

Brussels, 30.07.2025

Agence Française de Développement

5, rue Roland Barthes

75598 PARIS CEDEX 12

France

Att: Rémy Rioux, CEO

REGARDING AFD AND THE OCCUPATION OF WESTERN SAHARA

Dear Mr. El Rioux

Western Sahara Resource Watch (WSRW) is privileged to present you with our compliments. We are writing to inquire about AFD's position and practice in relation to Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara.

We wrote to you in 2020 over the matter, but did not receive a response.¹

We were particularly concerned to see references to the visit of you, personally, to the occupied territory in May 2025, announced on a press release on your website 12 May 2025.² Without any hint of irony, it stated (our translation)

"This first mission by a Director General of AFD under the agency's expanded mandate to the southern Provinces, announced by President Emmanuel Macron in October 2024, aimed to listen to the priorities expressed by elected officials, authorities, and local populations (...) in accordance with international law."

We fail to understand how AFD's mandate, and how AFD's support to Moroccan interests in Western Sahara can be anything but in violation of international law. There is not a single reference in the entire press release that your visit had been undertaken to the territory of Western Sahara, outside of the international borders of Morocco.

The reference to Western Sahara as "les regions du Sud", recognising as such the Moroccan claims to the territory, is in complete disregard of the rulings of France's own Conseil d'Etat and the CJEU.

A press release from the Government of Morocco dated 17 July 2025 mentions that you had personally announced "a €150 million investment plan in favor of southern provinces".³

On this basis, have some questions that we look forward to seeing responded to, outlined further below.

Allow us to first contextualise our query. The United Nations consider Western Sahara to be a non-self-governing territory without an administering power in place. The International Court of Justice has confirmed that Morocco has no sovereignty over the territory, and that the people of Western Sahara have a right to self-determination – the right to determine the future status of the territory.⁴ In 1988, the UN was able to broker a ceasefire arrangement between Morocco and the Western Sahara liberation movement, Polisario, in which both parties agreed to hold a referendum on self-determination.⁵ To that goal, a UN mission (MINURSO) has been deployed to the territory, but it has not been able to organise a referendum as Morocco continues to block any effort that

¹ https://vest-sahara.s3.amazonaws.com/wsrw/feature-images/File/66/6006c813d7591_20201112WSRW-AFD.pdf

² <https://www.afd.fr/fr/actualites/communiqu%C3%A9-de-presse/premiere-visite-dun-directeur-general-de-lafd-dans-les-regions-de-laayoune-sakia-el-hamra-et-dakhla-oued-eddahab-pour-construire-de-nouveaux-partenariats-de?origin=fr/actualites/communiqu%C3%A9-de-presse>

³ <https://www.maroc.ma/en/news/france-moroccan-sahara-major-strategic-turning-point>

⁴ International Court of Justice, Western Sahara, <https://www.icj-cij.org/case/61>

⁵ The "settlement proposals" are included in the Report of the UN Secretary General on Western Sahara of June 1990, available here: https://minurso.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unsg_report_18_june_1990.pdf

offers a choice beyond integration. In November 2020, the ceasefire collapsed after the Moroccan army seized a section of the UN buffer zone to break up a Saharawi protest.⁶

While well over a hundred of UN Resolutions, and rulings by the International Court of Justice, the European Court of Justice⁷ and the African Court on Human and People's Rights⁸, all underline that Morocco has no sovereignty or administering mandate over Western Sahara, Morocco continues to militarily control about three-quarters of the territory. Incentivized by its exploitation of the territory's resources, Morocco has little interest to genuinely take part in the UN-mediated peace process. Meanwhile, the lingering conflict continues to have a high human and humanitarian cost: over 170,000 Saharawis are stuck in refugee camps in neighbouring Algeria, surviving in harsh desert conditions and dwindling humanitarian aid. Saharawis who live under the yoke of Morocco's occupation are victims of serious human rights violations that have been reported by the UN Human Rights Committee, UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, in addition to credible international organisations such as Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and others. In 2023, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights lamented the fact that his Office has not been allowed to visit Western Sahara for the last eight years.⁹ Year after year, Western Sahara is ranked among the worst countries and territories in terms of political rights and civil liberties, on par with countries and territories like North Korea, Syria, Afghanistan and Crimea.¹⁰

