



American Committee On Africa

198 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10038 / (212) 962-1210 / Cable AMCOMMAF

June 29, 1979

Dear Friends:

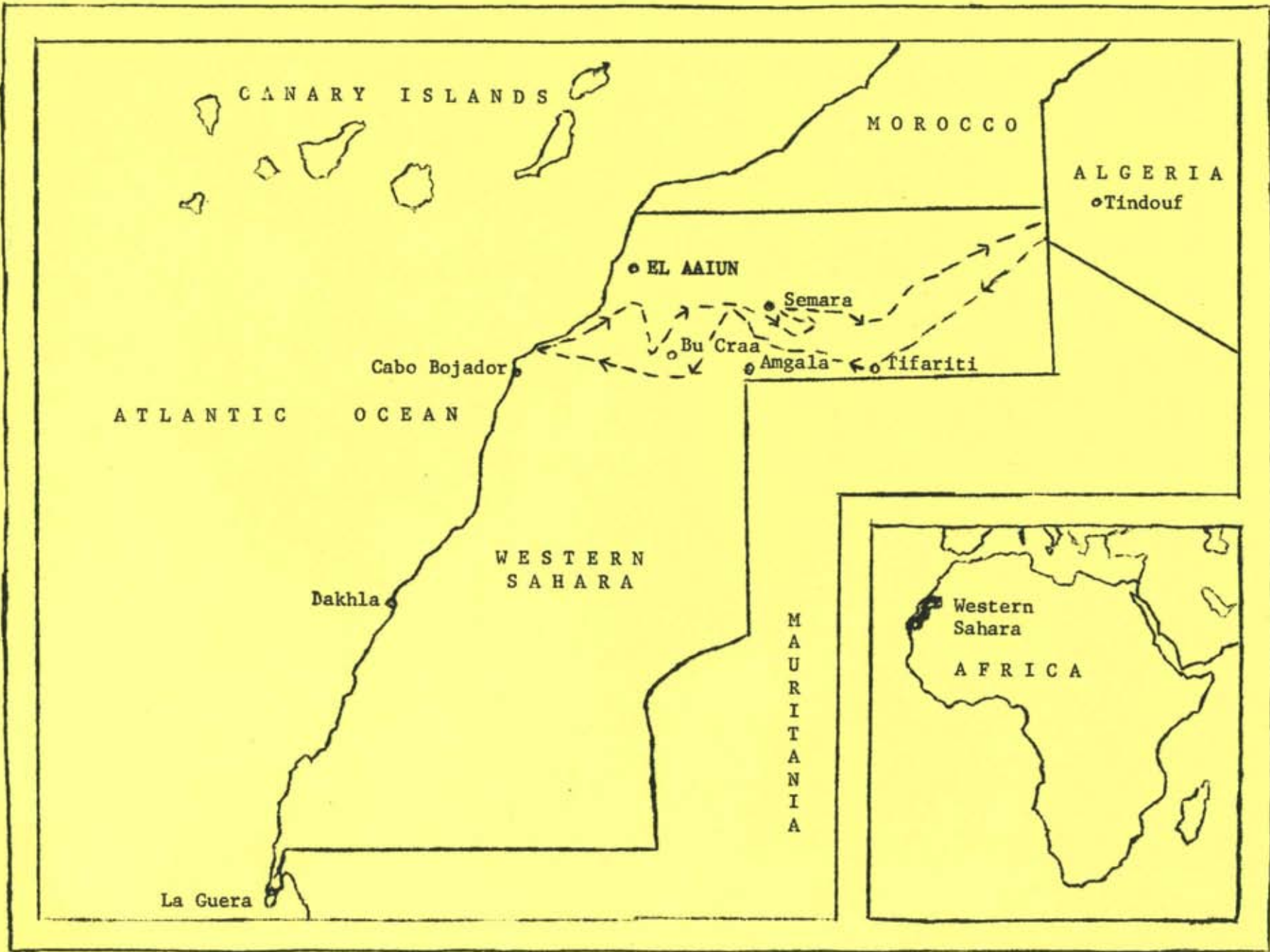
Enclosed is a report of my recent trip to the Western Sahara, the former Spanish Sahara. This is an area which is only beginning to be known more widely in the United States. I hope that my report will add to some understanding in what is happening there.

