

The United Nations and the UN Mission for a Referendum in the Western Sahara (MINURSO)

In 1991, a ceasefire sponsored by the UN and the Organization of African Unity – now the African Union – was signed, and the UN Mission for a Referendum in the Western Sahara (MINURSO) was deployed to begin preparations for a democratic referendum for the Saharawi people. MINURSO's original mandate included – and includes – the identification of voters for a referendum, the organization of said referendum, and the maintenance of the ceasefire. Each year between 1991 and 1996, the UN stated that it planned to hold the referendum by the following year. Nonetheless, because of challenges to the voter lists by both sides, work was painstakingly slow. In 1999 and 2000, MINURSO finally published its lists: 250,000 Saharawis were identified, and just over 86,000 were determined to be eligible voters. Both sides were then allowed to submit appeals – over 130,000 were submitted in one month, causing MINURSO to abandon its referendum preparations. The key issues remain the eligibility of Moroccan settlers in Western Sahara to participate in the referendum process and the participation of the various members of the Saharawi diaspora, both in the refugee camps and beyond.

In 1997, the UN then appointed James Baker, a former U.S. Secretary of State, as the Secretary General's Personal Envoy, to try to break the impasse with the voter identification process. In 2001, Baker submitted his first Peace Plan, which would have made the Western Sahara an autonomous region of Morocco. This proposal was accepted by Morocco but rejected by the Polisario Front.

