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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Il Cenacolo, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



Violations of Social Rights in Tindouf Camps: a Post-Covid Assessment

Introduction

If Tindouf camps on the Algerian territory have been facing unideal conditions exacerbated by transgression and misconduct in the management of the humanitarian aids, impeding this way access to social services and the enjoyment of civil and political rights, the covid-19 outbreak seems to have exposed further the existing structural issues, and rendered the living conditions rather challenging, adding to the complex vulnerability of the Tindouf camps population, and casting a lot of doubt on the Algerian government's willingness to ensure equitable and fair access to rights for Sahrawis in the camps.

Benefitting from an established and unwavering cover-up from the Algerian government, the Polisario Front has sought, by perpetuating a tight-fist control of the camps, to hide away the reality of the covid-19 pandemic outbreak in the camps, and quell the deteriorating health conditions and inability to withstand the potential threats rising from the pandemic.

Impeded access to accurate reporting

The Algerian authorities seem to be prudently struggling to withhold any information about the day-to-day running of vital services, including medical centers, in the camps, with the absence of reliable reports from impartial organizations or specialized UN agencies that explain the indecent health conditions in the camps.

The COVID-19 in Tindouf camps calls into question the responsibility of the Algerian authorities in protecting the camps population, as it has revealed how the Polisario's illegal, biased and militarized management of the camps generates serious shortfalls in medicines and of essential personal protective equipment, such as masks, gowns, goggles and gloves, inducing thus a lot of apprehension, and pushing human rights defenders and bloggers to question the silence exerted on the reality of the overall health situation in the camps.

During the pandemic outbreak, amid the mounting pressure from the general public in the camps, Sahrawi bloggers used their Facebook pages to raise the alarm about the incomprehensible silence from the Polisario, alerting that the camps have witnessed "a dramatic increase in the number of deaths inside during the outbreak of the pandemic".

Hiding away the deaths by Algeria, the host country, and the Polisario shows a discontinuous reporting line that blurs the reality, and casts shadows of doubt on the reliability and accuracy of the records used by the Polisario to raise money from international donors.

Different reports from Sahrawi bloggers and from other Sahrawis working for international humanitarian organizations, are divulging the other face of the reality in Tindouf camps, which the Polisario tirelessly tries to conceal. The importance of the emergence of Sahrawi bloggers and opinion leaders lies in the fact that they break the omerta on human rights violations, and bring to the attention of the outside world what is premeditatedly kept away from the eyes of the international community.

Weak Infrastructures and Poor Social Services

The camps population, amidst the snowballing pandemic and in its aftermath, are still having limited access to medical care and health services, nutritious food, clean and quality water and hygienic sanitation. These conditions already make Sahrawis highly vulnerable to varied communicable and non-communicable diseases, and throw discredit on Polisario and the host country who seems especially unwilling to put in place basic social infrastructures after 45 years of these camps existing on the Algerian territory.

The healthcare services in Tindouf camps are run by the Polisario, who monopolizes decisions on resources, staff and infrastructures, leading to major challenges, including poor and inconsistent services, lack of medical equipment and shortage of medication, despite the

substantial donations from international donors. The health centers in Tindouf camps could not treat covid-19 severe cases given the lack of ventilators and isolation beds, together with the limited availability of concentrated oxygen.

This scarcity of food and fuel has led to a general surge in prices, and generated a climate of tension among the inhabitants, worsened by a severe shortage of drinking water and the absence of hygiene and disinfection products.

The state of siege exerted on the camps, and the discernible insufficiencies, call into question the role of the UNHCR, who is allegedly ramping up efforts to increase capacity to prevent, treat and limit the potential spread of diseases among refugee communities, while the Sahrawis in Tindouf camps are left to the Polisario's arrangements with the Algerian government.

Repression Against Bloggers and Doctors

Many of the Sahrawi bloggers and medical doctors who used social media to draw the attention of the international community to the situation inside the camps have been targeted by the Polisario security elements, who considered social media campaigning a prejudice to the camps population morale. The bloggers and doctors have undermined Polisario's official narrative on the epidemiological situation in the camps, which seems to have enraged the Polisario leadership, who threatened to take retaliatory actions against the leaked information on social media ¹.