If you have not seen the report of my colleague, Rich Knight, who was in the area for the 3rd Anniversary of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic in late February and early March, we would be glad to send one to you.

Sincerely yours,

George M. Houser
Executive Director

GMH/jwb
Enc.



WITH POLISARIO IN THE WESTERN SAHARA

George M. Houser

I returned only recently from a visit to the Western Sahara, the former colonial Spanish Sahara. I was there two weeks (May 5 - 20, 1979) under the auspice of POLISARIO, the liberation movement in the territory. This was the most recent of frequent trips to Africa covering 25 years. I consider the two weeks spent with POLISARIO among the most memorable trips I have had over all these years. It was adventure in a political context.

I had not planned this trip very far in advance. My colleague, Richard Knight, had visited Western Sahara in late February and into March at the time of the third anniversary of the establishment of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (February 27) by POLISARIO. But an invitation was extended to me through Madjid Abdouallah, and after consultation with my ACOA colleagues, I accepted.

Since I could not plan a very extensive trip (with so much happening on the Zimbabwe issue in the U.S.) my original objective had been to spend about a week visiting the refugee camps near Tindouf in Algeria, very close to the border of Western Sahara, and then perhaps have about two days in POLISARIO-controlled areas of their country. I had expected to spend several days in Algiers, and then come home by way of Geneva, where I would talk with officers in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees not only about the Western Sahara refugees, but also the Zimbabwean and the Namibian problems.

My plans changed rather suddenly after spending five days visiting the POLISARIO refugee areas in Algeria. A proposal was put to me by my POLISARIO friends that I consider spending a week in Western Sahara going all the way from Algeria to the Atlantic Ocean across the expanse of the desert. I had about half an hour to make the decision around midnight May 11th. It meant changing the arrangements for spending any time in Algiers and foregoing talks with UNHCR in Geneva. But I felt that it was too good an opportunity to lose. Thus I became the first American to go by landrover with the POLISARIO guerillas all the way across the Western Sahara east to west, from Algeria to the Atlantic. The journey, lasting a week, was to pass through the heart of the Moroccan-occupied areas of the country. It was an exciting experience.

An aspect of the trip which made it exciting quite beyond the fact that I was with guerillas in a war zone of a contested area was that it all took place in the Sahara desert. For one week I traveled with POLISARIO guerillas, sleeping on the sand of the desert under a canopy of stars, resting in the shade of the occasional thorn trees during the heat of the day, drinking such water as was available, traveling under an almost full moon in captured landrovers in the dead of the night in supposedly Moroccan-occupied area with no headlights, eating food that was

available including gazelle, rabbit, desert birds, goat and camel. The companionship of the POLISARIO militants added a dimension which was unexpected but very satisfying. There were two other foreigners on this desert expedition--Jose of Spain who had been a former diplomat but now was of anarchist persuasion, and Dominico of Italy, an economist unofficially on the trip, although apparently approved by the Italian embassy in Algiers.

The experience quite naturally divides itself into two parts--the visits to the refugee camps, the hospitals, the schools of the Saharawi people from the 7th to the 11th of May, and the trip across the Western Sahara to the Atlantic from the 12th to the 18th. Although both aspects of this experience were connected with POLISARIO and the struggle in Western Sahara, they were obviously quite different from one another.

Before going into a more detailed discussion of the experience, let me summarize the political context into which it falls. Just as all of Africa was divided up among European countries at a conference held in Berlin in 1884-1885, so the Western Sahara was put under the colonial control of Spain. In spite of the struggle against Spanish rule by the people of the area, Spain maintained general control until early 1976. Spain was just about the last European power to give up control of its dominated areas in Africa. As late as June 17th, 1970 there was a major protest organized by a coalition of groups in the capital city of the Western Sahara, El Aaiun, against Spanish rule. A confrontation took place between the police and the people which led to the death of more than 50, the wounding of many others and the arrest of hundreds. This seemed to me to parallel events such as the Pidjiguiti massacre in Bissau in 1959 leading to a new strategy of the PAIGC, and the Mueda massacre in Mozambique in 1960. It hastened the organization of the liberation movement. POLISARIO Front was formed out of a coalition of anti-colonial organizations in 1973.

