

NOVEMBER 2017

A frozen conflict and a humanitarian program that works: UNHCR's Confidence Building Measures in Western Sahara

A FEINSTEIN INTERNATIONAL CENTER PUBLICATION



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Cover photo: UNHCR

Citation: Jacobsen, Karen. *A frozen conflict and a humanitarian program that works: UNHCR's Confidence Building Measures in Western Sahara*. Boston: Feinstein International Center, Tufts University. (2017).

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Contents

- 1. Introduction** **5**
- 2. Confidence Building Measures used for humanitarian purposes** **6**
- 3. Western Sahara – A political impasse** **7**
 - The camps 7
 - How many in the camps? 8
- 4. The CBM program** **9**
 - Family visits 10
 - Telephone communication centers 11
 - Cultural seminars 12
 - Blocking the CBM bridge—and how to open it 12
 - Can the program resume? 12
- 5. Conclusion** **14**
- References** **15**



Figure 1. A map of MINURSO.

1. Introduction

In the world's more obdurate protracted refugee situations, there are no prospects for "durable solutions" or any form of mobility for refugees because of the absence of a political solution and stalled peace process. The political actors preventing mobility are often militant political organizations and the governments opposed to them. The most well-known of these situations is that of the Palestinian refugee in camps in Lebanon and Syria, and in the West Bank and Gaza. There are not too many such refugee situations today; in most current protracted situations¹ refugees have some mobility. However, one of the most longstanding and 'frozen' protracted situations is that of refugees from Western Sahara.

Thousands of Sahrawi refugees fled the armed conflict in Western Sahara in the late 1970s and '80s, and crossed into Algeria where they have been stuck in the desert camps near Tindouf ever since. Theirs is one of the longest protracted refugee situations in the world today (almost 40 years), and the lack of a political solution and stalled peace process mean it is likely to continue. The camps are managed by the Polisario Front, the Sahrawi national liberation movement seeking independence from Morocco for Western Sahara. Humanitarian agencies provide food and assistance, but the refugees, especially the youth, have few livelihood prospects. There is suspected recruitment from jihadist organizations in the region, and smuggling of migrants. One of the saddest humanitarian consequences of this longstanding situation is the separation of Sahrawi families. The border between Western Sahara and Algeria is closed and Morocco has created a heavily mined and fortified sand wall known as the "berm" or the "Sand Curtain" inside Western Sahara. These barriers have separated the refugees from their families for more than forty years.

In situations like the Tindouf camps, where no solutions are in sight, it is worth exploring other ways to help the refugees. One such humanitarian program has managed to navigate the complex politics of Western Sahara has enabled more than 20,000 refugees to visit and communicate with their families across the Sand Curtain. This program is UNHCR's Confidence Building Measures (CBM), based in Laayoune, Western Sahara. It is officially part of the UN Integrated Mission known as MINURSO that was set up in 1998 to support the referendum in Western Sahara. The referendum never happened, but the family visits and other activities of the CBM program began in 2004 and continued until 2014 when politics intervened, and the visits had to stop. Since then, no family visits have been allowed, and the human bridge is blocked. Now there is hope that a window of opportunity has opened and the CBM program can be resumed.

¹ A "protracted refugee situation" is generally considered to be one where refugees are displacement for five years or more. A recent study found half of all refugees had been in exile for over ten years at the end of 2014. Crawford, N., J. Cosgrave, S. Haysom, and N. Walicki. *Protracted Displacement: Uncertain Paths to Self-Reliance in Exile*. London: Overseas Development Institute, 2015. www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9851.pdf.

2. Confidence Building Measures used for humanitarian purposes

Confidence building measures (CBMs) have long been employed, with little success, as part of conflict reduction and resolution programs, especially in the Middle East.² CBMs have also been used by humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR to address broader displacement problems, such as the separation of families, by enabling visits between displaced people and their families and communities in places of origin and the camps. In some cases, humanitarian agencies have used such confidence-building measures to contribute to sustainable return and the prevention of further displacement. For example, during the conflict in Sri Lanka, UNHCR worked with the Sri Lankan government (the Ministry of Disaster Management and Human Rights)³ to devise a CBM program that enabled “Go and See” visits.

