

# Western Sahara

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### Unsolved problems relevant to the Fourth Convention

In spite of ICRC efforts there remained a number of outstanding problems relating to the Fourth Convention: first and foremost the applicability of the Fourth Convention, the destruction of homes and the settlement of Israelis in the occupied territories.

## Western Sahara

The ICRC continued its activities of protection and assistance begun the previous year for victims of the events in the Western Sahara.

### Protection

The ICRC encountered considerable difficulty in providing protection owing to the unusual character of the crisis in the former Spanish Sahara and to the fact that humanitarian questions were often used for political or propaganda purposes.

**Prisoners in the hands of Polisario.** — As soon as fighting began, in 1975, the leaders of the Polisario forces (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguiet el Hamra and Rio de Oro) undertook to respect the Geneva Conventions and in December 1975 authorized ICRC delegates to visit eight Moroccan and four Mauritanian soldiers whom they had taken prisoner.

In 1976, the ICRC made repeated efforts to make further visits, and to obtain access to other Moroccan and Mauritanian troops captured in the meantime. In September, delegates were able to meet 57 of these prisoners, out of a total of about 250, the number given at that time by the Polisario leaders.

At the same time, the delegates visited two French nationals, to whom they handed letters from their families and some relief supplies. These two persons were freed soon afterwards by the Polisario forces.

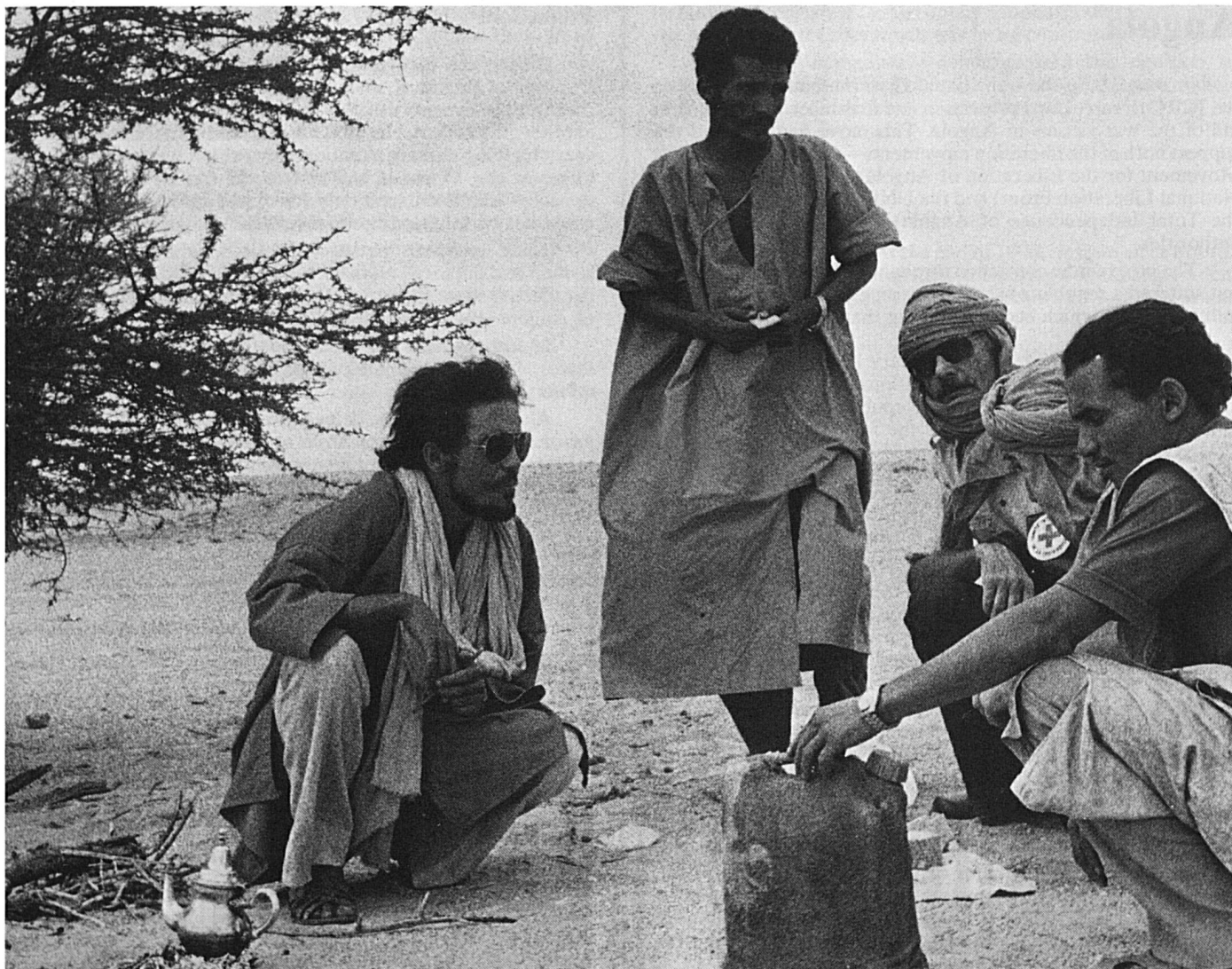
At the end of 1976, the ICRC had still not received authorization to visit all the Moroccan and Mauritanian prisoners, since the Polisario leaders made it a prerequisite that the ICRC should obtain access to all combatants captured by the Moroccan and Mauritanian armed forces.

**Morocco and Mauritania.** — The ICRC also approached the Moroccan and Mauritanian authorities for permission to visit the persons captured by their armed forces since the start of hostilities.

In *Morocco*, the ICRC delegates made three visits to 99 Algerian military prisoners and, with the collaboration of the Moroccan Red Crescent, gave them messages, parcels and money from their families and from the Algerian Red Crescent.

Concerning the Polisario fighters, about whom the ICRC had also made representations, the Moroccan authorities stated that, on capture by the royal armed forces, they had been disarmed and freed in the territories where they lived.

In *Mauritania*, the delegates were allowed access, in January 1976, to 63 Polisario fighters captured by the country's armed forces. They were authorized to make another visit, but in spite of numerous efforts, the date for this visit had still not been fixed by the end of 1976. The Mauritanian authorities gave their permission for the Mauritanian Red Crescent to distribute relief supplies to these prisoners.



### Assistance

Following on the mission to assess needs, in December 1975, the ICRC and the League of Red Cross Societies launched a joint appeal for funds in January 1976, for the purpose of financing an aid programme for those affected by the events taking place in the Western Sahara. The programme was established on the basis of the data collected by ICRC delegates in the Western Sahara and by League delegates in the camps in the Tindouf area, in Algeria.

After this appeal, the ICRC dispatched relief supplies for the Sahara. However, events moved fast and, from the beginning of February, the population in the camps in Algeria increased, while in the former Spanish Sahara the Moroccan and Mauritanian Red Crescent Societies organized relief campaigns.

The ICRC adapted its operation to the situation: it took part in the work organized at Tindouf by the League, the Algerian Red Crescent and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, by supplying supplementary aid consisting of medicines, tents, clothing, milk powder, flour and food for children. By the end of 1976 the aid thus donated amounted in value to more than one million Swiss francs. In addition, the ICRC gave relief supplies worth about 255,000 Swiss francs to the Mauritanian Red Crescent for its activities to assist the victims. The International Committee also contributed to the work being done by the Moroccan Red Crescent for 30,000 Moroccan nationals who had been resident in Algeria and had had to leave that country; relief provided to the Moroccan Society was valued at 85,000 Swiss francs.