Under the decolonization procedures of the United Nations, a number of options were open to Spain, from turning over power to the major liberation movement, to holding a plebiscite to ascertain the will of the people. Neither option was chosen. Instead Spain entered into a unilaterally-devised tripartite agreement involving Morocco and Mauritania, (both of which claimed certain areas of the Western Sahara for themselves), and in late 1975 the country was divided, the northern two thirds with its rich phosphate deposits going to Morocco and the southern third to Mauritania. This is generally the status of the struggle at the present time although it has undergone many changes as a result of the growing strength of the POLISARIO movement, the formation of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic by POLISARIO in 1976, and the recognition of both the movement and the Republic by a growing number of states around the world.

It should be noted that a U.N. visiting mission in 1975 reported: "Within the territory, the population was categorically for independence and against the territorial claims of Morocco and Mauritania..." The International Court, at about the same time, gave an advisory opinion rejecting the Moroccan and Mauritanian claims to past associations with the territory which would give them sovereignty in parts of Western Sahara.

My respect and admiration for POLISARIO were greatly strengthened as a result of my trip. Over the years I have worked quite intimately with many of the leaders and movements throughout Arica. POLISARIO, without question, ranks with the best of the movements. It is well organized, has fine leadership, and is composed of a committed and determined people.

"POLISARIO" is an acronym drawn from the names of two sections of the country as designated by the Spanish. The north was called "Saguia el hamra," and the south "Rio de Oro". So the POLISARIO Front was formed to struggle for the liberation of their country from north to south.

The Camps in Algeria

There are three major camps called Wilayas (the word for provinces) on the Algerian side of the border. These are sub-divided into 23 districts (or dairas). Perhaps there are as many as 100,000 Saharan refugees or maybe it is only half that number. It is difficult to get an accurate count. In a sense it doesn't matter. There are thousands of Saharawi people who have been forced out of their homes in the Western Sahara by the bombing attacks and by the occupation forces of Morocco and Mauritania. The only place they have had to flee for refuge has been across into Algeria. The exodus began in late 1975.

I found it almost impossible to think of these people as refugees. I have visited many refugee camps in Africa over many years but I have never seen a group of people who are as self-reliant and as well organized as are these Saharawi people. They are dependent on friendly countries and international organizations for food and clothing to be sure. But they are independent of outside control and they have organized themselves according to their own way of life. The camps are not administered by Algerians, or United Nations personnel, or by technicians from any other country in the world. Politically the people are all POLISARIO or Western Sahara nationalists. I had the feeling, as others have, that in visiting these camps I was seeing something of what the nation of the Western Sahara would be like under the independent control of POLISARIO. I had a feeling that in visiting these camps I was visiting a nation in exile. This I think is the importance of the camps politically.

The camps need to be seen in their natural setting. They are located south of Tindouf and very close to the Western Sahara border, but they are in the desert. The most obvious physical characteristic of the camps are the tents--hundreds of them. But if one has in mind the kind of tent that we are accustomed to in going camping it would be a false image. The space covered by any individual tent may be 20' by 30' or more. There may be more than one family, sometimes several families, using the same tent. There is no furniture--no chairs, no tables, or beds. The sand of the desert inside the tent is covered by rugs, tapestries or mats. There are pillows that one can lean against. The ground is one's bed or one's chair or one's table. One has a feeling of homeyness inside the tents not only because of the rugs which cover the ground but because of the lining of the walls and ceilings of the tent. It is hot in the middle of the day and I imagine in winter it is very cold. And yet there is a kind of a comfortable feeling because of the atmosphere in the shade of

the tent cover. The camps have been constructed where there is usually a water supply. There may be an oasis with palm trees. There are wells from which water can be drawn by buckets tied to a rope which one lets down to the water level. There are animals, particularly goats individually owned for the most part, which are kept outside the area where the tents are. This makes for good sanitation. I never smelled one unpleasant odor in walking through the camps.

