

Polisario Front

The reader of the Constitution of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and the internal laws of the Polisario Front would be informed of various principles, some of them being:

- The priority given to human rights
- Guarantees of freedom of expression and freedom of movement
- Equality between the sexes
- Political participation by everyone on an equal basis

All these principles also apply to the protection of children and to preserving their dignity; this will become evident in the answers to your questions, as follows:

Steps made

During the years of conflict, the Front worked to give protection from the repercussions of war to special groups: children, women, the elderly and handicapped people. This was achieved by providing them with all possible means, such as education, medical care and a proper living environment far from the destructive conflict zone.

During the war, the civilians, children included, were in locations separate from the combatants.

Challenges

- The psychological effects of war. In several cases, these were aggravated by the loss or disappearance of a father during the war.
- The general situation of being in a refugee camp, which is not a natural environment to live in.
- The lack of resources to meet needs.
- The lack of means of communication and media, such as television and internet, which caused severe isolation, especially during the war.
- The absence of entertainment possibilities, and the ability to practice hobbies.

Protection measures

Since its independence in March 1976, the Sahrawi government has tried to provide for the protection of children, taking measures that guarantee this right to all children, without discrimination.

Our ambition is to improve the protection of children in Sahrawi refugee camps. A problem in this regard is to find the financial means for projects that benefit children. This is especially true for the funding of educational programmes according to children's needs and

which would serve children psychologically and socially and correspond to children's natural growth. Access to higher education is very difficult.

Sahrawi children do not live like refugees but have had contact with others through exchange programmes. These programmes are arranged by sympathetic NGOs, and are called "Vacations in Peace", and provide for children to spend their summers in different European countries, mainly Spain and Italy. Furthermore, we interact with the different UN agencies like UNHCR and UNICEF. This cooperation is mainly on education and health, and is done via the relevant Ministries. Additionally, there are some NGOs which provide medical assistance, like Medico International and Mediciens du Monde.

The Sahrawi Government has enacted a group of laws which aims at child protection, which is clear in the Constitution, in addition to Polisario laws and internal regulations. There is also a national plan of action which addresses the rights of the child. Furthermore, the Sahrawi Government wrote the Minors Code, which is based on the Constitution and Polisario internal laws and was drafted by the Ministry of Justice. It was adopted by the parliament. In addition it has signed all the relevant African Union treaties, such as the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, establishing the age of a child as below 18 years.

In accordance with international laws, the Sahrawi Government does not recruit children into the army and no child has participated in combat operations. Under the Sahrawi Government all children enjoy medical care through maternity and child programmes. Furthermore, they have the right to elementary education with an open opportunity to continue secondary education, University and even higher education paid by the Sahrawi Government, which is available for free to everyone. The schools are located in the refugee camp, although some get a scholarship, mostly for University level, to have the chance to study abroad (mainly in Algeria, Libya, Spain and Cuba). In addition to all that, social and recreational activities are organized. Children do not receive military training. Any other educational training is the responsibility of the family and of society as a whole.

Following our traditions, there is no discrimination in our society between sexes. All women live in dignity.

Adopting the age of 18 for recruitment into the army is accepted. By taking this standard, we follow the norms of the world, and of Muslim culture, which regards this as the right age for children to take their responsibility.

No report by any international organization at any level has ever mentioned mistreatment of Sahrawi children in any context. Furthermore, the periodical "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara" of the UN, in which human rights are addressed as well, has never mentioned the Sahrawi child.

The absence of the UN and its various institutions at the beginning of the war and the subsequent invasion saddens us. No international organisation came at that time. Even now, their presence is still limited, and the programmes directed towards children are poor with

no diversity. There is need for, for example, support for kindergartens, specialised centres for handicapped people, sport activities/infrastructure, cultural/leisure activities and places.

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