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## **UN 'miss opportunity' to allow Western Sahara human rights monitoring**

The UN Security Council's failure to add human rights monitoring to the mandate of its Western Sahara peacekeeping force – despite ongoing reports of abuses in the region – is a “missed opportunity”, Amnesty International said today.

The mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) – one of the few UN peacekeeping missions in the world without a human rights mandate – was renewed today.

A US move to include a human rights component in the draft resolution under consideration by the Security Council was quashed after protests from the Moroccan government.

“The Security Council has failed the people of Western Sahara and the Tindouf refugee camps by missing a unique opportunity to subject persistent human rights concerns there to sorely needed international scrutiny,” said Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Director, Philip Luther.

In his latest report to the Security Council, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had reiterated the need for “independent, impartial, comprehensive and sustained monitoring of the human rights situation in both Western Sahara and the camps”.

The Moroccan authorities forcefully rejected the US proposal to expand MINURSO's mandate, claiming it threatened Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara.

Washington subsequently backtracked, and Security Council members agreed on a new resolution that failed to grant MINURSO the authority to monitor human rights abuses.

Amnesty International has long-standing concerns about human rights violations in Western Sahara and the Tindouf camps in Algeria.

Reports of excessive use of force against demonstrators, alleged torture in detention and restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly and association continue to emerge in Western Sahara.

The human rights situation in the Tindouf camps, which are controlled by the Polisario Front, remains opaque. There are no independent human rights observers currently operating there, leaving residents vulnerable to abuses.

“The Moroccan authorities argue that they are making efforts to improve the human rights in Western Sahara and complain that human rights organizations rarely visit the Tindouf camps,” said Philip Luther.

“For these reasons, they should have welcomed the prospect of a UN human rights monitoring mechanism, not lobbied against it.”

Despite today's failure, the adopted resolution acknowledges the need for improving human rights in Western Sahara and the Tindouf camps.

It encourages "the parties to work with the international community to develop and implement independent and credible measures to ensure full respect for human rights".

"Morocco and the Polisario Front are accountable to the Security Council and the international community and they should heed the call – albeit a muffled one – to enhance the promotion and protection of human rights," said Philip Luther.

"Progress on human rights should be assessed according to concrete steps such as the opening of thorough, impartial and independent investigations into allegations of torture in detention."

For several decades Morocco and the Polisario Front have been involved in a struggle for sovereignty over Western Sahara, annexed by Morocco in 1975.

The UN Security Council established a peacekeeping force in 1991 to monitor a ceasefire between the two sides and implement a referendum to determine the territory's final status.