These visits enabled IDP community leaders to return safely to their home communities for short periods to verify the security situation and gather information for the IDPs as they planned for the future and made their own decisions about return. These kinds of visit-based confidence-building measures require the negotiated acceptance of all political parties to the conflict, including government and non-state actors. This kind of political negotiation is done by UNHCR.



Figure 2 Sahrawi refugees at airport on a CBM visit

² For more on confidence building measures, see Ben-Dor, G. and D. B. Dewitt . *Confidence Building Measures in the Middle East*. Boulder: Westview. (1994).; Bzostek, R. and A. Rogers. "Oslo +20: Reassessing the role of confidence building measures." *The Social Science Journal*. 51(2): 250-259 (2014).

³ UNHCR. "Confidence Building & Stabilisation Measures for Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the North & East of Sri Lanka." (2006). <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/protection/operations/482af5132/confidence-building-stabilisation-measures-internally-displaced-persons.html>.

3. Western Sahara – A political impasse

Western Sahara was a colony of Spain (as “Spanish Sahara”) until 1976 when Spain quit its colonies and both Morocco and Mauritania claimed the territory. Mauritania renounced its claims in 1979, but Morocco “reintegrated” the Territory. A political liberation movement composed of Sahrawi nationals, the Frente POLISARIO (henceforth Polisario),⁴ rejected this claim and demanded independence for Western Sahara. Armed conflict followed, along with the mass displacement of Sahrawis to Algeria and Mauritania. The United Nations and the Organization of African Unity (OAU) worked to seek a settlement, and eventually negotiated a ceasefire in 1991. The UN Security Council approved a UN Settlement Plan stipulating a referendum in which the people of Western Sahara would choose between independence and integration with Morocco.⁵ The ensuing political process became enmeshed in obstacles and negotiations and eventually stalled in 2003 when Morocco and the Polisario could not agree over who would be eligible to vote in the referendum. In the end, no referendum was ever conducted.

Today, the two parties contributing to the political stalemate are the Polisario and the Moroccan government. The Polisario seeks a referendum for the Sahrawis in which they vote for either full independence from Morocco or autonomous self-government. Morocco, which offered (self-governing) autonomy to the Territory of Western Sahara (as it is referred to in the UN) in 2007, is willing to negotiate the terms of autonomy, but refuses to allow the option of independence on the referendum ballot. Neither party will budge and the UN has been unable to resolve the situation. All parties agree that the refugee situation can only be ended with a political solution. But that solution is nowhere in sight.

The camps

During the armed conflict between Morocco and the Polisario in the 1980s, thousands of Sahrawis fled across the border into western Algeria. The Algerian government, sympathetic to the Polisario cause, had earlier given the Polisario a base at Tindouf, and now they gave land for the camps to be built, and allowed the Polisario to manage the camps, and control security arrangements. In effect, the Polisario became a state within a state, and today it conducts formal relations with 45 states around the world that recognize its legitimacy as the government of Western Sahara.

There are four camps, each named after a city in Western Sahara (Laayoune, Awserd, Smara and Dakhla), and Polisario has its headquarters in Rabouni, the administrative center of the camps. The humanitarian presence consists of the World Food Programme (WFP) providing food aid, a “care and maintenance” program conducted by UNHCR Algeria,⁶ and other international aid agencies (including proposed livelihood program support by the Danish Refugee Council). Bilateral donations (often from Spain) are implemented through NGOs and the Red Crescent. Since 2012 and the global financial crisis, there has been a substantial reduction in bilateral assistance and consequently in the coverage of basic humanitarian needs of the refugee population.

⁴ POLISARIO, from the Spanish acronym Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro (“Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro”) is a Sahrawi rebel national liberation movement aiming to end Moroccan presence in the Western Sahara. The UN considers the Polisario front to be the legitimate representative of the Sahrawi people, and that the Sahrawis have a right to self-determination. The Polisario Front is outlawed in the parts of Western Sahara under Moroccan control. Taken from [Wikipedia](#).

⁵ The 1991 Settlement Plan created a UN integrated mission involving civilian, military and police personnel known as the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). Subsequent UNSC Resolutions withdrew the civilian component of MINURSO (involved in the voters’ identification for the referendum) and only the military component remained to monitor the ceasefire between Morocco and Polisario (“the Parties”). The MINURSO presence in Western Sahara remains today. See <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/minurso/background.shtml>

⁶ UNHCR. “Bridge over troubled desert: A review of the UNHCR confidence building measures programme in Western Sahara and Tindouf.” PDES/2013/17 p.4. (November 2013).

