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**Sahara:  
Africa's  
New War**

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DAKHLA, Sahara—The distant thump of artillery fire momentarily halted Spanish legionnaires hauling their possessions out of whitewashed barracks named after El Greco and Picasso.

But the bearded soldiers, in their final hour in this north-west corner of Africa, calmly resumed their move toward their ships and away from a conflict they helped ignite but can now ignore.

Spain's surrender of the Sahara to Morocco and Mauritania has turned this long-neglected stretch of desert into simmering battleground for conflicting ideologies, nationalisms and local power rivalries.

Algerian and Moroccan armies have massed along their common border. The Polisario Front guerrilla group—based in Algeria—is staging raids in Sahara and beyond. So intense is the rancor that Algerian President Houari Boumediene has publicly made accusations against the Moroccan king and his family.

As the last Spanish soldier left Dakhla last Monday, Moroccan and Mauritanian troops moved into the village of Argoub across the 10-mile-wide bay here in the aftermath of a small battle that typifies the new conflict in the Sahara.

Twenty bodies lay in the houses of the village shattered by Moroccan artillery, and 20 young men were captured by the joint force, which had come under rifle fire at the village's outskirts. The snipers were members of the Polisario Front.

Polisario, which demands independence for the 70,000 nomadic tribesmen who inhabit this 105,000-square-mile territory, has been unable to disrupt the turnover of control. The Moroccans extend their administration each day and knit the northern

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half of the territory more firmly into their nation.

But the region has been profoundly shaken by the turnover, which Spain reluctantly agreed to after Morocco's King Hassan II sent 350,000 unarmed marchers into territory in a showdown not only with Spain but also with neighboring Algeria, which backs Sahari independence.

Smarting from the political defeat inflicted on them by a monarch they view as reactionary, the radical leaders of Algeria have struck back with a harsh propaganda war and material support for Polisario.

Tensions along the Algerian and Moroccan frontier are at their highest point since the 1963 desert war between the two Arab neighbors. Algeria has expelled 20,000 Moroccans and an even larger number of Sahari tribesmen have fled their villages as rumors of massacres and mistreatment have preceded the Moroccan advance into the territory.

The rich phosphate mines at Bu Craa that turned the desolate territory into a going economic concern in the last years of Spanish rule have been shut down for an indefinite period. Commerce is resuming in areas under Moroccan control, but is still sharply reduced.

Over these local problems hangs the shadow of the kind of big power conflict that has turned Angola into a threat to detente.

The Soviet Union has increased the number of its military advisers in Algeria, which is allowing Soviet war materiel to be transhipped to Angola. Morocco has turned to the United States for new military equipment and increased training.

King Hassan has strengthened his throne with the Sahara victory. His officials present Moroccan ownership of the Sahara as a fait accompli. There seems to be little fear in Morocco of an imminent attack by the better equipped but diplomatically weakened Algerians—who received little open support in the Arab world on the Sahara issue.

But top Moroccan officials conceded that the low-level guerrilla actions of the Polisario Front probably will continue.

"We can live with a little rheumatism in the winter," Moroccan Information

Minister Taib Benhima said in Rabat. "It is not serious."

The guerrillas evidently hope they can slowly bleed the Moroccan army enough to produce discontent with the king's annexation policy which is highly popular now. Moreover, they see Mauritania as the vulnerable link in the new chain of relationships that has been forged by the Sahara takeover.

The Mauritians have moved about half of their army of only 2,000 men into this port town, which was known as Villa Cisneros under the Spanish and is the Mauritanian headquarters for its zone of the Sahara—south of the 24th parallel.

Polisario, concentrating its attacks in the last month on Mauritanian troops moving up from the south, has largely avoided contact with the 12 Moroccan battalions sent from the north. Polisario has also stepped up raids into Mauritania itself.

This has produced a Moroccan commitment to keep its troops in the southern zone of the Sahara, under nominal Mauritanian control, and Benhima disclosed that Morocco would send troops into Mauritania if asked.

The only point in the territory controlled by Polisario is the abandoned Spanish outpost of Mahbes, 40 miles southwest of the corner where Algeria, Morocco and Sahara meet.

"We will go into Mahbes when we want," said Col. Ahmed Dlimi, Moroccan commander for the Sahara operation and King Hassan's most trusted military aide. "But we don't want to do anything now that would upset the situation along the border."

"Polisario is not a military problem for us."

But Polisario guerrillas demonstrated their ability to strike deep inside the Sahara in recent weeks. They attacked Spanish troops with mortars at Bu Craa on Dec. 21 and planted a mine there that killed a Spanish worker last week. The rebels firebombed two stores here before the Moroccans moved in.

Their supporters chalked wall slogans demanding Moroccan withdrawal even after the Moroccans took control of this nearly deserted port town, and three Sahari youths cautiously approached this correspondent in the center of Dakhla Tuesday to say: "We are Polisario. The people don't want Moroccans or Mauritians here. We

have to pretend to accept them or we lose our heads."

They moved off quickly as Moroccan soldiers moved up the street toward them.

The departing Spanish commander, Gen. Gomes da Salazar, said that the estimated 2,000 armed Polisario guerrillas "are not a military threat to the Moroccans. Algeria's aid until now has been very cautious. The desert is very hard and it demands strong aid for a war. Polisario does not even seem to be getting enough food and water."

The Spanish should have a good grasp of Polisario's strength. They helped form the group when it became clear in recent years that they would have to leave the territory. By blocking Morocco's claim and producing a nominally independent Sahara, Spain could have retained influence here.

When King Hassan's march and Generalissimo Francisco Franco's lingering illness and death forced a swift change in policy in November, the Spanish found themselves confronting their former proteges.

The last Spanish ad-

ministrators are to depart on Feb. 28, when the Sahara formally goes over to Morocco and Mauritania, although there are reports that they will be asked to stay on longer.

King Hassan's daring performance in forcing the Spanish out has left his civilian opposition at its weakest point since Moroccan independence in 1956. This is despite an economic squeeze resulting from a 40 per cent drop in revenues last year from the main export, phosphate, because of a glut in world markets.

The Sahara's own large phosphate reserves will not be a significant economic asset for Morocco in the next two to three years but will give Morocco the possibility of dominating the export market by the end of the decade.

Morocco faces the security problems of trying to prevent Polisario attacks on the 60-mile-long conveyor belt that carries the phosphates to the coast. About half of the 2,000 Spanish workers who ran the mines at Bu Craa apparently are reluctant to return to work. Thus it will be at least one month before Morocco reopens Bu Craa, Benhima indicated in Rabat.

"The Algerians are playing into the king's hands by keeping up their attacks," said one Western diplomat. "Moroccans from the far right to the far left all agree that the Sahara is theirs."

The Algerians have promoted visits by North Vietnamese defense minister Gen. Nguyen Giap and Palestinian guerrilla leaders to the Polisario headquarters in Algiers.

They also have moved more than 200 tanks and 30,000 soldiers to the border since November, announced plans

for a 20 per cent increase in defense spending and mobilized reservists.

But Western military analysts doubt that the Algerians, who have a clear superiority in armor and warplanes, will risk an attack against a well dug-in Moroccan army that experts feel would have an advantage in fighting a defensive war.

"The Spanish decided that the Sahara was not worth a war," one Westerner said. "Rationally, I can't see the Algerians deciding the opposite."