

Living in the refugee camps

[Image]

The refugee camps are situated in the western part of the Algerian desert, near the frontier between Algeria and the SADR. They are divided into 4 districts (wilaya) bearing the name of El Ayoun, the capital of Western Sahara; Smara, the sacred town; Dahla, the largest port and Aousserd, a little town in the interior of the country.

Each camp is sub-divided into 6 or 7 villages (daira), each village into 4 quarters. The organization of the camps, is almost entirely in the hands of the women. The majority of the men do not live in the camps, they are in the army.

The men, women and children of Western Sahara live here for nearly 20 years in one of the most inhospitable regions of the world. When they came to these regions, where the summer temperature rises to more than 50 degrees in the shade and in winter it is freezing cold, they did not find anything else than sand. It is solely thanks to the solid organization structure and the large feeling of solidarity, characteristic of these people, that they were able to build an organized society in this desert.

Nearly all the 20 year old youngsters were born in these camps. They did not have a great deal in handling matters and had very little to fall back on. At first, the mortality rate was very high, especially in the case of children. But thanks to a strong input on hygiene, the Sahrawi people was able to prevent epidemics and control the high infantile mortality rate. As a result of the policy adopted for dealing with food products destined for children, there are practically no longer cases of malnourishment. The greatest attention is

focused on prevention by the Committee for Health Care, but treatment has also great importance. In the camps the women are trained to become assistant nurses for helping out in the dispensaries, a number of students are already being trained abroad to become nurses or doctors.

The Ministry for Health Care has continued to make progress. A new national hospital just opened. Inside the building, there are operation rooms and possibilities for giving treatments, physically as well as psychologically.

At the time of the Moroccan invasion the illiteracy rate of the Sahrawi's was 95%, a heritage from the Spanish colonisation. At present, after almost twenty years in exile, the Sahrawi's have succeeded in reversing this figure so that the number of people able to read and write is now 90%. In every village, there are creches and nursery schools, and in every province there are primary schools. For secondary education they have built two large boarding schools.

A certain number of students attend courses at universities in Algeria. Higher education has also been offered by a number of friendly countries. It is the constant aim of the Education Ministry to improve the potential of the Sahrawi population, not only to create the best possibilities in the camps, but above all to be better prepared for the reconstruction of the their own country after independence.

A great deal of attention has been concentrated on the campaign for the elimination of illiteracy. The majority of the adults have the opportunity to learn to read and write. Higher level courses result in a greater standard of education. Here it is essentially the National Union of Sahrawi Women which underlines the importance of these campaigns. The future taking part in the reconstruction and the management of their country by these Sahrawi women, depends on the possibilities of capable women. For the women, a certain number of «schools for women» were created. The 27th of February school was the first. Each year there are around 300 women who come with their families and their tent to the school. From September onwards, they follow a course lasting ten months: management, teaching, medical care or weaving.

For their children, there are projects for setting up creches, nursery schools and primary schools. For each tent there is a sanitary block and a kitchen which have been built to enable these women to have the possibility of combining study and family welfare. The Olof Palme school is the first school for women to be found in a province; next year they want to start a second one.

What is relatively new, is the importance given to the Ministry of Culture.

The Sahrawi people rely on songs, story telling, drawings and paintings to perpetuate their traditions and their history to the younger generations. War and the building of camps have caused a break-up in this cycle. «Every old person dying is like a library which has disappeared». The Ministry of Culture wants to maximise chances given to the younger generation to become competent in this field. The Sahrawi people should be ready, after independence, to carry on the construction work using important elements taken from their own tradition and culture.

All has been done to put into motion a system for living as normal a life as possible under difficult circumstances. All the dispositions have been taken to survive for an eventual long time in the desert. At the same time, all their hopes have been founded on an eventual return to their own country.

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