The refugees in the camps endure extreme desert temperatures (reaching 55C in summer and 5C at night in winter) and little by way of livelihoods or life prospects. Young men are susceptible to recruitment from jihadist organizations in the region, and there is suspected smuggling of migrants. With few prospects for ending the frozen conflict, the protracted refugee situation is likely to endure indefinitely. As noted by UNHCR, the operational environment in the camps is “very challenging” because of the complex geopolitical context.⁷ There is high, visible presence of security personnel in the town of Tindouf (which also hosts an Algerian military base), and after a kidnapping incident in Rabouni in October 2011 (of three NGO workers who were released in July 2012), security measures were introduced including armed escorts by the Algerian police and Polisario militia.

How many in the camps?

The number of refugees is unknown because there has been no formal registration or census in the camps since 1999, despite repeated requests by UNHCR. In 1999, UNHCR conducted a pre-registration of refugees to prepare for repatriation as part of the UN Settlement Plan (which was soon to stall). The pre-registration exercise indicated that there were 129,863 refugees. Since then, the actual number of refugees has never been agreed on, but clearly the camp population has changed, both because of natural population growth and because it is likely (but there are no data) that young people leave the camps. The Algerian authorities and Polisario estimate there are 165,000 refugees, but UNHCR and WFP work with a planning figure of 90,000 with WFP distributing food rations to an additional 35,000.⁸

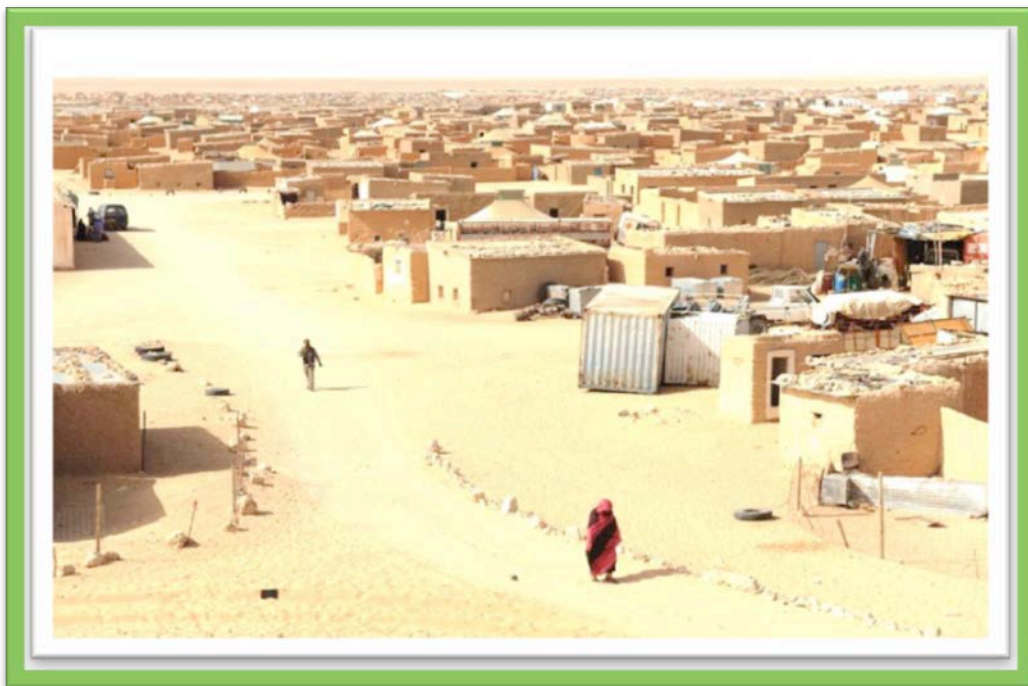


Figure 3 Tindouf camp

⁷ UNHCR. “Bridge over troubled desert: A review of the UNHCR confidence building measures programme in Western Sahara and Tindouf.” PDES/2013/17. p.4. (November 2013).

