

OVERVIEW

Over 173,000 Sahrawi refugees are estimated to live in five camps in Tindouf province, Algeria, on the border between Mauritania, Morocco, and Western Sahara. Some have been displaced for more than 45 years after fleeing the conflict between the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (Polisario), Mauritania, and Morocco in 1975 (ICG 25/04/2018). Refugees face harsh desert conditions and rely almost fully on humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs. The exact number of refugees in the camps is not known, mainly because of political disputes between Morocco and the Sahrawi authorities on the number of eligible voters for the referendum. The figure 173,000 is not used anymore for response planning and the planning figure of 90,000 refugees is considered for humanitarian assistance (OXFAM 08/05/2020; ICG 25/04/2018; UNHCR 28/12/2021). Protracted displacement in harsh desert conditions with little access to livelihoods and services, particularly water, has been driving the humanitarian needs of refugees.

The new clashes in November 2020 further aggravated the humanitarian conditions of Sahrawi refugees. According to camp authorities, the clashes displaced an additional 4,700 Sahrawis from conflict areas near the sand wall between Morocco- and Polisario-controlled territories in Western Sahara to the camps in Tindouf. Humanitarian access has been extremely limited because of COVID-19-related movement restrictions, shortages of staff in humanitarian operations. Political tensions between Algeria, Morocco, and the Polisario have also been hampering humanitarian response and preventing sustainable solutions (KII 15/07/2021; KII 28/07/2021; KII 18/08/2021; KII 02/09/2021).

About this report

In the ACAPS Global Risk Analysis published in March 2021, ACAPS identified the potential risk of localised fighting in Western Sahara aggravating needs and protection risks for the Sahrawi people. This report aims to increase awareness about the situation of Sahrawi refugees, compile available information on their needs and the corresponding humanitarian response, and highlight existing gaps to improve the level of information available to responders and other decision makers.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Food insecurity:** 30% of Sahrawi refugees are food-insecure, and 58% are at risk of food insecurity. According to the last food security assessment in 2018, 94% of the refugees depended on humanitarian assistance for food.
- Access to water is a main challenge for Sahrawi refugees, who rely mostly on water trucking provided by humanitarian responders.
- Education quality is decreasing because of the low incentives and high turnover of teachers, the shortage of educational resources, and very limited opportunities available for refugee children after graduation.
- **Health:** the camps need COVID-19 vaccination and awareness-raising. The high turnover of qualified staff caused by low incentives and limited growth opportunities is a challenge.
- **Protection:** feelings of stagnation, desperation, loss the sense of time, and hopelessness have been reported particularly among the Sahrawi youth, leading to a high risk of radicalisation because of conflict, limited opportunities, and an unknown future.
- **Newly displaced:** Some of the 4,700 Sahrawi refugees displaced from the conflict areas to Tindouf camps in November–December 2020 still require humanitarian assistance such as shelter, food, and livelihoods.

Methodology: this report is based on the secondary data review of publicly available sources, supported and verified by six key informant interviews with humanitarian experts working on the crisis.

Limitations: the information available on the humanitarian situation in Sahrawi refugee camps is limited. The reliability of available sources and reported needs is low. Collecting and analysing information on this crisis is difficult given the sensitivities associated with the political stalemate surrounding the status of Western Sahara territories.

CRISIS CONTEXT

Over 173,000 Sahrawi refugees live in five camps in Tindouf, the westernmost province of Algeria bordering Mauritania, Morocco, and Western Sahara. The last assessment of the total in-camp population was conducted in late 2017, so this number is likely higher in 2021 (OXFAM 08/05/2020; ICG 25/04/2018).

The Sahrawi people are the indigenous population of Western Sahara territories that have been disputed between Mauritania, Morocco, and the Polisario since 1974, following the withdrawal of the previous Spanish colonial administration. The armed conflict began in 1975 after Morocco's claims to the territories were dismissed and the International Court of Justice reaffirmed the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination. This event triggered Morocco to seize parts of the Western Sahara territories in 1975, leading to the first wave of displacement. Mauritania left the territories in 1979. Conflict in Western Sahara is one of the most protracted crises in modern history, with a longstanding stalemate and sporadic escalations (ECFR 26/05/2021; BBC 06/05/2018; KII 15/12/2021).

In 1976, the Polisario declared the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). In 2021, the UN considers Western Sahara a non-self-governing territory and the Polisario the international representative of the Sahrawi people (ECFR 26/05/2021).

