahara) in 1976, and the rest of the territory in 1979, following Mauritania's withdrawal. A guerrilla war with the Polisario Front contesting Rabat's sovereignty ended in a 1991 UN-brokered cease-fire; a UN-organized referendum on final status has been repeatedly postponed. In April 2007, Morocco presented an autonomy plan for the territory to the UN, which the U.S. considers serious and credible. The Polisario also presented a plan to the UN in 2007. Since June 2007, representatives from the Government of Morocco and the Polisario Front have met four times to negotiate the status of Western Sahara.

Location: Northern Africa, bordering the North Atlantic Ocean, between Mauritania and Morocco

Area: total: 266,000 sq km, land: 266,000 sq km, water: 0 sq km

Climate: hot, dry desert; rain is rare; cold offshore air currents produce fog and heavy dew

Terrain: mostly low, flat desert with large areas of rocky or sandy surfaces rising to small mountains in south and northeast

Natural Resources: phosphates, iron ore

Population: 393,831 (2008 est.)

Nationality: noun: Sahrawi(s), Sahraoui(s) adjective: Sahrawi, Sahrawian, Sahraouian

Ethnic Groups: Arab, Berber

Religions: Muslim

Languages: Hassaniya Arabic, Moroccan Arabic

Economy: Western Sahara depends on pastoral nomadism, fishing, and phosphate mining as the principal sources of income for the population. The territory lacks sufficient rainfall for sustainable agricultural production, and most of the food for the urban population must be imported. Incomes in Western Sahara are substantially below the Moroccan level. The Moroccan Government controls all trade and other economic activities in Western Sahara. Morocco and the EU signed a four-year agreement in July 2006 allowing European vessels to fish off the coast of Morocco, including the disputed waters off the coast of Western Sahara. Moroccan energy interests in 2001 signed contracts to explore for oil off the coast of Western Sahara, which has angered the Polisario. However, in 2006 the Polisario awarded similar exploration licenses in the disputed territory, which would come into force if Morocco and the Polisario resolve their dispute over Western Sahara.

Industries: phosphate mining, handicrafts

Airports: 9 (2007)

Ports and Harbors: Ad Dakhla, Cabo Bojador, Laayoune (El Aaiun)

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