⁸ Since 1999, the only registration of refugees in the camps has been undertaken as part of the CBM program, which conducted three registration exercises in 2004, 2008, and 2012. However, an evaluation exercise found that the data collected were of poor quality. A profiling exercise conducted by [JIPS](#) or another reputable and politically savvy data gathering organization would go a long way to correcting this lack of information.

4. The CBM program

The UNHCR Confidence Building Measures (CBM) program in Western Sahara began in 1998. As part of the UN Settlement Plan, UNHCR initiated a humanitarian program aimed at supporting the planned voluntary repatriation of refugees from the Tindouf camps to participate in the referendum.⁹ UNHCR set up an office in the town of Laayoune, Western Sahara, to start preparations. In 1999, the political process around the referendum in Western Sahara stalled because the Parties could not agree on voter identification. The referendum was called off, which meant no repatriation would take place. Keen to keep hope alive, UNHCR proposed a set of “Confidence Building Measures” with a strictly humanitarian aim: to create a “humanitarian bridge” between the long-separated refugees in the camps and their family members in the Western Sahara Territory. The bridge would take the form of cross-border family visits and communication facilities, and the activities could also inform (“sensitize”) the Sahrawis about the Western Sahara situation.

UNHCR wanted five CBM activities: exchange of family visitors, telephone communications, cultural seminars on Western Sahara, a mail service, and an information campaign. The Parties (Morocco and Polisario) agreed to the CBM Plan of Action and it was endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 1282 in 1999. However, implementation of the Plan was (and is) no easy operational task, because of political disagreement amongst the parties over practical modalities. It therefore took UNHCR three years, from 2000-2003, to begin activities. Two of the planned activities did not happen: exchange of personal mail never occurred because the Parties could not agree on the use of stamps and the distribution of mail to the addressees on both sides of the berm; and the information campaign did not take place as it had been planned in the context of the referendum which never occurred. However, the three activities that took place between 2004 and 2014 dramatically succeeded in their goal of uniting (for a short time) families and enabling communication.



Figure 4 Sahrawi children at airport on a CBM visit

⁹ The UNHCR Algeria program is separate from UNHCR’s CBM program which is based in Laayoune, Western Sahara.

Family visits

Family visits were the flagship of the CBM program with the most direct and tangible humanitarian impact. The family visits lasted five days and re-united Sahrawi families in the Tindouf camps and in the Territory. Those eligible for a family visit were refugees the Tindouf camps or Sahrawis living in one of the four cities in the Territory (Boujdour, Dakhla, Laayoune, and Smara) who had a direct family link (first degree relatives such as a parent, child, sibling, spouse) in the camps. In total UNHCR registered 48,251 individuals (9,420 families). Of these, two thirds (31,365 individuals in 5,658 families) in the camps and one third (16,886 individuals in 3,762 families) in the Territory met the selection criteria. Families came forward to be registered and UNHCR developed travel lists of about 150 people per flight from this registration list. The travel lists were checked and agreed upon by the Parties, a process that took much negotiation. UNHCR chartered flights and provided ground transport to and from the airport. The refugees from the camps were give a small cash grant to support their non-camp relatives' expenses associated with the visit.¹⁰

As others have noted: "It is hard to overstate what these five-day visits mean to those lucky enough to benefit."¹¹ Especially for the older family members, many had not seen their families for more than thirty years, and the children had never met their grandparents or seen their extended families. The visits were extremely popular as evidenced by the huge demand for them.



Figure 5 Sahrawi woman

Interruptions of the program occurred several times, when it was blocked by the Parties for various reasons. Beneficiaries selected by UNHCR could be denied by either Party on security grounds or the entire program was sometimes stopped ostensibly because of the presence of "political material" (such as flags), or the staging of demonstrations in the Territory.