One has to comprehend that a large part of the population of the Western Sahara now lives in these camps. This is where the nation is located. Perhaps the Moroccans and the Mauritians occupy 10 or 12 towns in the country. But the larger share of the people have left and are living in these camps as part of the POLISARIO nationalist movement.

One is struck by the fact that most of the people you see in the camps are women. The men are part of the guerilla force inside the Western Sahara or on duty wherever they have been assigned. One sees many children and of course older men and women. But on the whole these camps are made up of women and their children.

These are a politically-conscious people. The POLISARIO movement is obvious every place. Everyone I talked with was a member of a POLISARIO cell. Each cell has 11 members. This is the basic unit of the movement from which representatives are elected to the popular committees in each of the dairas or districts and from there to the Willaya Councils, from there to the General Congress, which is the top policy-making body for POLISARIO. The National Council of POLISARIO, the Political Bureau and the Executive Committee are chosen by the Congress.

But in addition to the direct political structure there is a functional organization for running the community (or the camps). Virtually everyone is a member of a functional committee. There are five such--health, education, handicraft, (these committees have responsibility for making tents for example), food distribution (and this really means distributing the food to the families in the tents as food is available), and justice. Since there are five functional committees, the tents are organized in lines of five with a person in each tent responsible for one of the five areas. Thus in any of those five tents if a person has a problem of health, it is taken to the person responsible for health. If the problem cannot be settled on the tent level, it is taken to the district level. It is a very workable system.

I was very interested to have a long session in one of the districts (or daira) camps with all of the persons who were responsible for justice. Most of the Responsibles were women of course. I counted 60 of them when they gathered in one tent for our meeting. I was able to ask any question I wished of any of them and got something of an idea of how the system worked. For one thing I was amazed that there really isn't any crime even under the conditions prevailing. I said I couldn't believe that there wasn't any theft for example. But they said there was not any. Maybe one could observe that there is not that much to steal. This would be a cynical approach to it. The fact is that the people are highly committed to an objective which is very close to them (their desire to return home to an independent country) and this takes precedence over everything. The main function of the justice committee is actually to arrange marriages, or the occasional divorces, as allowed under Islamic law.

How did the people get to the camps? For the most part they walked, in many cases the hundreds of miles across the desolate desert. This included the children, the women and the old folks. They received some help in terms of food from POLISARIO guerillas. Those who were not able to walk were carried in landrovers. The whole development is fairly recent since the struggle against the Moroccan and Mauritanian occupation only began in late 1975. So this system has grown up in less than four years.

On the elementary level, the schools are essentially built around the discipline of the Koran. The people are exclusively Moslem, and they are very devoutly so. Each of the dairas has a school for older children. Also there is a national school that at the present time has 1500 children in it. It officially opened on the third anniversary of the establishment of their Republic, February 27, 1979. The buildings were constructed out of bricks made of sand and water by the people themselves. Eventually this school will take 3,000 children. It is a boarding school. As many as 50 children sleep in one large dormitory room with at least a blanket each. The bed is a mat on the floor.

Each दौरا has a clinic. In the case of one of the provincial camps (the Willaya of Dakhla) there is what is called a central hospital because Dakhla is perhaps 200 kilometers from the National Hospital. The hospital at Dakhla has 60-70 beds (in hospitals they do have beds). The National Hospital, again constructed out of sand bricks, eventually will have 400 beds. It is now only able to accommodate about 100. Its surgical wing is not open, yet with limited facilities, they give the best care possible.

If there are signs of malnutrition among small children in the camps, they are assigned to tents somewhat segregated from other tents. The mothers are with the children, as they are in the hospital as well, and they are given a special diet to build them up. Usually in less than three months these babies and young children will be built up sufficiently to go back to the regular camps and participate in the life of the community.

