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International Meeting of Experts
Western Sahara – Referendum Now!

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Kerstin Tack, Member of the German Parliament (Deutscher Bundestag, SPD)

“The Case of Western Sahara in the German Parliament”

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear friends of the Western Sahara,

For almost 40 years now, the Sahrawi people are fighting for freedom and independence. For almost 40 years now, the Sahrawi people live on the run in families disunited and under the most difficult conditions in the refugee camps in Algeria and Western Sahara. Without any rights and largely unheard!

The countless attempts to mediate the conflict between the Moroccan Government and the Polisario Front as the political representative of the SADR (Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic) remained unsuccessful.

In the refugee camps in Algeria, the humanitarian situation is difficult. Due to the current economic crisis, especially Spain has massively reduced its support. There is particularly a lack of food, medicines and school supplies.

In Western Sahara, human rights violations, which are not adequately sanctioned, are known repeatedly. The United Nations` peacekeeping mission MINURSO, already established in 1991, shall perform – among other things – the task to organize the referendum on the future of Western Sahara. To date, the mission however does not include an explicit mandate for monitoring and supervising the human rights situation and for protecting the civilian population. The MINURSO mandate is thus currently the only UN mandate where the protection of human rights is not part of the program.

We need to worry in particular about the situation of the young people. Their lack of prospects currently leads to the fact that they are beginning to get uneasy and are pressing for a visible sign to obtain attention. We even cannot exclude that they will take up arms.



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The German Parliament Deutscher Bundestag has regularly addressed this issue. In particular, the Bundestag was at regular intervals engaged in the question of human rights and the desire for a solution to the conflict. In 2011, a delegation of members of parliament from the Human Rights Committee visited the refugee camps and the Western Sahara. A motion on the part of the parliamentary groups of SPD and Alliance '90/The Greens to improve the human rights situation and the humanitarian situation in Western Sahara and to clarify the status under international law followed.

The German Federal Government strongly supports all UN efforts to achieve a peaceful and consensual political solution to the conflict. Since 2008, every year EUR 200 000 are made available for family visits and telephone contacts of the Sahrawi people. From 1982 to 2006, the BMZ, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, has given food, emergency assistance and refugee relief to the amount of almost 12 million euros. Via the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO), around 130 million euros were made available for refugee assistance since the beginning of the conflict. The annual ECHO budget for the refugee camps is around 10 million euros. The German share amounts to about 20 percent.

Nevertheless, I also recognize that the discussions within the parliamentary groups in the German Bundestag and even within the Federal Government about the conflict in Western Sahara are becoming more difficult. One can notice a growing sympathy for the Moroccan offer of an autonomous region of Western Sahara under Moroccan rule. This is especially due to the fact that Morocco is estimated as one of the reliable partners in an increasingly unstable Africa and therefore there is a decrease in the necessary pressure on Morocco to move. Currently, many people appeal to the ability of both sides to find a compromise. We must be careful because this means that the Sahrawi people have to move. The offer of an autonomous region under Moroccan rule is seen as a compromise.

I think this is wrong. And I also think that this means a violation of the UN resolution. There can be a choice in a referendum. The goal of the referendum can be the independent Sahrawi Republic or an autonomous region under Moroccan rule. But a decision can only be reached by a referendum. This is what we all owe the Sahrawi people, because it is what we have promised them for decades.

Therefore, it seems very important to me that the civil societies are aware of and discuss the conflict. Morocco has to be confronted more often in public with the violations of human rights and its refusal to implement the UN resolution.

I do not know how much time is left until arms are taken up again in order to draw attention to the conflict. It would be the worst thing that can happen and I think that it would be politi-



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cally disastrous for the Sahrawi people. Therefore, especially the young people must understand that there is support for the Sahrawis and that we do not ignore their situation. This congress can contribute a lot to such an understanding.

Dear friends,

These are the needs for political action from my point of view:

- (1) The Federal Government has to campaign more than previously via the EU and the United Nations for a lasting solution to this conflict and for a prompt and constructive realization of a free and democratic referendum organized and supervised by the UN. After all, this is the substance of a valid UN resolution.
- (2) The Federal Government must use its influence to ensure that MINURSO is enabled to take charge of the human rights situation in Western Sahara. This means that a human rights mechanism has to be added to the mission of MINURSO.
- (3) The Federal Government must ensure that the Moroccan Government complies with the Paris Principles for National Human Rights Institutions, in particular with regard to the strengthening and respect for the powers of the CNDH (Conseil National des Droits de l'Homme).
- (4) The free trade agreement between the EU and Morocco must be reviewed to ensure that goods from Western Sahara may only be exported to the EU if the Sahrawi people benefit from the earnings.
- (5) Goods from Western Sahara must be labelled as such and not as goods from Morocco.
- (6) In the case of a renegotiation of the fisheries agreement with Morocco, fishing in the waters of Western Sahara must be excluded as long as its status under international law has not been settled by a referendum or as long as the Sahrawi people do not benefit from the resources collected. The consent of the former Federal Government to the fisheries agreement is not acceptable.

Dear friends,

The conflict in Western Sahara must soon find an end. There is no other UN resolution than the resolution to hold a referendum. Therefore, after almost 40 years, all of our work should aim to hold the referendum. In this spirit, I wish the conference every success.

Yours sincerely,

Kerstin Tack