Tensions between the Polisario and Morocco started increasing again in late 2020, after 29 years of stalemate and ceasefire since the escalation in 1991. In October 2020, Sahrawi protesters blocked the strategic Guerguerat road linking Morocco to Mauritania and the broader sub-Saharan Africa. On 13 November 2021, Moroccan troops were deployed into the UN-monitored buffer zone to disperse the protesters and block their access to the border crossing. There are conflicting reports over how much force Morocco has used with the Polisario. Some state that forceful intrusion in the protected buffer zone broke the ceasefire, while Morocco denies any violent clashes and violations of the ceasefire. The Polisario announced the end of the ceasefire on 13 November 2020 (ICG 14/10/2021; The Washington Post 08/09/2021; IISS 15/11/2021; APS 13/11/2020).

Tensions between the Polisario and the Moroccan army escalated in the buffer zone between Morocco- and Polisario-controlled areas in Western Sahara in November–December 2020. The conflict displaced about 4,700 Sahrawis (or 900 households) from the escalation area to the Tindouf camps in November–December 2020, with even more people displaced to Mauritania. The needs of the newly displaced are similar to the needs of the people in the camps: food, shelter, access to water, health, livelihood, and education. Humanitarian operations have ceased in the areas affected by the conflict escalation (GardaWorld 30/05/2021; KII 28/07/2021; KII 18/08/2021; KII 02/09/2021).

In December 2020, the US recognised the Moroccan claims and control of Western Sahara in exchange for Morocco normalising relations with Israel, which further aggravated the political situation (ECFR 26/05/2021; The Washington Post 11/12/2020).

The armed escalation was still active as at September 2021, with Polisario forces claiming daily attacks on Moroccan military bases and outposts. The Moroccan army has neither confirmed nor denied any attacks, but they have installed reinforcements on the wall separating the Moroccan- and Polisario-controlled areas of Western Sahara (The Washington Post 08/09/2021).

The lack of a political solution leaves refugees in Algeria stranded and increasingly frustrated, with no perspective for a durable solution. The ceasefire signed in 1991 between Morocco and the Polisario stipulated that the UN was to organise a referendum allowing Sahrawis to choose between independence and integration with Morocco. The referendum has never happened, mainly because of disputes between Morocco and the Polisario on the number of eligible voters (ECFR 26/05/2021; HRW 18/10/2014).

The Polisario administers and controls the five refugee camps in Tindouf. It has a constitution and laws, operates a court and prison, has police forces, makes legal decisions, manages family issues, and controls borders. The Polisario is the only authority in the camps. Its administrative centre is Rabouni, the site of the state ministries and the main field offices of humanitarians regularly operating in the camps (HRW 18/10/2014).

The Sahrawi refugees in those camps have been in protracted displacement, resulting in dire living conditions. The refugee population relies heavily on humanitarian aid to address their basic needs. Over half of the Sahrawi refugees were born and grew up in the camps. Some of them believe they should remain in the camps because the sites draw attention to their situation and needs. There is no information on the scale of the migration of Sahrawi refugees to other countries. Overall, people are free to travel but do not have the means to do so. Mobility opportunities mostly consist of the ability to study in Algeria (ICG 25/04/2018; ECHO 16/07/2004; HRW 18/10/2014; KII 08/07/2021; KII 28/07/2021; KII 08/07/2021; KII 02/09/2021).

STAKEHOLDERS

- Algeria has played a crucial role in hosting and supporting the refugees and providing education both in Algerian schools and by building schools in the camps at the beginning of the displacement. Each year, about 2,500 refugees receive healthcare in Algeria. The country also provides electricity, internet connectivity, and other infrastructure (KII 02/09/2021). Algeria is one of the countries that recognise the SADR (The Washington Post 08/09/2021; IISS 15/11/2021).
- Morocco controls about 80% of Western Sahara. In December 2020, Morocco normalised relations with Israel, and the US recognised the Moroccan claims and control of Western Sahara. Morocco sees the Polisario as a separatist group and calls Western Sahara the 'southern provinces' or the 'Saharan provinces'.
- The Polisario is the Sahrawi political movement that fought against the Spanish administration in 1973 to achieve self-determination. It is considered the international representative of Sahrawi refugees and has declared the SADR. The Polisario presents itself as a 'liberation movement' and controls about 20% of Western Sahara. The Polisario also administers and controls the Tindouf camps. They have been fighting against the Moroccan army since the end of the ceasefire agreement (The Washington Post 08/09/2021; IISS 15/11/2021).
- Spain: in the 1880s, Spain established what would become its colony of Spanish Sahara – know as Western Sahara since the 1960s. The UN recognised it as a 'non-self-governing territory' under the Spanish administration. In 1974, Spain agreed to organise a referendum on Western Saharan independence.
- The main objectives of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) are to conduct the referendum, monitor the ceasefire, reduce the threat of mines, and provide logistical support to UNHCR. MINURSO is present in the refugee camps and Western Sahara. The group was unable to conduct the referendum because of the disputes between Morocco and the Polisario on the number of eligible voters (MINURSO accessed 13/09/2021).

HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

Food

There is little up-to-date information on the food and nutrition needs of Sahrawi refugees in 2021. According to the last nutrition survey conducted in 2019, the nutritional status of children and women was deteriorating. Global acute malnutrition rates among children between 0–5 years increased from 4.7% in 2016 to 7.6% in 2019. In 2018, 30% of Sahrawi refugees were food-insecure, with 58% more at risk of food insecurity (WFP accessed 16/05/2021; EU accessed 18/06/2021).

As per the last food security assessment conducted in 2018, 94% of Sahrawi refugees depend on external assistance as their main source of income (WFP 31/08/2018; KII 02/09/2021). Agricultural opportunities are very limited because of the desert climate. Humanitarian agencies have implemented small-scale agricultural projects, but these have been insufficient in covering the needs for fresh fruit and vegetables (KII 14/07/2021; KII 28/07/2021).

WASH

Sahrawi refugees face challenges in accessing water, as they rely mostly on the water trucking provided by humanitarian responders. By the end of 2021, 50% of the water supply is expected to be piped. The remaining half will continue to be provided through water trucking, which costs more and provides lower-quality water. Available water sources continue to fall short of providing the target of 20 litres per person per day and are heavily mineralised with a high percentage of salt, which poses a health risk (WFP 31/08/2018; KII 02/09/2021). Developing a water pipeline network is necessary to ensure the fair distribution of water and facilitate access to safe water and sanitation (UNHCR 18/10/2020; KII 28/07/2021; KII 02/09/2021).

Livelihoods

Livelihood opportunities are very few, and incentives are low. People work in camp facilities, which include ministries, schools, and shops, and engage in farming and livestock breeding. Some households receive remittances from family members living overseas. The humanitarian sector has also created some jobs.

Sahrawi refugees are not allowed to work in Algeria, so some work there illegally, making them vulnerable to exploitation and labour rights abuses and increasing the level of unmet needs. It is difficult for Sahrawis to find work outside the camps unless they have connections with Algerians. Many Sahrawis prefer to remain in the camps with their family (KII 15/07/2021; KII 28/07/2021; KII 08/07/2021; KII 18/08/2021).

Workers face challenges such as the lack of professional training and skills development, which affects the services they provide. The turnover of staff is high because of insufficient incentives. Humanitarian responders provide training and skills development activities, especially for youth, women, and community-based organisations (UNHCR 16/03/2021; KII 15/07/2021). There have been divergent opinions on the existence of vocational training centres in the camps. Some key informants report that they do not exist, while others report that some courses are accessible. Responders see the need for more vocational training, which could create livelihoods and improve the level of services in the camps, since there are minimal livelihood opportunities for refugees in the camps and the refugees are not allowed to work in Algeria (KII 14/07/2021; KII 15/07/2021; KII 28/07/2021).

The lack of rains in the last three years, especially in areas near the wall (in Western Sahara territory), has affected the livestock and led to livestock losses (KII 02/09/2021).

Health

50% of Sahrawi children and women have anaemia (EU accessed 18/06/2021).

Humanitarian organisations provide hospitals in the camps with staff, medical equipment, and medicines, but there are limitations on the drugs they can supply, mainly because of funding shortages. There are primary healthcare centres and five hospitals inside the camps, as well as one regional hospital providing basic health services to the refugees. However, no specialised health services are provided, and hospitals lack medicines and medical equipment. People have to travel outside the camps to seek health services for serious health issues (UNHCR 16/03/2021; KII 28/07/2021; KII 02/09/2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic put additional pressure on the health system. Movement restrictions hampered the delivery of medical items, and some medical staff evacuated from the camps. The high turnover of qualified staff because of low incentives and limited growth opportunities is another challenge (KII 15/07/2021; KII 18/08/2021).

