

Polisario Front Leader Mohamed Abdelaziz Dies in Algeria



Algiers, May 31 (RHC)-- Mohamed Abdelaziz, the secretary general of the Polisario Front, a movement fighting for independence of a region of Western Sahara, has died. The official website of the Front said that Abdelaziz, who was 68 years, died on Tuesday afternoon after a long battle with cancer in an Algerian hospital.

The movement ordered a 40-day mourning period, after which a new secretary-general will be chosen. Samir Bennis, the editor-in-chief of the online newspaper Morocco World News, told Al Jazeera that Abdelaziz's death would have little impact on attempts to end the conflict. Bennis said: "Abdelaziz's death will not change anything between Morocco and Algeria, what might bring change is what happens next in Algeria."

"Abdelaziz Bouteflika [the Algerian President] has been sick for many years, and any change will depend on who rules Algeria. If Algeria accepts the UN-brokered resolution, a new dynamic will be restored."

Morocco has controlled most of Western Sahara since 1975 and claims sovereignty over the sparsely populated stretch of desert to its south, which has offshore fishing and phosphate reserves.

Morocco's annexation of Western Sahara prompted an armed struggle by the Polisario Front backed by Morocco's neighbor, Algeria. The United Nations brokered a ceasefire in 1991, but talks to resolve the 41-year dispute have failed to find a breakthrough.

The Polisario has been demanding a referendum offering full independence, while Morocco has so far only been willing to offer limited autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty.

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