... the celebrations each time family members arrive to re-unite with their families ... are something to behold. Hundreds surround the cars pull up outside their host's residence, jostling with one another to be the first one to make physical contact ...
(Source: E. Benson 2009)

Disagreement between the parties on the selection of beneficiaries from Dakhla city brought the family visits to a temporary halt between March 2010 and January 2011, and permanently halted the telephone service. The revised 2012 Plan of Action streamlined procedures by introducing pre-clearance of travel lists by the Parties, and a bigger airplane (which increased numbers and reduced costs). But problems persisted over the issue of "political material" and the possibility of pro-independence demonstrations. UNHCR field staff were in constant negotiation with Moroccan and Polisario coordinators, and some incidents were even referred to UNHCR Geneva Headquarters for mediation between the Parties. A new Plan of Action was agreed in 2012, and family visits gained momentum with double the number of visitors.¹²

Disagreement between the Parties stopped the program in 2014, and the family visits have yet to resume. Between 2004 and 2014, more than 20,000 individuals benefited (Figure 6). The UN had provided 253 flights between the camps and the Territory, ferrying 2,174 families (9,520 individuals) from the Territory, and 2,212

¹⁰ In 2013 the grant was \$50 per individual up to a maximum of \$250 per family but only for the refugees and not for the Territory residents. Should the family visits resume, this support should be re-considered as it is not nearly sufficient for the high costs associated with a family visit.

¹¹ Benson, E. "Confidence-building measures in Western Sahara." *Forced Migration Review*. 33, 56-58 (2009).

¹² UNHCR. "Bridge over troubled desert: A review of the UNHCR confidence building measures programme in Western Sahara and Tindouf." PDES/2013/17. p.4. (November 2013).

families (11,179 individuals) from the four camps. It was not only the family members who took the flights that benefited—the visits had significant multiplier effects. Between 2004-14, almost four and a half thousand families traveled on the planes, but during the five-day stay each family was visited by dozens, even hundreds of their family and community members. (Indeed, the cost to the host family of supporting such a visit was high. The obligatory slaughter of a camel for the first day’s feast cost the host approximately two thousand dollars.) A simple calculation means that as many as 400,000 people benefited from seeing and spending time with their long-lost families and hearing about others back home or in the camps.

One elderly woman as she was boarding the plane back to the refugee camps explained that in her water bottle she had seawater and pebbles from the Atlantic Ocean. She remembered as a child growing up next to the sea, but having been in the refugee camps for more than thirty years and with no solutions to this situation in sight, she was unsure if she would ever see the sea again.

(Source: E. Benson 2009)