The status of the territory comes with repercussions for business activities. As established in 2002 by the UN Legal Counsel at the request of the Security Council, any economic activity in the territory would be in violation of international law if not undertaken in accordance with the wishes and the interests of the people of the territory.¹¹ We also refer to the conclusions of the UN Treaty Body on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights¹² and of the UN Human Rights Committee¹³, which have both emphasized the need of obtaining the Saharawi people's "consent to the realization of developmental projects and [resource] extraction operations". In this context, it is important to stress that the rights of the people of Western Sahara should not be viewed through the concept of FPIC, as they are not an indigenous people with a certain rights to a part of a territory in a state that they recognise as such - the people of Western Sahara are the holders of the sovereign rights to Western Sahara as a whole. Their homeland is in part under foreign occupation, but the right to self-determination - the right to decide the status of the territory as a whole, and of the resources harboured therein - lies with the Saharawi people. The UN treats the unresolved conflict in Western Sahara through the right to self-determination as the cornerstone principle, and does not regard this as an indigenous peoples issue.

Recent years have witnessed an emerging body of law pertaining to Morocco's claim to the territory. Since 2015, in ten (!) consecutive rulings, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has concluded on the following points as settled:

- The territory of Western Sahara constitutes a territory distinct from that of the Kingdom of Morocco.¹⁴
- Morocco has no sovereignty¹⁵ or administering mandate¹⁶ over Western Sahara.

⁶ WSRW, 19.11.2020, Saharawi gov calls for halt of all activity in Western Sahara over war, <https://wsrw.org/en/news/saharawi-gov-calls-for-halt-of-all-activity-in-western-sahara-over-war>

⁷ The Rulings for cases T-512/12, T-180/14, C-266/16, T-275/18 and combined cases T-344/19, T-356/19 and T-279/19 can be accessed at the site of the EU Court of Justice, <http://curia.europa.eu>.

⁸ African Court on Human and People's Rights, 22.09.2022, Ruling on Application N° 028/2018 <https://www.african-court.org/cpmt/storage/app/uploads/public/632e0f3ad632e0f3ad580e748464681.pdf>

⁹ OHCHR, 07.03.2023, Global update: High Commissioner outlines concerns in over 40 countries, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements-and-speeches/2023/03/global-update-high-commissioner-outlines-concerns-over-40-countries>

¹⁰ <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores?sort=asc&order=Total%20Score%20and%20Status>

¹¹ UN Security Council, 12.02.2002, Letter dated 29 January 2002 from the Under-Secretary-General for Legal Affairs, the Legal Counsel, addressed to the President of the Security Council, S/2002/161, <https://undocs.org/S/2002/161>

¹² UN Economic and Social Council, 22.10.2015, Concluding Observations on the fourth periodic report of Morocco, E/C.12/MAR/CO/4*, §6, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=E%2fC.12%2fMAR%2fCO%2f4&Lang=en

¹³ UN Human Rights Committee, 01.12.2016, Concluding Observations on the sixth periodic report of Morocco, §10, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR/C/MAR/CO/6&Lang=en

¹⁴ Judgment of 21 December 2016, EU:C:2016:973, §92, and reiterated in the Judgment of 27 February 2018, EU:C:2018:118, §62, Judgment of 4 October 2024, EU:C:2024:833, §163, Judgment of 4 October 2024, EU:C:2024:839, §85 and Judgment of 4 October, EU:C:2024:835, §134.

¹⁵ Judgment of 10 December 2015, EU:T:2015:953, §241. Considered a settled matter in subsequent rulings.

¹⁶ "Account must also be taken of the fact that the Kingdom of Morocco does not have any mandate granted by the UN or by another international body for the administration of that territory, and it is common ground that it does not transmit to the UN information relating to that territory, such as those provided for by Article 73(e) of the UN Charter." Judgment of 10 December 2015, EU:T:2015:953, §233. Considered a settled matter in subsequent rulings.

- Consequently, the waters adjacent to Western Sahara cannot be regarded as part of the Moroccan fishing zone, territorial waters, exclusive economic zone, or any other notion used to describe Morocco's role vis-à-vis the waters off Western Sahara.¹⁷
- The people of Western Sahara are to be regarded as a third party to the EU's agreements with Morocco, and that as such, no agreement can affect their territory without their consent, as a corollary of the right to self-determination.¹⁸
- The Court is clear that the right to consent resides with the people of Western Sahara, and not with the population of the territory.¹⁹ The Court stipulates that "a majority of the population of Western Sahara is not part of the people holding the right to self-determination, namely the people of Western Sahara. That people, which for the most part has been displaced, is the sole holder of the right to self-determination with regard to the territory of Western Sahara."²⁰ The Court adds that "there is a difference in that regard between the concept of the 'population' of a non-self-governing territory and of the 'people' of that territory. The latter refers to a political unit which holds the right to self-determination, whereas the concept of 'population' refers to the inhabitants of a territory."²¹
- The Court has firmly established the position of Front Polisario, the UN-recognised representation of the people of Western Sahara to be able to bring cases before EU Courts on behalf of the Saharawi people, and that it has access to the Court to defend their right to self-determination.²²
- In Case C-399/22, which specifically dealt with the labelling of products from Western Sahara, the Court again emphasised the separate and distinct status of the territory in relation to Morocco, and concluded that at the stages of import and sale to the consumer, the labelling of the goods from Western Sahara must indicate Western Sahara alone as the country of origin of those goods.²³

In January 2025, the Conseil d'État in France affirmed the separate and distinct status of Western Sahara in its confirmation of CJEU ruling in case C-399/22, upholding that goods harvested in the territory are to be labelled as originating from Western Sahara, not Morocco.²⁴ It should be noted that neither the Conseil d'État, nor the Public Rapporteur referred to the statement of President Emmanuel Macron of October 2024, in support of Morocco's untenable claim to the territory and encouraging French investments in the territory. As such, the President's statements on the matter hold no normative value and offer no protection to the legal risks companies may run into when seeking to do business in the territory.

Against that backdrop, we have three questions to AFD.

1. Irrespective of the political position of the Government of France, does AFD agree with the Conseil d'État, ICJ, CJEU, UN and the African Court on Peoples' and Human Rights that Western Sahara is not part of Morocco?
2. Does AFD agree with the ICJ²⁵ that the right to self-determination of a people of a non-self-governing territory constitutes a fundamental human right?
3. What *legal risk* does AFD consider it to entail that it follows the *political* mandate given to it by the French government without seemingly taking into account the principles outlined by the French legal system?
4. Which are the projects in the territory of Western Sahara that have so far been granted support by AFD?
5. In the above-mentioned letter that we sent to you in 2021, we inquired about AFD's support to OCP and to Morocco's National Port Agency (ANP). Will you respond to these questions?

¹⁷ Judgment of 27 February 2018, EU:C:2018:118, §67-85. Considered settled in subsequent rulings.

¹⁸ Judgment of 21 December 2016, EU:C:2016:973, §104. Reiterated and refined in subsequent rulings.

¹⁹ Judgment of 4 October 2024, EU:C:2024:833, §180-181. Judgment of 4 October 2024, EU:C:2024:835, §152-153.

²⁰ Judgment of 4 October 2024, EU:C:2024:833, §157. Judgment of 4 October 2024, EU:C:2024:835, §128.

²¹ Judgment of 4 October 2024, EU:C:2024:833, §158. Judgment of 4 October 2024, EU:C:2024:835, §129.

²² Judgment of 4 October 2024, EU:C:2024:833, §96-138, Judgment of 4 October 2024, EU:C:2024:835, §70-109.

²³ Judgment of 4 October 2024, EU:C:2024:839, §89.

²⁴ Conseil d'État, 28.01.2025, « Les melons et tomates cerises du Sahara occidental doivent comporter la bonne mention du territoire d'origine mais ne peuvent être interdits par la France », <https://www.conseil-etat.fr/actualites/les-melons-et-tomates-cerises-du-sahara-occidental-doivent-comporter-la-bonne-mention-du-territoire-d-origine-mais-ne-peuvent-etre-interdits-par-la>

²⁵ <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/169/169-20190225-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf>

Looking forward to hearing from you,

Sincerely,

Erik Hagen,

Western Sahara Resource Watch

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