Mental health

Refugees report feelings of stagnation, desperation, loss the sense of time, and hopelessness. Although the international community covers their basic needs, refugees are still human beings who aspire for more than survival – especially the youth. Challenges are also tougher for young people because of active tensions, few opportunities, and an uncertain future, putting them at risk of radicalisation. The lack of prospects for the resolution of the political impasse further aggravates protection needs and the risk of radicalisation. There is no information on mental health services in the camps (KII 08/07/2021; KII 15/07/2021; KII 18/08/2021).

Shelter: the needs for shelter rehabilitation and construction materials are unmet. 90% of Sahrawi refugees live in adobe huts built using a mixture of soil, water, and sand, with the remaining 10% in tents. Living conditions are harsh because of the heat and vulnerability to damages often caused by sandstorms, rains, and floods, usually between November–March. Damages caused by floods and sandstorms are extensive and have affected up to 50% of shelters at a time in the past (UNHCR 11/01/2017; KII 15/07/2021; KII 02/09/2021)

Protection

Feelings of stagnation, desperation, timelessness, and hopelessness have been reported particularly among the Sahrawi youth, leading to a high risk of radicalisation because of conflict, limited opportunities, and an unknown future. Each of the parties to the conflict has reported high protection risks, such as discrimination, harassment, and violence (Amnesty International 26/05/2021; Front Line Defenders 14/05/2021; Al Jazeera 13/11/2020; HRW 18/10/2014).

Education

Upper secondary schools and universities are not available in the camps. There are five to six primary schools and one to two middle schools in each camp. Primary school teachers experience low incentives and a shortage of educational resources. About 98% of primary school-aged children are in school, and the illiteracy rate is 4% (KII 08/07/2021; KII 15/07/2021; KII 28/07/2021; KII 18/08/2021; KII 02/09/2021).

Sahrawi students can access upper secondary schools and universities in Algeria for free, but they need to travel to reach educational institutions and cover their living expenses. Some boys move out to study in Algeria, but this is not possible for most girls (KII 08/07/2021; KII 15/07/2021; KII 28/07/2021; KII 18/08/2021; KII 02/09/2021).

Opportunities after finishing their studies are also very limited, as Sahrawis are not allowed to work in Algeria. There is no information on the number of students in the camps or the number of students who have travelled to Algeria to study (KII 08/07/2021; KII 15/07/2021; KII 28/07/2021; KII 18/08/2021; KII 02/09/2021).

Electricity and communication

Four of the five camps are connected to electricity grids. Laayoune camp is not connected to the electricity grid, so people are resorting to the use of batteries, solar panels, and fuel generators. The Algeria mobile network reaches the camps, and people can access the internet using their mobile phones (KII 15/07/2021).

Access of population to services

The population moves freely in the camps and in Tindouf city, but for travel through Algeria and outside of Tindouf, Sahrawi refugees require movement permits from Polisario authorities. These permits are valid for 15 days, and the process of obtaining them takes about one day. People travel outside the camps for health services, work, or education.

Sahrawi refugees cannot access Western Sahara territories since they cannot pass through the wall and the buffer zone separating Sahrawi-controlled areas from Moroccan-controlled areas. The presence of landmines and Moroccan armed forces further complicates access (KII 15/07/2021; KII 18/08/2021; KII 02/09/2021).

COVID-19

As at 28 November 2021, about 1,800 COVID-19 cases have been recorded in total in the camps, including 74 deaths, 1,696 recoveries, and 28 active cases. COVID-19 variants, insubordination to preventive measures, the lack of PCR tests, and the scarcity of protective equipment will likely aggravate the situation in the next four to six months (KII 08/07/2021; KII 15/07/2021; Oxfam 27/07/2021).

Although the pandemic has resulted in movement restrictions and the evacuation of expatriate staff, basic humanitarian assistance has continued. Movement restrictions aggravated by conflict-related tensions near the wall (in Western Sahara territory) have affected the crossing areas and exchange of trade, limiting the availability of some goods in the camps (KII 18/08/2021; KII 02/09/2021). The measures have also affected humanitarian operations, which continued with only the implementation of lifesaving activities, minimum visits to the camps, and limited interactions with refugees (Medium 01/06/2020).

