



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

Violence in Western Sahara

SPEECH

Monday, 21 February 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Perrett, Graham, MP

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Mr PERRETT (Moreton) (12.55 pm)—I commend the member for Page for this motion. It is a great first step in terms of getting an idea out there into the Australian community. Perhaps it could be a little strongly worded but it is a good first step. I also thank the members for Flinders and Forde for their contributions in the chamber.

As I am sure you well know, Mr Deputy Speaker Georganas, Western Sahara is the size of Great Britain. It is rich in mineral resources including things like phosphates and iron ore and has rich fishing grounds off its coast. More importantly, it has great potential for oil and gas reserves, and there, I guess, lies one of its problems. It has great potential and, as we all know, when something has value people throughout history have tended to fight over those values, and we can trace its history back as a Spanish colony, to the time it was invaded by Morocco in 1975.

I started teaching geography back in 1986. Even then there were parts of the atlas that still had cross-hatching, showing that this was a non self-governing territory, and every year since 1975, I suppose, it has been discussed by the UN in terms of how the area could be decolonised. The Frente Polisario waged an independence war against the Moroccan invaders until the UN brokered a ceasefire in 1991. The truce included the promise of a referendum where there would be some self-direction, but that has not happened, unfortunately largely due to Morocco's obstruction. The Sahrawi Republic declared by the Polisario in 1976 has been recognised, however, by over 80 governments and it is a full member of the African Union. Morocco and the Polisario held four rounds of formal UN sponsored peace talks in 2007 and 2008, but they broke down in acrimony, unfortunately, due to Morocco's refusal to even discuss the option of independence as one of the alternatives to be put to the people.

In my electorate we have a lot of Sudanese constituents so I have seen the joy that has come since the referendum where they had nearly 99 per cent support in one part of the Sudan for self-determination for an independent country. I look forward to 9 July when that new country will be formed, and so many of my Sudanese constituents will be so happy about that process. Unfortunately, it is not the case for Western Sahara. Since these discussions in 2007-08 there have been three rounds of informal talks, the last held in New York in November 2010. But still there has not been a great deal of movement on the 35-year-old dispute. There were further talks in January but we are yet to see a resolution.

As one of the co-conveners of the Parliamentary Amnesty International Group, I am particularly concerned—and the matter was touched on by the members for Flinders, Forde, and Page, I think, in their speeches—about the call for investigations into the deaths in the Western Sahara protest camps. Obviously, it is time that we called on the Moroccan authorities and put a spotlight on their behaviours so that we have an independent, trusted investigation into the events that led to a number of deaths and injuries at Gdaim Izik, a protest camp in Western Sahara. There are reports that nine people were killed including people from the security forces, and Amnesty International has received reports that camp residents were seen lying injured on the ground and some were bleeding and others had been burned. This obviously needs to be investigated. There are also suggestions that Sahrawi people were forcibly removed from the protest camp by Moroccan security forces.

I quote from Malcolm Smart, who is Amnesty International's director for the Middle East and North Africa. He says:

This was clearly a very serious incident and one that threatens to fuel further tension in Western Sahara.

This is the last thing that we need. He goes on to say:

The Moroccan authorities must launch an immediate, independent inquiry and get to the bottom of what occurred and consider asking the UN to assist.

For too long the UN has not fully engaged itself with this region and I think that is something that the UN needs to step up and change as quickly as possible. I thank the member for Page for bringing this motion to the chamber and for giving me the opportunity to speak on this topic that I care a lot about.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr S Georganas)—The time allotted for this debate has expired. The debate is adjourned and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.