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Washington, D.C.

Policy Group Welcomes EU Support for Sahrawi Refugees

Robert Holley, Executive Director of the Moroccan American Center for Policy (MACP) welcomed news from the European Commission that it would provide €10 million in additional funding for Sahrawi refugees held in camps in southwest Algeria. Since 1993, the Commission has provided aid worth more than €128 million to the Sahrawi refugees according to the Commission's Humanitarian Aid department (ECHO).

"We are pleased to see that ECHO will be providing additional assistance in terms of food aid and funding for water and sanitation, health and education in support of the refugees. This humanitarian crisis calls for broader efforts from the international community to improve the quality of life of those confined to the camps. MACP continues to monitor the situation of the refugees and hopes that this additional support will encourage the Polisario to be more forthcoming in reestablishing the family reunion visits between the refugees and their families living elsewhere."

Mr. Holley noted with interest that the food aid would be managed by the World Food Programme (WFP) whose inspector general released a study in 2005 noting severe irregularities in the distribution of food aid by the Polisario. Another study documented the diversion of this aid to nearby countries where the food, destined for the destitute in the camps, was sold for profit. Similar diversions were reported in medical supplies. "I hope that the WFP has learned its lesson and will insist on oversight and accountability on the part of the Polisario and their Algerian hosts." He added, "To compound the suffering of the refugees by manipulating food and medicine for profit is unconscionable and is a further indication that the whole system needs to be changed. Without a census that factually establishes the numbers in the camps and their status, there will always be opportunities for abuses." The need for establishing the actual number in the camps, with

estimates ranging from 70,000 to 150,000, was underscored by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees 2005 report that challenged the higher number as the basis for aid allocations for the Sahrawis held in the camps.

“It is time for the Polisario and Algeria to be held accountable for their mismanagement in the camps. While the political solution sits on the backburner of the UN, the humanitarian needs continue and abuses multiply. We want to see greater freedom of movement for the refugees, a return to the family visits program, which should be expanded, and strict accountability to ensure that the refugees’ rights are being honored. It is what the international community should insist on.”

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