Despite some vaccines being available, hesitance among the population has kept vaccination numbers very low. As at 10 October 2021, 2.5% of the camps' population has received the first dose, and only 0.56% has received both doses. Sahrawi health authorities and humanitarian actors have implemented advocacy for vaccination and awareness-raising activities in the camps, but those activities were not enough, and more awareness-raising is needed (UNHCR 04/07/2021 and 16/03/2021; KII 08/07/2021; KII 08/07/2021; KII 18/08/2021).

Climate

Living conditions in the desert aggravate the crisis. Air temperature exceeds 40 degrees Celsius, reaching 50 degrees Celsius in summer and 10 degrees Celsius in winter. These weather conditions result in poor agricultural production, the death of livestock, and increased needs for water and shelter. The Sahrawi refugee camps are vulnerable to flash floods and sandstorms. A severe sandstorm in September 2020 resulted in serious shelter damage and high needs for shelter rehabilitation (EU accessed 18/06/2021; UNHCR 11/01/2017; weather-and-climate accessed 28/07/2021; KII 15/07/2021; KII 02/09/2021).

RESPONSE CAPACITY

Operational constraints

Humanitarian responders do not know the exact number of Sahrawi refugees. Multisectoral needs assessments are needed to get an overview of the population's needs.

It is difficult for humanitarians to have direct access to people in need because they have to implement activities through Polisario authorities. The lists of aid recipients are prepared by the camp communities and the Sahrawi Red Crescent (Separate from IFRC), so implementation and distribution are done indirectly. Some responders report that humanitarian organisations do not communicate significantly among themselves about their respective action plans, the funding they receive, and their knowledge about the gaps in the coverage of needs (KII 08/07/2021; KII 28/07/2021).

NGOs face different access impediments, such as costly, time-consuming and complex administrative and registration processes, as well as complex visa processes for expatriate staff. Polisario authorities oversee the activities of NGOs. Organisations need to request permission from Sahrawi authorities to access camps and get an Algerian visa to enter Algeria to reach Tindouf. The relationship and personal connection of Algeria with Sahrawi authorities are very important for NGOs getting visas (KII 28/07/2021; KII 18/08/2021).

The fact that another authority than Algeria controls the camps keeps them in extraterritorial status, which is problematic for development actors who want to establish durable solutions in the areas where the displaced people reside. There are also political constraints to implementing development activities, as local stakeholders refuse to allow long-term planning while focusing on the return policy to Western Sahara. The camps' territories are also not covered by development work through the few programmes Algeria implements in its territories. Overall, it is very challenging to do any innovative programming in the camps. Implementing long-term solutions is not straightforward because of a certain reluctance reported among some refugees to solutions not focused on the return to Western Sahara territories (KII 18/08/2021).

Camp authorities do not accept cash assistance beyond vouchers, so humanitarian agencies need to respond with in-kind food assistance (KII 28/07/2021; KII 02/09/2021).

Local and international response capacity

Algeria hosts Sahrawi refugees and provides them with electricity, education, and health services (KII 08/07/2021). The humanitarian response is limited to a few UN organisations and other INGOs, as well as local NGOs such as the Algerian Red Crescent. The EU supports food and nutrition care, the provision of clean water, healthcare, and education. UNHCR has offices in both the Moroccan-controlled territory and in the Tindouf refugee camps. It provides WASH, health, fuel, food, shelter, and livelihood support (EU accessed 18/06/2021; UNHCR 28/12/2021; HRW 18/10/2014).

Available funding covers only very basic needs, resulting in unmet needs and the lack of recovery activities and sustainable solutions (KII 28/07/2021; KII 02/09/2021; WFP 18/11/2021).

Most humanitarian activities are implemented by Sahrawi refugees employed by humanitarian programmes as teachers, healthcare workers, and WASH sector staff, from which they receive incentives (KII 08/07/2021).

INFORMATION GAPS AND NEEDS

There is insufficient information on the humanitarian situation in the refugee camps in Tindouf and the number of people affected and in need. Multisectoral needs assessment is needed to inform humanitarian actors on the needs and how to respond.

- The exact number of Sahrawi refugees is not available, and available numbers are not disaggregated.
- There is limited information on the vaccination campaign in the camps.
- The number of students in the camps is not available.
- Information on mental health services in the camps is not available.

Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf

