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

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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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* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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The human rights situation of the Saharawi youth

In 1991, the UN sent a peacekeeping mission - MINURSO - to the non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara with the mandate to organize and implement a referendum of self-determination on the destiny of the territory. This intervention of the UN came after 16 years of armed struggle between Morocco and the Saharawi liberation movement, the POLISARIO Front.

Now, 23 years later, this promise remains unfulfilled, political attempts to find a solution has been without success, and the status of the non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara remains unresolved. As a result, the Saharawi youth are today divided into three groups: some are in refugee camps in southwest Algeria; some are living in the non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara, and some in the diaspora. The Saharawi youth form a large and important part of the Saharawi society, making the challenges they face an essential and critical consideration when talking about the Western Sahara conflict.

The majority of the Saharawi youth was born and has grown up in exile – away from their homeland. This new generation of exiled Saharawis has lived their whole life with the promise of one day returning home through a referendum of self-determination. Decades later, this still-unfulfilled promise is leaving them with a sense of disappointment and defeat.

Given their location in the midst of the Sahara desert, living conditions in the camps are extremely difficult. On top of this, however, young Saharawi refugees face challenges that are specific to their group. During the armed struggle, most Saharawi men, and young men in particular, were at the frontline, leaving women to build and run the refugee camps. Since the ceasefire, all men have returned to the camps, where they began to pursue higher education and professional skills. Furthermore, there has since been a change from a voluntary economy to a money-based economy. This, in turn, has led to a shift in the socioeconomic demands and needs of the Saharawi youth living in the camps.

The socioeconomic situation of the Saharawi youth in the camps is grim. There is a lack in many of the basic necessities and infrastructures, and the job opportunities are very limited considering the resources available. Over the years, the Saharawi government-in-exile has put great emphasis on educating the younger generation. This has created many graduates specialized in all possible professions who are now, however, unable to find employment in the camps. Many young people continue to have a spirit of voluntarism, but because of their needs for money, they are pushed to seek paid jobs. These circumstances have generated an emigration of skilled labour, leading to the brain drain of, inter alia, medical doctors, engineers and professors, who are of critical importance to the well-being of the refugee community. Moreover, the lack of recreational facilities and activities leaves the youth with a sense of empty purpose.

Due to the lack of higher education facilities in the camps, the majority of young Saharawis seek education abroad. There, they face many challenges and obstacles, including poor educational circumstances and boarding conditions. Doubly exiled, the Saharawi students live away from home from a very young age, a time when they most need the emotional and psychological support of their family network. After spending many years receiving professional and skilled training, the Saharawi youth return to the camps where they find little prospects for the future. A more recent issue is that many Saharawi students have had to interrupt their education, given the current circumstances in Syria and Libya, highlighting their dependence on, and thus their vulnerability to, the situations in other countries.

Western Sahara is divided by the longest military wall in the world. Referred to as the "Wall of Shame", this structure divides the Saharawi nation, its people and its families. Many young Saharawis have never seen or met their own family members, including siblings. This division and scattering of the Saharawi population endangers the Saharawi identity. The wall, furthermore, represents an emotional and psychological obstacle for the Saharawi youth, preventing them from movement or access to their natural resources in the non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara. While the Saharawi refugees are exposed to severe economic hardship and an extreme dependence on humanitarian aid (for example ECHO's contribution which was only recently reduced by half), the rich natural resources in the non-self-governing territory are exploited without the Saharawi population profiting.

Yet, despite the difficulties young Saharawi refugees are facing, a return to Western Sahara is not a conceivable alternative to exile.

In the non-self-governing territory, Saharawi youths experience discrimination, a similar lack of opportunities, as well as repeatedly violations of their most basic human rights.

After an illusory peace following the 1991 ceasefire, the young Saharawis began to initiate peaceful and non-violent demonstrations against the status quo. This movement began with the first Intifada in 1999, followed by the Intifada of Istiqlal in 2005 and more recently, Gdeim Izik in 2010. These non-violent and civilized protests reflected the Saharawi youth's rejection of the status quo. Despite their peaceful nature, several cases of human rights violations through Moroccan authorities were reported, especially against activists.

From 1975 to nowadays, a large number of youths in the non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara have experienced forced disappearance, arrest, and imprisonment without fair trial where they face torture and are forced to live in dire prison conditions. Furthermore, young Saharawis have faced most brutal assassinations and murders. The most notable cases are those of Husain Lektaiif and Baba Khaiya who were murdered on the campus of the University of Agadir in 2008. Habad Hamad faced a similar fate in 2011 at the Swisi campus of the University of Rabat.

Morocco has neglected to build higher educational facilities such as universities and training institutes in Western Sahara, Saharawi students are therefore obliged to study at universities in mainland Morocco, where they often suffer discrimination. Furthermore, Saharawi citizens in Western Sahara experience high levels of unemployment and socioeconomic marginalization. Young Saharawis face discrimination when seeking to enter the labour market, and when they do find employment, this is usually in the form of low-paid jobs, where they are deprived of their most basic labour rights. Moreover, the Moroccan settlers in the territory are given priority in relation to job opportunities and in the assignment of managerial positions.

Whether in the refugee camps in southwest Algeria, in the non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara or in the diaspora, the Saharawi youth is growing up in an extremely difficult context that offers them little perspective, both in their daily lives and for their future. Nevertheless, the Saharawi youth has demonstrated great eagerness to develop and achieve an equitable, just, and democratic society that offers its people security and dignity.

The stalemated attempt to resolve the Western Sahara conflict via political means in the framework of the UN-led peace process is however increasingly leading to a sense of indifference amongst the youth, a loss of their confidence in the peace-process, and a growing frustration with the status quo. The referendum, promised back in 1991, is therefore urgently needed; credible steps towards fulfilling this promise need to be taken. The younger Saharawi generations increasingly see a return to armed struggle as their last alternative to ending the Western Sahara conflict after 23 years of upholding non-violent and peaceful means to end their struggle.

The Saharawi youth therefore needs signs that the international community will take its responsibility seriously. The Human Rights Council, the United Nations and the international community need to take a firmer stand in resolving this conflict. With the organisation, preparation and execution of the promised referendum on self-determination, in line with the Vienna Declaration and the UN Charter, as the ultimate goal, the following aspects should be given utmost priority:

- The establishment of a permanent human rights monitoring mechanism in the non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara by extending the mandate of MINURSO to include the respective capacity.
- Renewed visits by mandate holders within the Special Procedures of the Human Rights Council to the territory, without further delay, to investigate the human rights situation in situ.
- The strict enforcement of international law and human rights standards concerning the exploitation of natural resources in non-self-governing territories. States and international organisations should refrain from entering agreements and engaging in business activities involving resources extracted from the territory.