
MOROCCO AND WESTERN SAHARA

Kingdom of Morocco

Population: 31.5 million (11.7 million under 18)

Government armed forces: 200,800

Compulsory recruitment age: conscription abolished

Voluntary recruitment age: 18

Voting age: 18

Optional Protocol: ratified 22 May 2002

Other treaties ratified (see glossary):

CRC, ILO 138, ILO 182

There were no reports of under-18s serving in the armed forces.

Context

The ongoing dispute between Morocco and the Polisario Front (the pro-independence Sahrawi movement) over control of Western Sahara remained deadlocked more than 30 years after the conflict had begun. The Polisario Front called for an independent state of Western Sahara and ran a self-proclaimed government-in-exile in refugee camps in south-western Algeria. Demonstrations by Sahrawis against Moroccan rule continued into 2006 and hundreds of people were reportedly arrested.¹ In April 2007 the Polisario Front rejected a Moroccan proposal for enhanced autonomy for the region, since it failed to include a referendum on independence.² In April 2007 the UN Security Council renewed the mandate of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) until 31 October 2007.³ The same month a leaked UN mission report voiced serious concerns over the human rights situation in Western Sahara.⁴

Between 2006 and the end of 2007 some 700 suspected members of armed Islamist groups were arrested by Moroccan security forces.⁵ Over 500 members of the unauthorized Islamist group Al-Adl wal-Ihsan (Justice and Charity) were charged with offences such as belonging to an unauthorized association after the group had launched a recruitment campaign.⁶ In March 2007, 18 people were arrested in connection with a suicide bomb attack in the Sidi Moumen district.⁷ In April 2007 suicide bomb attacks were made close to the US consulate in Casablanca. The renewed attacks in Morocco coincided with bomb attacks in Algeria.⁸

Government

National recruitment legislation and practice

The 1996 constitution stated that “All citizens shall contribute to the defence of the country” (Article 16). The minimum age for voluntary recruitment in the armed forces had been set at 18 by the Royal Decree of 9 June 1996.⁹

Morocco reportedly moved to abolish compulsory military service in 2006 as a result of fears that the army was being infiltrated by members of armed Islamist opposition groups. Morocco’s junior defence minister was quoted by news agencies as saying that “This text of law came to abolish the obligatory military service with immediate effect, according to the instructions of his Majesty King Mohammed, the commander-in-chief and the chief of staff of the royal armed forces.”¹⁰

There was no evidence of under-age recruitment in the Moroccan armed forces.

Military training and military schools

There were two military schools, in Kenitra and Meknes. According to the government, students who attended military schools did so voluntarily, and those under 18 followed the same national curriculum as those in ordinary state schools.¹¹

Armed groups

Polisario maintained that recruitment to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA, their armed wing) was voluntary and that the minimum age, including for military training, was 18. The Polisario’s UK representative stated that “No Sahrawi in the Sahrawi refugee camps in south-west Algeria who is under the age of 18 years, receives any military training, or participates actively in situations of armed conflict.”¹² It was not possible to verify independently the recruitment and use of under-18s in the PLA.

Developments

In October 2007 Morocco endorsed the Paris Commitments to protect children from unlawful recruitment or use by armed forces or armed groups and the Paris Principles and guidelines on children associated with armed forces or armed groups. The two documents, which were previously endorsed by 59 states at a February 2007 ministerial meeting in Paris, reaffirmed international standards and operational principles for the protection of and assistance to child soldiers, following a wide-ranging global consultation jointly sponsored by the French government and UNICEF.

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- 1 “Morocco/Western Sahara”, *Amnesty International Report 2007*.
 - 2 “Morocco/Western Sahara”, *Human Rights Watch World Report 2008*.
 - 3 UN Security Council Resolution 1754 (2007), UN Doc. S/RES/1754 (2007), 30 April 2007.
 - 4 “Leak Shows UN Concern for Western Sahara”, *Financial Times*, 17 April 2007, www.ft.com.
 - 5 “Morocco/Western Sahara”, above notes 1, 2.
 - 6 “Morocco/Western Sahara”, above note 1.
 - 7 “Morocco arrests 18 people after explosion: minister”, Reuters, 15 March 2007.
 - 8 “New suicide attacks hit Morocco”, BBC News, 14 April 2007.
 - 9 Report of Morocco to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, UN Doc. CRC/C/28/Add.1, 19 August 1995.
 - 10 “Morocco to do away with compulsory army service”, Reuters, 2 December 2006; Olivier Guitta, “The Islamisation of Morocco”, *Weekly Standard*, 2 December 2006, www.weeklystandard.com.
 - 11 Report, above note 9.
 - 12 Communication from Acting Representative of the Polisario Front to the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland, 17 April 2007.