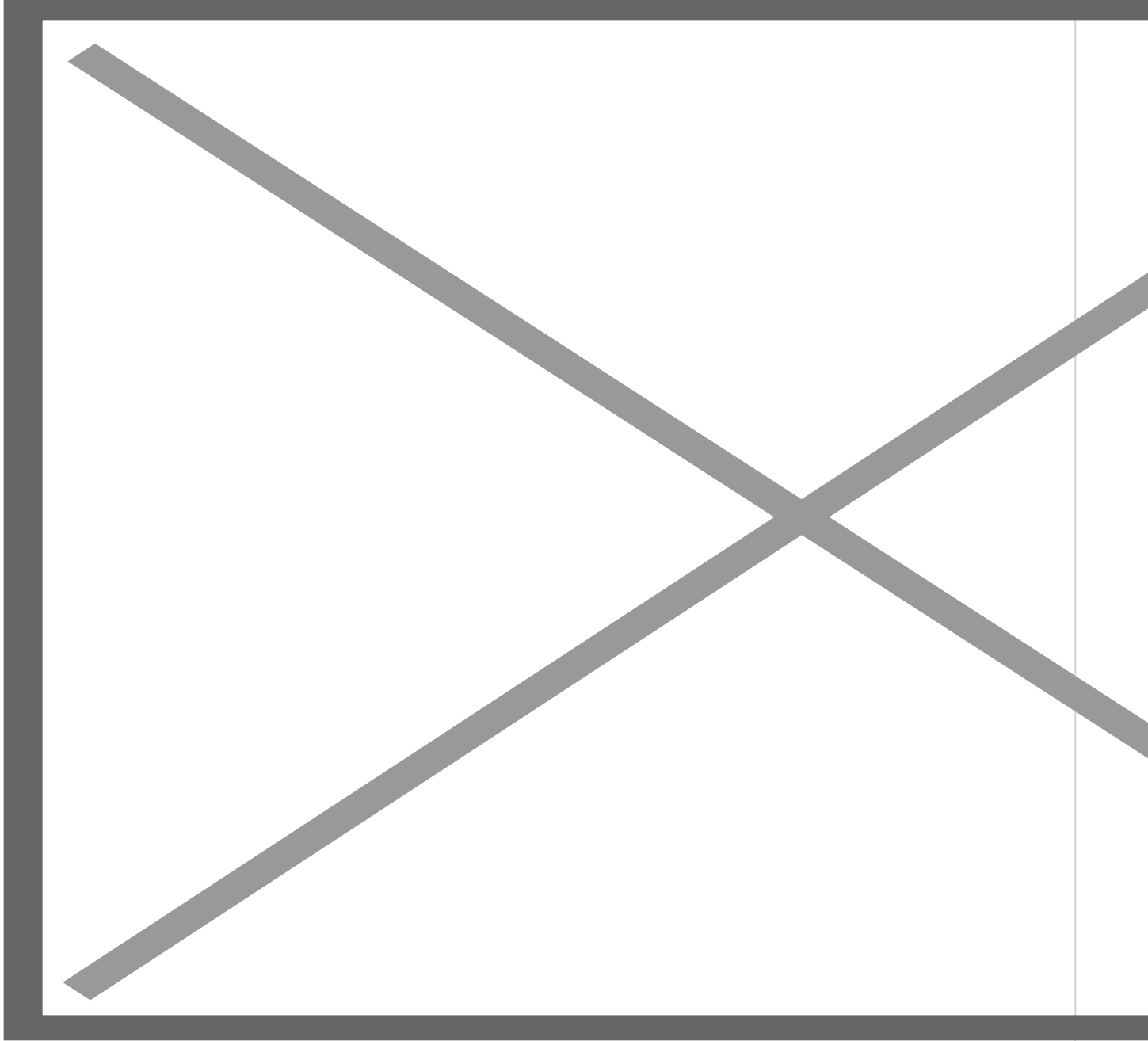


Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara hinders earthquake relief efforts

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Two women and a child look for items in the rubble of their home in the village of Imzalin in Morocco, on September 16, 2023.

Rabat, September 26 (RHC)-- The Moroccan regime has refused to redeploy forces in Western Sahara and their equipment to assist in relief efforts.

On September 8, 2023, Morocco was rocked by a devastating earthquake in the Marrakesh-Safi region that injured and killed thousands. Located in an area of seismic hazard and in proximity of the African-Eurasian plates, the country also lies in a problematic collisional zone (where tectonic plates meet) with

an increased vulnerability to catastrophic events.

More recent earthquakes in Morocco, such as in the Al Hoceima and Drâa-Tafilalet regions in 2016 and 2019, were minor by comparison. Morocco hasn't experienced this type of devastation since the severe and extreme damages seen after the earthquakes of 1960 and 2004. Before that, devastation of this magnitude goes back over a century.

In this interview, international relations expert Stephen Zunes discusses the ramifications of Morocco's historic ties to the United States and the West, its occupation of Western Sahara and its own displaced resources, and how that has impacted the country's ability to rescue and deliver aid to its citizens. The following transcript has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Daniel Falcone: How has the Moroccan government responded to the recent earthquake? Can you also comment on how the international community is rallying around the country and the people in dire need of support emotionally, medically and financially?

Stephen Zunes: Morocco has been a favorite of the U.S. and other Western nations because they were a reliable ally during the Cold War at a time when many of the other countries in the region were nonaligned or even somewhat pro-Soviet. Subsequently, Morocco has been seen as important ally in the so-called "war on terror."

This kind of support for Western objectives has led the Moroccan regime to be given the coveted status of a "Major Non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization Ally" of the U.S. Similarly, their openness to neoliberal development strategies and Western corporate interests has been rewarded with a free trade agreement with the U.S. As a result, in addition to the humanitarian impulse in helping earthquake victims, the Moroccan government's pro-Western orientation has resulted in particularly strong support for Morocco from the West and from wealthy Gulf states in the face of this tragedy.

Morocco has experienced earthquakes before, primarily in the north, but nothing of this magnitude in well over a century. The Moroccan government has long been known for its corruption and inefficiency, and in most social statistics — such as life expectancy, literacy, infant mortality etc. — the country is below those of other countries on the North African littoral.

The Moroccan government has been tragically slow in clearing the bureaucratic hurdles to allow much aid to come through, and people have been dying as a result. Morocco's elusive king, Mohammed VI, has not been very visible in his country's hour of need and has failed to give authorization for several urgent relief operations. The Washington Post noted how Morocco "has also appeared slow to take up offers of broader humanitarian and technical assistance" and that European officials "expressed surprise that assistance was being turned down."

You have stated that, "If the Moroccan regime didn't have tens of thousands of troops busy oppressing the people of occupied Western Sahara, they would be better able to rescue people buried under the rubble inside Morocco." Could you break down this comment to readers who rightly hold sympathies for civilians buried in the rubble while pointing out how the occupation lends itself to exacerbating tragedy?

Morocco has been illegally occupying most of the nation of Western Sahara since its 1975 invasion of that former Spanish colony in violation of a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions and a landmark decision by the International Court of Justice. Western Sahara (formally known as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic) has been recognized as an independent state at one time or another by over 80 countries and is a full member state of the African Union. Only the U.S. and Israel formally recognize that country as part of Morocco.

The Sahrawis, the Indigenous peoples of the occupied territory, speak a different dialect, practice a more liberal version of Islam, have a very different culture and kinship system than Moroccans, and have been

resisting the occupation — both through an armed guerrilla movement and through impressive nonviolent resistance. As a result, Morocco has tens of thousands of troops stationed in Western Sahara to suppress the local population. Freedom House has ranked the occupied Western Sahara as second only to Syria in terms of the lack of political freedom. Most Moroccan forces are in the northern part of Western Sahara, only a short distance from the parts of southern Morocco most impacted by the earthquake, but the Moroccan regime has refused to redeploy these forces and their equipment to assist in the desperately needed relief efforts.

In addition, the 48-year occupation, the repression and counterinsurgency war has drained an enormous amount of Moroccan government resources that could have instead been spent on development inside Morocco, including providing adequate housing that would not collapse so easily when the ground moves. It is certainly important that justifiable anger at Morocco's repression and illegal occupation not get in the way with our sympathy and support for the victims of the earthquake. At the same time, it's important to recognize that the scale of the tragedy could have been at least somewhat mitigated if Morocco had a more democratic government without an expansionist agenda.

Are there any analogs in contemporary history whereby an occupying force has hurt its own citizens after a severe and catastrophic event because of their own preoccupation with imperial imperatives?

The nearest analog I can think of is the U.S. in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, when at least 35 percent of the Louisiana National Guard, long serving as the front line in hurricane relief efforts, were unable to respond to the crisis because they had been sent to Iraq. The numbers that could have been on the ground participating in relief operations were reduced further because of the dramatic drop in recruitment during the previous two years to avoid being sent to support the U.S. occupation.

Perhaps even more significant was the absence of National Guard equipment critical for emergency responses, as dozens of amphibious vehicles, Humvees, refuelers and generators were sent to Iraq rather than remain in the state. Louisiana's 256th Infantry Brigade and Mississippi's 155th Armored Brigade, both of which were then in Iraq, included engineering and support battalions specializing in disaster relief. In Mississippi, which took the brunt of the hurricane's 145-mile per hour winds and 20-foot storm surge, 4,000 members of the state's National Guard — a full 40 percent of its total troop strength — were in Iraq when Katrina hit.

What kind of solutions and organizations provide the best information so citizens of the world can take inventory on the complex moving parts of Morocco's diplomatic and geopolitical landscape, in your view?

In terms of the immediate crisis, Oxfam has always been good at both providing direct aid as well as having good analyses of the broader political context of the countries hit by natural disasters. There are also the more traditional but reputable charities like CARE, Doctors Without Borders, and others. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Cross Crescent Societies certainly do good work and are on the front lines right now. King Mohammed VI has announced his own charitable entity for funneling aid, but I would not recommend donations there due to the notorious levels of corruption in government circles.

Regarding human rights, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have done important advocacy work regarding the country's poor human rights record, particularly regarding political prisoners. There are also some Moroccan-based groups that have tried to challenge corruption and human rights abuses, but unfortunately many of them feel obliged to support the occupation of Western Sahara to avoid being shut down by the regime.

Regarding solutions, the most important thing Americans can do is to pressure the Biden administration to rescind the U.S. recognition of Morocco's illegal annexation of Western Sahara, which took place in the final weeks of the Trump administration. The U.S. is an international outlier (save for Israel) in this regard, and the U.S.'s recognition is hurting its credibility in opposing Russia's illegal annexation of parts of Ukraine. Secondly, the U.S. must suspend arms transfers, training, and other military cooperation with

Moroccan security forces until they withdraw from the occupied territory and respect human rights at home.

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