

The Polisario has benefited from the strong support of the Algerian government since its inception decades ago, most importantly through the welcoming of the Saharawis as refugees and the provision of a safe haven for the Polisario leadership. The Saharawi camps outside of Tindouf, Algeria, defy the western vision of refugee camps. Rather than disorganized rows of haphazard tents and long lines for food and medical treatment, Tindouf is home to six well-organized camps – Ausserd, Dakhla, February 27th, Laayoune, Rabuni, and Smara – inhabited by well-organized people. The camps are run entirely by the SADR government, the Polisario Front, and a number of Saharawi civil society organizations. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] and the World Food Program [WFP] provide tents – which most Saharawis set up next to their more permanent homes of sand bricks – and food, but have little presence in the camps.

Upon visiting the camps, international visitors are surprised to find taxis, buses, satellite television, DVD players, barber shops, grocers, electronics stores, gas stations, restaurants, Internet cafes, hospitals, clinics, schools, a Turkish bath, day care centers, farms, gardens, and local radio and television stations. Some argue that life in the camps is becoming too normal – thus creating the appearance of acceptability for the status quo – and that the international community is thus at risk of abandoning the case altogether.



Since 1975, when the first Saharawi refugees crossed over into Algeria, the Polisario and the SADR have been modernizing and developing the camps with two goals in mind. First, a degree of livability is necessary to sustain the independence movement in such inhospitable conditions in the Saharan Desert, where summer temperatures reach up to 130°. Secondly, the Saharawis have developed and administered the camps to such a degree to prove that they are ready for

self-rule – a practice-run for statehood.

For administrative purposes, each camp [called a wilaya in Hassaniya] is divided into five to six regions [or dairas], which are further broken down into neighborhoods. These divisions are used for electoral and health processes, as food and vaccines are distributed on the local level by the Saharawis themselves. Each दौरا has at least one primary school. Because of the primacy given to education by the Polisario's leaders, even before houses were built in the refugee camps, Saharawi teachers set up outdoor "classrooms" to ensure that the children were well-educated. Today, primary school is mandatory for all refugee children.



As in the Polisario Front organization, women play a very important role in administering the refugee camps. Partly out of necessity - as the men were off fighting in the Saharawi army - women were the first directors of the camps, and they maintain their important positions today. The Saharawis boast that they are one example in the Arab world of a population that truly promotes women's equality.

The camps are not without their problems, however. While crime has been largely absent over the decades, the continuation of a situation of "neither war nor peace" has increased frustration among the refugee population. This frustration, combined with the flow of new commodities and the birth of an independent economy in the camps, has increased illegal activity.

Finally, health risks created by adverse conditions lower the Saharawi refugees' quality of life in Algeria. Because of the Saharawi Ministry of Health's intensive campaign to monitor the health of both humans and animals in the camps, the Saharawis have survived for 35 years in exile without a serious pandemic spreading through the close quarters. Nonetheless, malnutrition, diarrhea, and high blood pressure are prevalent throughout the camps, and water shortages are

frequent. In the winter, isolated thunderstorms wash away houses and threaten to destroy entire camps. In summer, the heat and sun are so intense that many children are temporarily “adopted” by families in Spain and other European countries to spend the season abroad. While the Saharawis are a strong people, and have proven their ability to withstand great hardship, the status quo is not sustainable indefinitely.