

# The Truth about the Polisario: Embezzlement of Humanitarian Aid

- In January 2015, *Agence France Presse/Le Monde* obtained a report published by the European Union's Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) that revealed "well-organized, years-long" embezzlement by the Polisario Front of humanitarian aid designated for Sahrawi refugees. This latest information corroborates earlier reports by both the [World Food Program](#) and the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) that the Polisario leadership routinely sells food aid intended for the refugees in the camps on the black market for their own personal enrichment.
- Concerned about reported large-scale diversions of aid in the camps as well as blatantly inflated population numbers, OLAF undertook a four-year investigation from 2003-2007 in the camps "to establish a reliable number of refugees," and "to establish proof of the diversions." OLAF obtained witness testimony from people directly and indirectly involved with aid diversion; NGOs active on site; civilian and military prisoners forced to participate in the diversion; the European Union Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection (ECHO) department official responsible for the region; and UN officials, among others.
- The resulting report concludes that the Polisario refusal to give access and allow oversight by humanitarian organizations, as well as its maintaining secret warehouses for the aid, facilitates the fraud. As noted in the Executive Summary, "Moreover, the fact that the Saharaoui authorities have not given free access to the members of the humanitarian organizations present on-site, and also have not allowed for checks to be performed on logistical and distribution chains, as well as the reported existence of secret storehouses, constitutes an element which corroborates the conclusion to be drawn as to fraudulent intent."
- Diversion of the aid occurs at several levels of the distribution process by both Algerian and Polisario authorities, starting in the Algerian port of Oran, where some of the merchandise designated for the camps is instead removed and distributed or sold locally. Merchandise is also stolen en route from Oran to Tindouf. When what remains of the aid arrives at the camps, still more of it is placed in secret locations—to which the NGOs do not have access—that serve as depots for the trafficking of humanitarian aid.
- From those depots, the aid is sold on the black market – with branded items appearing in markets both near and far from the camps in Algeria (Tindouf and Bechar), and Mauritania (Nouakchott, Chingetti, and Nema). Eleven ECHO Missions in the region have confirmed the presence of several tons of food aid products intended for the Sahrawi camps in twelve different markets. OLAF also reported that Canadian wheat intended for the camps is replaced by lower quality grain, while the high quality wheat is sold for profit; and that products for raising poultry are also sold rather than being provided to the refugees. The same swaps are also being done with building materials provided in aid shipments.
- Other aid abuses include the use of unpaid prison laborers to handle the diverted food aid and construct the majority of buildings and other infrastructure projects financed by international aid; fraudulent billing of "labor costs" for projects that were built using this unpaid labor; the request for building materials in preliminary plans that do not end up being used for the intended aid-financed building projects; taxes imposed on refugees' bartering activities; sale of humanitarian aid to the refugees at grocery stores and bakeries in the camps rather than free distribution intended by the

donor agencies; and the use of humanitarian aid by the Polisario army, in contravention of the intended civilian use of the aid.

- To tackle this issue – and address the very significant failings of the monitoring process – the report recommends:
  - Conditioning aid to the camps on the guarantee that ECHO can circulate freely in the camps, conduct unexpected inspections of the stocks, monitor the distribution of merchandise, and meet freely with aid beneficiaries
  - Removing the accused embezzlers from participation in any capacity in the aid distribution program
- The extent of this fraud is compounded through the inflated population numbers provided by Algeria and the Polisario Front, who refuse to allow a census of the camp populations – despite formal requests from UNCHR. While ECHO reduced the number of refugees to 90,000 based on the results, this study is not a substitute for a census, the need for which is increasingly urgent in order to provide appropriate levels of aid to the refugees.

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