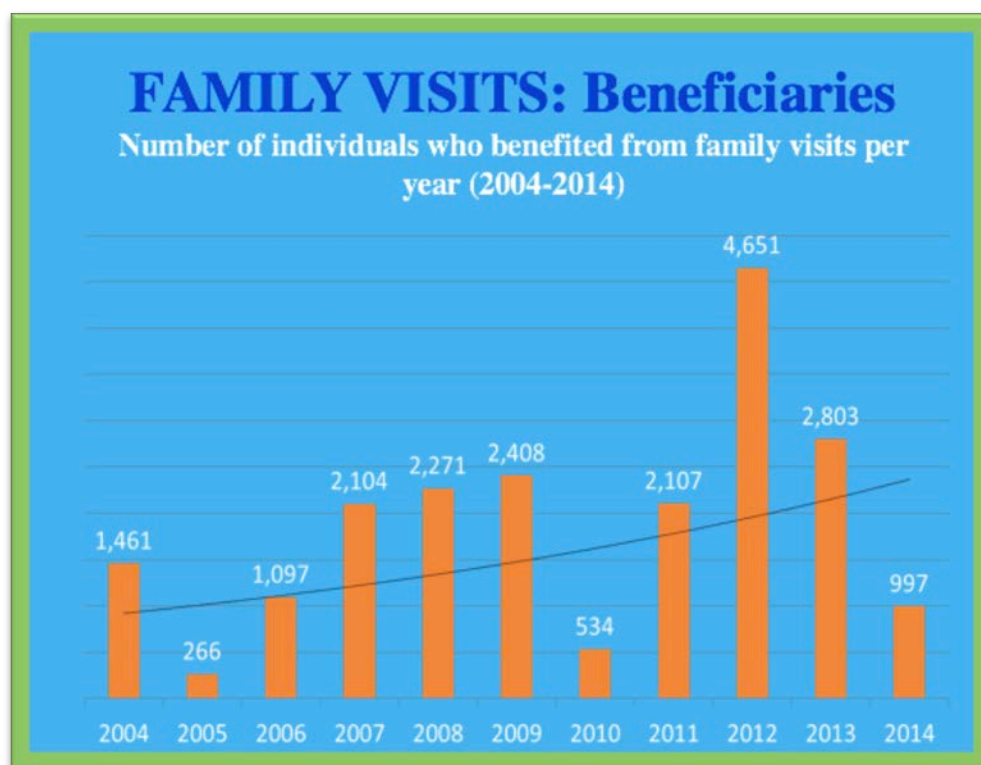


Figure 6 Source: UNHCR CBM Laayoune

Telephone communication centers

In 2004, UNHCR opened telephone centers in four camps and until 2010, they handled almost 140,000 telephone calls.¹³ The centers stopped functioning in September 2010 when one of several halts of CBM activities occurred, and never resumed for political reasons.¹⁴ Given the spread of mobile phones since 2010, telephone centers have become somewhat redundant, however it is worth noting that not all refugees in camps have access to mobile phones.

¹³ These camps were Laayoune, Smara, 27 February (a small satellite camp) and Awserd. Efforts to open a fifth telephone center in the most remote camp (Dakhla) in 2007 were not successful.

¹⁴ The Polisario sought reciprocity, wanting similar telephone centers to be established in the Territory but the Moroccan government did not see why the UN should open telephone centers in the Territory and refused.

Cultural seminars

Cultural seminars organized and hosted by UNHCR CBM, enabled Sahrawi refugees from Tindouf and the Territory to meet in third areas, such as the Azores Islands, to discuss non-political Sahrawi issues such as Hassaniya language and culture.¹⁵ The seminars were facilitated by academics from Mauritania familiar with Sahrawi culture, and offered opportunities for dialogue and information exchange. However, despite the deliberately non-political nature of the seminars, political sensitivities were so high that practical details were agreed only in 2010, and the first seminar was held in September 2011, in Madeira, Portugal. Four subsequent seminars were held in the Azores Islands (Portugal) between July 2012 and March 2014.¹⁶ The seminars particularly benefited those Sahrawis who were not eligible to participate in the family visits because they did not meet the selection criteria (having first degree relatives on the other side).¹⁷

Blocking the CBM bridge—and how to open it

The last of the CBM family visits was in April 2014, and disagreement between the Parties over beneficiary lists for the scheduled flights in June 2014 led to the current impasse. The telephone centers ceased functioning in December 2010, and the last cultural seminar was in March 2014. High demand for these activities continued, however. As of December 2014, 53,897 people were registered for family visits (19,330 in the Territory and 34,567 in the camps).¹⁸ As of June 2014, nine flights had been scheduled for the remainder of 2014 and another 17 flights for 2015. The humanitarian bridge between the camps and the Territory was closed, but people were massed on either side, and the logistical infrastructure firmly in place. Only political reasons prevented the refugees from crossing the bridge.

The greatest challenge for the CBM program has been the political sensitivities between the Parties. All exchanges and interactions with the parties around the CBM activities have had to be transparent and impartial with no room for slippage or error. UNHCR's presence in Laayoune is "non-traditional" (in the UN diplomatic sense)—the office is part of MINURSO and the CBM operation facilitates contacts between separated family members rather than assisting Sahrawi refugees in the Tindouf camps directly (which is done by the UNHCR Algeria program). Even with UNHCR falling over backward to accommodate these political sensitivities, the Parties have found ways to stop the program.¹⁹

Can the program resume?

In October 2017, UNHCR CBM held a workshop and retreat that for the first time brought together all the CBM staff in Tindouf and Laayoune, from drivers and cleaners to the Head of Operations. Many of the staff had worked together since the program began but had never met. The workshop, held in Las Palmas (Canary Islands, Spain), enabled them to meet and get to know each other in a relaxed and beautiful setting. The workshop also gave the workshop organizers²⁰ a chance to hear the deeply knowledgeable perspective of the national staff. Many of the most informative interventions in the workshop came from staff drivers who had worked in the program for many years and knew the Sahrawis well.

¹⁵ "Hassāniya (Arabic: حسانية) is the variety of Arabic originally spoken by the Beni Hassān Bedouin tribes, whose authority extended over Mauritania and the Western Sahara between the 15th and 17th centuries, and almost completely replaced the Berber languages spoken in the region. Taken from [Wikipedia](#).