One very interesting school I visited is called February 27th, after the anniversary of the Republic and is only for adult women. This is part of the POLISARIO effort to fully integrate women into the life of their political movement and their society. There is a nine month course including emphasis on politics, culture, and the military. Time again, in the discussions I had, the question of the role of women came up, not necessarily introduced by me but by the women. One conversation was started by a woman who asked me out of the blue what the role of women in the American Committee on Africa was. After a word on this, we went on to discuss the role of women in Western Sahara society and POLISARIO. There is a very conscious effort within POLISARIO for women to have equal responsibility. They have made great strides in this direction. As the women explained to me, under Spanish colonial domination women were given a very inferior place. But now this is being corrected by the POLISARIO.

Who Controls the Western Sahara?

I spent a week in the Sahara travelling by landrover with the POLISARIO guerillas, from Algeria to the Atlantic. I suppose the round trip, taking into account our zigzagging course, covered 1200 or 1300 miles. There were no roads. It was a matter of following tracks made by other POLISARIO landrovers or of making our own tracks in the desert. But the POLISARIO

people know the desert. How they know where they are going in a given direction I have no idea. They had no compass and no radio but they could find their way with ease to a well, or to a small town which had been liberated recently, or to a wreckage of an F-5 U.S. jet plane which had been downed at some point in the desert.

We started on our journey toward the Atlantic at 3:30 a.m. Saturday morning the 12th of May. We stopped for a rendezvous with another Santana land-rover just before dawn and rested for awhile. We had some tea and biscuits for breakfast. Then we took off heading westward through the desert until about noon. By this time we were getting very hot and I found out it was a general practice to locate an area where there were a few small thorn trees and put blankets on the ground and rest through the worst heat of the day. By three or four in the afternoon some kind of lunch would be served with everyone eating and drinking out of a common bowl. A rabbit was shot at our first stop for there are a few such small animals and gazelles and some birds about the size of turkeys in the desert. Then during the latter part of the afternoon perhaps into the early evening we would continue to head west in the open landrovers (no top and no windshield, no glass of any kind that could shatter on impact). The turban or shesh (the Algerian or Arabic word) was a protection from the wind, and the sand and sun.

On the second evening heading west we came to what had been the town of Tifariti. It rose right out of the desert. No signs pointed to it and no paved roads marked the way. Its population may have been 15,000 at one time, I was told. This would include Saharawi living in tents close by. The Moroccans had occupied Tifariti in 1976. POLISARIO recaptured (or liberated) it in March, 1979, a month and a half before I was there. In fact when Richard Knight was in Western Sahara in March he had seen some of the battle for Tifariti. By May the 13th, I slept on the sand outside a Spanish constructed administrative center in Tifariti. We saw the signs of battle everywhere. All the people of course were gone because they were in the camps in Algeria. A few forlorn dogs had been left behind. The airfield was no longer in use. Only a few POLISARIO guerillas guarded the place. There was a large graveyard close by with mounds marking graves. Some were Saharawi civilians killed by napalm in the initial Moroccan attack. Some were Moroccan and POLISARIO combatants.

We spent our third night out in the open, no trees around. We slept on a blanket on the sand. By morning it was cool enough to want another blanket. I was awakened just before dawn by a rifle shot in the distance. Immediately three POLISARIO comrades sprang to their feet with their rifles and I must admit I wondered if the Moroccans were coming. Instead it was an S.O.S. from one of the POLISARIO guerillas some miles hence. Rifles were shot in the air by some of our group and tracer bullets were sent up. Then one of our landrovers went off into the early dawn to pick up this POLISARIO comrade. I discovered later there was to be a rendezvous. Seven landrovers gathered at this spot. The one that signaled us had had mechanical difficulty and was asking for help. We waited the entire day for this problem to be solved having found some shade a few miles from where we had camped at night. We explored the desert and engaged in stimulating discussion. We waited until after 11 p.m. when the moon came up before continuing our journey to the sea. The moon provided the light necessary as we headed across a fairly flat and sandy area with headlights off. Now there were four landrovers together sometimes going as fast as 60 miles an hour using only the light of the moon because we were very close to Bu Craa the phosphate center for the Western Sahara.

En route we stopped at the town of Amgala which had been taken from the Moroccans toward the end of April just about two weeks before we got there. This was a hilly area and there were all kinds of underground defenses that had been constructed by the Moroccans. It was amazing to me that POLISARIO guerillas had been able to win the battle for Amgala. As at Tifariti we saw graves undoubtedly for Moroccans in one place and the Saharawi in another.

Just a couple of hours before our westward journey was to end at the Atlantic we were taken to the site of a downed American F-5. The Moroccan pilot had parachuted to safety and was a prisoner of war of the POLISARIO in one of their camps. There were clear and unmistakable American markings on the scattered parts of the plane. I photographed them if ever evidence was needed that American military equipment is being used by Morocco in the Western Sahara contravening what is supposed to be an understanding between the U.S. and Morocco by a military agreement of 1960.

In the heat of the midday desert, one could feel the cool breezes of the Atlantic long before we arrived. I felt like some explorer of many years ago when we at last sighted the waves of the ocean. The desert goes right up to the seashore. There is no line of palm trees or any other vegetation unlike West Africa hundreds of miles south. The water of the Atlantic near Cape Bojador is very cool. It is supposed to be rich in fish. Some of us swam in clean water and even washed clothes in the salt water.

There was never a sign of Moroccan troops anyplace. I believe what I was told by my POLISARIO companions--that the Moroccans do not stray more than 5 kilometers from the towns they occupy. POLISARIO guerillas keep an eye on the towns and would know if they were leaving the environs. The Moroccans are in defensive positions. Their only offenses are the occasional air raids. I saw some Moroccan planes flying very high overhead, but nothing which seemed threatening to us.

We went not far from the capital city of El Aaiun and fairly close to the phosphate center at Bu Craa. On the return trip east we went near the major town of Semara at a time when POLISARIO was shelling Moroccan defenses. From what was assumed to be a safe distance we heard and watched the shelling taking place. The Moroccans responded with their own gunfire from the ramparts they had constructed which must have been similar to those we had seen at Amgala just a few days previously.

My experience led me to the conclusion that the POLISARIO guerillas can go anywhere they wish across the desert at any time of the day or night. They control the land as surely as the PAIGC did in the liberated areas of Guinea-Bissau. The companionship of the POLISARIO comrades is of a high order. It took awhile to find out who really was in command. Everyone had his task to perform and did it. I never heard anyone challenging anyone else, nor did I see signs of bickering. When it came time for the landrovers to stop one of the POLISARIO men was obviously in charge and he directed where each landrover would go, usually under any available bush or small tree. The vehicles were put in relatively safe places in case Moroccan planes went overhead. When we occasionally passed other POLISARIO landrovers in the desert, we always stopped. The greetings were genuine and touching. The farewells were deeply felt. When we stopped at night conversation around the campfire went very late. Unfortunately it was all in Arabic and I could not understand it. But I could tell by the tone and laughter that it was convivial.

It seemed very natural that everyone should drink even the muddy water which we got out of the wells in the middle of the desert from one common bowl. It was even more natural to eat with fingers or with an occasional spoon from one dishpan-like container for a meal of rice mixed with a little meat. POLISARIO treats the desert as a friend and even as a companion. They know their land and I could sense a real love for it.

It seems very clear to me that there is as genuine a liberation struggle taking place in the Western Sahara as there has been in any other part of the African continent. Mauritania already has made it quite clear that it would like to opt out of the war. A cease fire exists at the present time. In the southern third of the country, POLISARIO militants are able to travel freely. Mauritania however has about 8,000 Moroccan troops on its soil. It remains to be seen whether a separate peace can be made. The POLISARIO Front would like very much to do so.

Morocco is in an entirely defensive position militarily. They have perhaps 30,000 troops committed to the Western Sahara war. Some estimates are twice that number. All reports are that morale is low. It is a punishing tour of duty for most of the Moroccan troops. For the POLISARIO when they are inside the country, they are home. I was told again and again by my companions that POLISARIO would like to be a friend of the United States. What is the ideology of POLISARIO? It is certainly socialist in orientation, but essentially it is a nationalist movement. To call it ~~Maoist~~ would be an exaggeration. They take the same pragmatic view on ideology as Amilcar Cabral, the great leader of the PAIGC in Guinea-Bissau. They say "we have many political tendencies within the movement. It will be up to the people to decide after we are independent which way we will go." One thing is clear and that is that virtually all the POLISARIO people with whom I came into contact were devout and practising Moslems. This included all the guerillas with whom I lived for one week as we crossed the Sahara. They prayed in the early morning and the late evening and sometimes stopped during the day to face the East.

The last evening I was in the eastern liberated area of Western Sahara, resting in one of the POLISARIO underground bunkers, a meeting was arranged with the man responsible for medical work for the military. His name is Dr. Ali. He said there are seven doctors serving the military. He received his own medical training in El Aaiun and in Spain. There is no one hospital base located in a particular place in Western Sahara. Everything is mobile, just as the guerillas are. They have women as well as men in the medical corps. Any person who has been seriously wounded or needs serious medical attention must be transported to a POLISARIO military hospital in Algeria.

What About U.S. Policy?

The United States says that it is "neutral" in this conflict and yet the United States is supplying Morocco with military equipment. By a U.S. Moroccan military agreement made in 1960, no U.S. supplied arms are to be used by Morocco in the Western Sahara. And yet it is now admitted by spokesmen for the State Department that this agreement is being violated. Furthermore I saw evidence of it myself particularly in one of the F-5 planes which had been downed and which I referred to earlier. Richard Knight saw the wreckage of other planes in the desert in March. There has been about a half billion dollars worth of U.S. arms sold to Morocco in the last four years. Foreign military sales credits for Morocco amount to \$46.5 million for 1979. It is under debate now in Congress as to whether the amount for 1980 will be

\$30 million, as proposed by the Administration, or will be increased to \$45 million as approved in the Senate.

It is reported that 15 F-5 planes have been sent to El Aaiun from U.S. planes supplied to Morocco. POLISARIO claims they have shot down five of these aircraft. The U.S. government approved the sale of six Boeing Chinook helicopters to Morocco in February 1979. Furthermore the administration has approved the sale of \$2.4 million worth of spare parts for F-5 and C-130 planes to Morocco during fiscal year 1980.

The supply of a Northrup detection system has been approved for Morocco by the administration recently. This system is similar to that used in Vietnam, and detects any movements in a given area of either machines or people. According to the State Department, the detection devices will not be placed in Western Sahara, but part of the communications equipment will. The equipment is apparently not subject to the Arms Export Control Act.

A Westinghouse radar system was approved by the administration several years ago. This includes installation in Western Sahara as well as Morocco.

A political objective of the American Committee on Africa and others who are committed to the right of self-determination should be to work for a policy by our government that would stop any military assistance going to Morocco as long as the struggle continues in Western Sahara. I feel everything possible should be done to strengthen this position in the days ahead.

A Note On Material Assistance To Western Sahara Refugees

Although as I have indicated in this report, the Saharawi people have organized themselves very efficiently in their camps, they need material assistance from friendly countries and international agencies. The Algerian government and the Algerian Red Crescent (the equivalent of the Red Cross) are a primary source of help. Assistance comes from elsewhere also. Some African countries have given material assistance. International agencies include Oxfam of Belgium and Medico International of West Germany.

When the Africa Fund sent \$22,720 worth of medicines in May, the shipping costs were borne by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. The UNHCR is prepared to help in other ways.

In the many discussions I had about the needs, some of the things particularly emphasized were:

Clothing; Sandals for children and shoes; blankets.

School supplies - Chalk, pencils or ball point pens, blackboards, sports equipment, (soccerballs for example)

Tents or material for making tents (the wind and change of climate from hot to cold does great damage to tents)

Medicines and Drugs - Anti-biotics, vitamins, calcium, liquid protein. Also the need for syringes was stressed, and surgical equipment. The POLISARIO medical responsables said that Mobile Clinics would be especially helpful because of the distance of the National Hospital from the camps.

At the American Committee on Africa and The Africa Fund, we will be glad to give all the information we can to agencies that would like to help.