Bloggers, opinion leaders and journalists, as well as members of the medical staff in the camps are exposed to serious threats, and the Polisario, afraid of its human rights record being stained, is deliberately suppressing independent voices inside the camps. Many of them were coerced into making inaccurate statements about the covid-19 development in the camps. Worth mentioning that the Polisario soldiers have tried to arrest the Sahrawi Doctor E. H. E., who diffused on social media, critical statements regarding the exacerbating situation in the camps, for which the Polisario sought to punish him, before he received a wide support from Saharwi refugees in the camps, and from Spanish activists who issued a support communiqué addressed to the Polisario leadership.²

M. Z., A Sahrawi opinion leader confirmed: "I was interrogated for several hours by the security elements, and forced to write positively about the health conditions in the camp, and delude public opinion by saying that hospitals are in good condition, aiming to instrumentalize my wide outreach on Facebook to embellish the image of the Polisario, and disseminate unveracious information on my Facebook page".

Embezzled Aids and Deteriorating living standards

The OLAF-endorsed report about the embezzlement of humanitarian aids by the Polisario and the Algerian army provides a strong reference to our post-covid assessment, that the catastrophic outcomes of the malfunctioning health system in the camps, including the inexplicable surge in deaths, along with the premeditated silence over the deteriorating situation, call into question the reliability and accuracy of Polisario's reports, and undermine Algeria's alleged support for Sahrawis, while unlawfully leaving the fate of these Sahrawis in the hands of an armed group who violates their basic rights and freedoms on the Algerian territory.

Under direct oversight from the Algerian authorities, favoritism in access to services, nurtured by the tribal affiliations that the Polisario deliberately maintains as a tool of containing social uprisings in the camps, has created interest-oriented networks of Sahrawis sanctioned by the Polisario to manage humanitarian aids, and entrench allegiance-based practices, by guaranteeing access to privileges to only those who pledge loyalty to the Polisario political approach, and ignoring or sometimes suppressing those who criticize or show disapproval of the living conditions in the camps.

The defective response to covid-19 outbreak was only a repercussion of the profound inadequacies and ruthless looting of the aids in Tindouf camps, which have engendered

tremendous uncertainty, fear, and anger, coupled with powerlessness from Sahrawis in the camps to bring change to the management style imposed on them by the Polisario and the Algerian authorities.

Sahrawis are increasingly skeptical of Polisario's handling of the aids from international donors, especially that the camps have received in only four months in 2020, more than 13.427.000 euros, in order to develop an effective response to the covid-19 outbreak. Notwithstanding the important donations unceasingly destined to the camps, the medical staff continue to denounce the lack of necessary health equipment to withstand the challenges rising from the various diseases threatening the lives of Sahrawis in the camps.

The health system has been in a poor state for years, and the UNHCR, by retreating from playing its mandated roles, has engendered unpreparedness to respond in a coordinated manner to public health emergencies. With all that in mind, the response to the pandemic outbreak proved ineffective due to the host country's reluctance to put an end to the lawlessness reigning in the camps.

Conclusion

If the UNHCR could raise important funds to combat the covid-19 health crisis, and to address other medical needs in Tindouf camps, the Algerian authorities thwart all endeavors to create an independent local capacity to meet the existing health needs of the camps population, and no improvement has been achieved both in health services nor in access to water and quality food.

It is Algeria's responsibility to set up effective control and monitoring mechanisms to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches the intended beneficiaries, and that measures are taken to avoid actions that might disrupt or delay the provision of humanitarian aids and the setting up of the necessary infrastructures to deliver needed social services.

AIPECT(African Institute for Peacebuilding and Conflict Transformation. (AFORES) AFRICAN FORUM FOR RESEARCH AND STUDIES IN HUMAN RIGHTS. LSDDH (LA LIGUE DU SAHRA POUR LA DEMOCRATIE ET LES DROITS DE L"HOMME. NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.

1. <https://snnsahara.com/?p=13772>
2. <http://futurosahara.net/?p=55765>