November 7, 1975
Report of the United Nations Visiting Mission to Spanish Sahara, 1975

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Summary:

Spain first entered the Western Sahara in 1884, but it took its troops five decades to firmly establish control over an area whose borders were drawn by agreements with France between 1886 and 1912. In the 1940s, engineers discovered that the area held important mineral deposits. Early hopes for oil did not quite materialize. Like its northern Moroccan neighbor, however, the West Sahara turned out to be one of the world's largest sources of phosphate, a key ingredient for fertilizers. Financed by US and French capital, extraction began in the 1950s—the start of a story told in Lino Camprubi's "Resource Geopolitics: Cold War Technologies, Global Fertilizer, and the Fate of the West Sahara" (2015).

Unlike Morocco, though, the West Sahara did not become independent in the 1950s. At the time, Sahrawis did not quite have a nationalist conscience. They were principally camel-herding nomads organized into fiercely autonomous tribes. It was as such, too, that some fought on Morocco's side in short clashes with France and Spain in 1956. They were suppressed in 1958 by the Franco-Spanish operation Ouragan. In the selfsame decade, the 1950s, the phosphate mines and the infrastructure around them started affecting the Sahrawis—first socioeconomically. Urbanization began in serious, an industrial labor force grew, and scholarization increased. By the later 1960s, these changes had political knock-on effects, as Tony Hodges has shown in his classic Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War (1983). Certain Sahrawis who had progressed to a university degree, some in Morocco, became politically active at home, together with some workers. Sahrawis began to develop a distinct national conscience. While somewhat open to ideas about associating with Mauritania, to the West Sahara's south, they now sharply turned against Spain. Thus, although Madrid was able to organize some loyalists, in 1973 the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro (Polisario) was founded, a liberation organization that immediately started a guerilla war backed by Algeria. Sahrawis' crystallizing national conscience also faced Morocco, which claimed their homeland, arguing it had historically ruled that area. In

October 1975, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague rejected this claim as irrelevant, asserting the primacy of self-determination.

This verdict mirrored the UN General Assembly's (UNGA) stance. From 1966, the UNGA had passed several resolutions asserting that the Spanish colony's fate had to be settled by a popular referendum. This followed established procedure. Thus, in 1960 UN resolution 1514—which the ICJ would cite in 1975—stated that a decolonized area could be attached to another postcolonial state only after its people had been consulted by referendum. Though delaying the referendum, Spain accepted it in principle, and in May 1975 agreed to a UN mission of inquiry.

This mission, whose report constitutes the text here, turned out to be pivotal. It did not simply document Sahrawis' demand. Rather, its very presence on the ground affected the political reality: it allowed Sahrawis in town after town to publicly and vociferously assert what they in their overwhelming majority wanted: independence. In November, however, the Spanish government made an about-face, weakened by the protracted moribund state of its head, General Francisco Franco (1892-1975; r. from 1939), and impressed by the force of Moroccan King Hassan II's (1929-1999; r. from 1961) populist mobilization over the West Sahara, to which the UN reacted hesitantly. In return for a 35% share in the biggest West Saharan phosphate mine, Fosbucraa, Spain transferred power to Morocco and Mauritania. The two states divided the West Sahara, and Polisario continued its war. In 1979 Mauritania sued for peace and withdrew from its territory—of which Morocco rather than the Polisario was able to take control, however.

Original Language:

English

Contents: