



Security Council

Distr.
GENERAL

S/1998/404
18 May 1998

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

PROGRESS REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON THE
SITUATION CONCERNING WESTERN SAHARA

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1163 (1998) of 17 April 1998, by which the Council extended the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) until 20 July 1998, and requested me to report to it every 30 days on the progress made in the implementation of the settlement plan (S/21360 and S/22464 and Corr.1) and the agreements reached by the parties, the Kingdom of Morocco and the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguía el-Hamra y del Río de Oro (Frente POLISARIO), under the auspices of my Personal Envoy, Mr. James A. Baker III (S/1997/742, annexes I to III).

II. DEVELOPMENTS DURING THE REPORTING PERIOD

2. During the reporting period, my Special Representative, Mr. Charles F. Dunbar, met with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees at Geneva on 20 April 1998, with the Secretary-General of the Frente POLISARIO and the POLISARIO Coordinator with MINURSO in the Tindouf area on 23 April and 8 May 1998 and with the Minister of State and of the Interior of Morocco at Rabat on 5 and 12 May 1998. My Special Representative also met with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Algeria at Algiers on 5 May 1998. In Mauritania, he visited the identification centres at Nouadhibou and Zouerate, where he met with local officials on 3 May 1998.

Identification process

3. In April 1998, the pace of the identification process was much slower than expected, with only two and a half weeks of work accomplished. No identification session took place in the Mission area in the two weeks beginning on 6 and on 27 April 1998. As a result, MINURSO identified only 7,427 applicants during that month. In Mauritania, the identification centre in Nouadhibou opened on 13 April 1998. As had been decided in my report to the Security Council of 15 January 1998 (S/1998/35), identification sessions also started in northern Morocco, at El Kelaa des Sraghna on 22 April and at Sidi Kacem on 6 May 1998.

4. Following discussions with the Chairman of the Identification Commission in late April 1998, the two parties agreed to the programme of identification for the month of May 1998. The programme provides for a substantially higher rate of identification, with at times as many as 10 teams operating concurrently in the Territory, the Tindouf area, Morocco and Mauritania. The Moroccan Government undertook to provide additional support to the identification operation, in the form of air transportation for its observers and Saharan sheikhs between Laayoune and the locations at which identification is to take place in Morocco (at El Kelaa des Sraghna and Sidi Kacem, each with two operating MINURSO teams, and Marrakech, with one team starting from 25 May 1998). Since 4 May 1998, identification activities have proceeded without incident.

5. In its discussion of the programme for May, the Frente POLISARIO asked MINURSO to include, in the Tindouf area and in Mauritania, the identification of those applicants from tribal groups H41, H61 and J51/52 who are listed in the 1974 census of the Territory and are therefore entitled, under the Houston agreements, to be convoked together with their immediate families. According to MINURSO's records, there are 603 such individuals. However, Morocco refused to participate in their identification until the overall issue of the eligibility of some 65,000 applicants from the above three groups is resolved. Thus, identification of those 603 individuals could not take place since the process requires the presence of observers of the two parties, as called for in my predecessor's compromise proposal of 1993 on the interpretation and application of the criteria and procedures for establishing the identity of prospective voters (S/26185, annex I).

6. As at 11 May 1998, 78,002 applicants had been convoked by MINURSO for identification since the resumption of the process in December 1997. Of those, 51,132 came before the Identification Commission to be interviewed. With the 60,112 applicants who had been identified during the first phase of the identification process (August 1994-December 1995), this brings the total number of persons identified thus far to 111,244. Fewer than 50,000 applicants from "non-contested" tribes remain to be convoked.

7. Ways of dealing with the 65,000 applicants from groups H41, H61 and J51/52 have yet to be found. My Special Representative is consulting with the two parties in the search for possible solutions to this outstanding issue. So far, both sides have maintained their positions with respect to these three groups. The Moroccan authorities maintain that all 65,000 applicants have the right to be identified in order to determine their eligibility to vote. Unless an overall solution is found for all these applicants, the Moroccan authorities remain opposed to the proposal, contained in paragraph 8 of my report of 13 April 1998 (S/1998/316), that MINURSO complete, as a first step, the identification of the 4,000 individuals who had presented themselves on the days of convocation of members from the above three groups who are listed in the 1974 census and their immediate families. While having accepted this proposal, the Frente POLISARIO also remains opposed to the identification of any applicants from these three groups other than those listed in the 1974 census and their immediate families.

Military aspects

8. As at 7 May 1998, the military component of MINURSO stood at 243 observers and other military personnel (see annex). Under the command of Maj.-Gen. Bernd S. Lubenik (Austria), the military component continues to monitor the ceasefire between the Royal Moroccan Army and the Frente POLISARIO forces, which came into effect on 6 September 1991. Both sides are adhering to the military agreement that they reached this year with the Force Commander. The MINURSO area of responsibility remains calm and there have been no indications that either side intends to resume hostilities.

9. During the reporting period, preparations for the deployment of the engineering unit of MINURSO continued. An advance party of the engineering company from Pakistan arrived in Agadir and contingent-owned equipment was unloaded at this Moroccan port. Pakistani and Swedish staff officers were also deployed to MINURSO headquarters in Laayoune. The Moroccan Government identified sites for the initial deployment of the unit. The deployment is under way and should be completed by mid-June 1998.

10. The draft status-of-forces agreements, submitted to Morocco on 31 March 1998, and to Algeria and Mauritania on 3 April 1998, are still being reviewed by the three Governments. Pursuant to Security Council resolution 1163 (1998) and in accordance with the established practice in all United Nations peacekeeping operations, I urge the three Governments to respond positively, so that these agreements can be signed without undue delay.

Civilian police aspects

11. The number of civilian police officers assigned to MINURSO stands at 78 out of an approved total of 81 (see annex). Under the command of the Civil Police Commissioner, Chief Superintendent Peter Miller (Canada), the civilian police component of MINURSO continues to work closely with the Identification Commission to ensure the smooth conduct of the identification operation.

Preparatory work for the repatriation of Saharan refugees

12. During the reporting period, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) continued operational coordination with MINURSO, covering such issues as accommodation for staff and field offices. A UNHCR headquarters mission visited Rabat on 23 April 1998 to discuss with the Moroccan authorities the formalization of UNHCR's presence in Laayoune, with a view to establishing a joint coordination mechanism for operational matters. Another mission from UNHCR headquarters visited Algiers and the Tindouf area, from 28 April to 7 May 1998, to discuss with relevant authorities UNHCR's ongoing preparatory activities in the Tindouf camps, including physical infrastructure and logistics planning.

13. Technical problems that were raised by the parties regarding UNHCR's planning and selection of implementing partners are being addressed with the relevant authorities. It is hoped that these problems will be solved soon so that further delays in the overall planning and implementation of the UNHCR repatriation programme under the settlement plan may be avoided.

14. In Mauritania, UNHCR has thus far pre-registered 6,110 persons at Zouerate and 1,182 persons at Nouadhibou. At camp Dakhla in the Tindouf area, the exercise ended with the pre-registration of 17,900 refugees. At camp Smara, pre-registration is scheduled to start in the third week of May 1998.

15. UNHCR is planning to hold a regional repatriation planning workshop by the end of May 1998. In addition to staff from UNHCR headquarters and the field, MINURSO and the World Food Programme will also attend the workshop. UNHCR is also planning a coordination meeting with non-governmental organizations for early June 1998.

III. OBSERVATIONS

16. While the pace of identification was slow during the month of April 1998, it is expected to increase substantially in May, as described in paragraph 5 above. Both parties have demonstrated willingness to cooperate to this effect. The Identification Commission is now in a position to programme the remaining work required with respect to applicants from the "non-contested" tribes: the Commission expects to complete their identification at the latest by the end of August 1998, provided both parties cooperate fully.

17. In the meantime, progress has been made towards the deployment of the engineering unit of MINURSO and the start of its demining activities in the Mission area.

18. UNHCR has also advanced in its preparatory work for the repatriation of Saharan refugees eligible to vote and their immediate families. In this regard, I expect that the return of refugees to the Territory will be effected under safe conditions, enabling them to participate in the referendum without administrative and military constraints, in accordance with the settlement plan and the principles and modalities set out in my report of 13 November 1997 (S/1997/882, paras. 22 to 26).

19. However, no consensus solution on ways of dealing with the 65,000 applicants from tribal groups H41, H61 and J51/52 has been found as yet. My Special Representative will continue to discuss with the Government of Morocco and the Frente POLISARIO practical and concrete ways of resolving this problem by the end of June 1998. To this effect, I urge the two parties to cooperate with him in the search for appropriate solutions, with a view to enabling the successful and timely completion of the identification process. Once my Special Representative has completed his consultations and assessed the views of the parties, he will submit to me recommendations as to how this critical issue should be addressed.

Annex

United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara:
contributions as at 7 May 1998

	Military observers	Civilian police observers	Staff officers	Troops	Total
Argentina	1	-	-	-	1
Austria	5	-	-	-	5*
Bangladesh	6	-	-	-	6
Canada	-	5	-	-	5**
China	16	-	-	-	16
Egypt	19	2	-	-	21
El Salvador	2	-	-	-	2
France	25	-	-	-	25
Ghana	6	10	-	7	23
Greece	1	-	-	-	1
Guinea	3	-	-	-	3
Honduras	12	-	-	-	12
Ireland	8	-	-	-	8
India	-	10	-	-	10
Italy	5	-	-	-	5
Kenya	8	-	-	-	8
Malaysia	13	10	-	-	23
Nigeria	5	10	-	-	15
Norway	-	2	-	-	2
Pakistan	5	10	5	5	25
Poland	3	-	-	-	3
Portugal	4	10	-	-	14
Republic of Korea	-	-	-	20	20
Russian Federation	25	-	-	-	25
Sweden	-	9	3	-	12
Uruguay	13	-	-	-	13

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	Military observers	Civilian police observers	Staff officers	Troops	Total
United States of America	15	-	-	-	15
Venezuela	3	-	-	-	3
Total	203	78	8	32	321

* In addition to the Force Commander.

** In addition to the police Commissioner.