¹⁶ The first seminar was on "Hassania Culture, Traditional Heritage and Practices" (34 participants). The second in July 2012 on "The Role of Women in Sahrawi Community" (34 participants), the third in February 2013 on "The Concept of Kheima (Tent) in Sahrawi Culture" (33 participants), the fourth in October 2013, on "The Role of the Camel in Sahrawi Society" (44 participants), and the fifth and last in March 2014, on "The consolidation of good practices and lessons learnt from previous seminars" (144 participants). Source: UNHCR

¹⁷ A UNHCR evaluation found that some Sahrawis considered the seminars a useless if well-intentioned palliative because of the difficulty of separating cultural from political issues. Many thought the seminars should be held alternatively in the Western Sahara Territory and in the Tindouf camps, instead of a European country. This change would help participants familiarize themselves with conditions on both sides (and would reduce costs for UNHCR).

¹⁸ UNHCR. Western Sahara CBM Factsheet. (March 2017).

¹⁹ For analysis of the political sensitivities, see White, Natasha. "Conflict Stalemate in Morocco and Western Sahara: Natural Resources, Legitimacy and Political Recognition." *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 42:3, 339-357 (2015).

²⁰ The workshop was the idea of the newly appointed Head of Operations, Filip Pappas. He brought in the author, Karen Jacobsen, as facilitator.

During discussions, the staff agreed that logistics were in place to resume the program and that there was great demand for the family visits on the part of the refugees—many on the waiting list are quite elderly now and longing to see their families before they die. Recognizing the political barriers that prevent resumption, the workshop agreed that progress could be made if a coordination meeting were to be held in Geneva between the Parties. The timing is right for such a meeting now—a window of opportunity has opened. The new Personal Envoy of the UN Secretary-General has announced that he will present a roadmap on the Western Sahara process by end-March 2018.

This is an opportunity for UNHCR to put the CBM back onto the Parties’ agenda. The forum for doing so has traditionally been a Coordination Meeting, and UN endorsement for a coordination meeting exists.²¹ There is also new leadership at all UN levels (a new Secretary General, Personal Envoy, Special Representative of the Secretary General, and CBM Head of Operations). Moreover, both Parties have had changes in leadership: there is a new governor in Laayoune, and new Walis in some of the camps—who need to be introduced at international level in Geneva.

There are other reasons to hold a coordination meeting soon. Refugees are losing confidence in the program, and UNHCR doesn’t want to strengthen the culture of dashed expectations. There is also the need to reassure donors that the Western Sahara political process is active. A coordination meeting provides the opportunity to re-activate (or go beyond) the Plan of Action, and even to encourage re-engagement on wider political discussions. At a minimum, the meeting will reaffirm the importance of CBM for the refugees.



Figure 7 Family meeting in Western Sahara

²¹ UN Security Council. “Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara.” S/2017/307 (April 10 2017).

5. Conclusion

The frozen conflict in the Western Sahara means it is unlikely that the Tindouf camps will disappear soon. In the meantime, a lot can be done to ease the hardship of the Sahrawi people in and outside of the camps. The CBM program has created a bridge that connects families, and thousands of Sahrawis are registered to make family visits. Many are now in their eighties or older and CBM-enabled visits are their last chance to see their families. The Parties blocking the bridge should consider the humanitarian implications of their actions and allow the program to resume. There are no political reasons to prevent this from happening.

The CBM program was carefully designed to operate within the parameters of the political sensitivities and to ensure the cooperation of the Parties. UNHCR constantly worked to ensure that all Parties were satisfied with the various activities. This meant many stops and starts and long negotiation periods, but the program persisted for ten years. It enabled the Sahrawi people separated by the Sand Curtain not only to visit and stay in communication with their families, but also to understand the situation in the Territory as it progressed. Should the program resume, there is scope for additional activities, but the visits at least should resume.

The Western Sahara conflict is a forgotten one; few people outside the region even know where it is. But lessons from it must be learned for other protracted situations, not least because a new generation of frustrated youth is growing up in the camps. In Tindouf and Laayoune, the UNHCR CBM program has shown that humanitarian activities are possible even where politics and lack of media attention mitigate against them. When it comes to protracted refugee situations, the world is desperate for a positive narrative. Why not from Western Sahara?

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