Section M  The Problem of Western Sahara (1988– )

Spain withdrew from Western Sahara early in 1976, having agreed that Morocco should have the northern two-thirds and Mauritania the rest – this being a recognition of their historic links with the territory. However, the indigenous but Algerian-backed Polisario movement also laid claim to it on behalf of the newly-announced Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), and embarked on guerrilla warfare. This, together with a change of regime, encouraged Mauritania to renounce her share of the post-colonial spoils in 1979, but Morocco was in earnest. She extended her claim to the whole territory and supported it vigorously. Committing huge resources to her campaign, she began the construction of a sand (and electronically-equipped) wall across the desert to safeguard that part of Western Sahara which she controlled, including an area of rich phosphate deposits. The wall was successively pushed outwards, and by 1988 contained most of the former colony (see Map 25).

This intra-African problem has from the start attracted the attention of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), and as early as 1978 it was proposed that there be an African-supervised cease fire and a UN-controlled referendum, with a later suggestion that the referendum be organized by the OAU. However, Morocco was wary of Polisario’s demand that she withdraw prior to the vote. No doubt she was apprehensive about the possible impact on its conduct of the fact that the diplomatic tide was turning against her – half the OAU’s members having recognized SADR by 1980. The consequential issue of SADR’s admission to the African club resulted in its paralysis for a while, and almost in its break-up.

In the mid-1980s, however, relations between Algeria and Morocco began to improve, and with Saudi Arabia and the United States (both of whom looked favourably on Morocco) also urging a settlement, the pressures were building up on both sides to reach an accommodation. The UN was a more promising peacekeeping instrument than the OAU,
in terms both of its expertise and of its acceptability, and in 1988, after lengthy negotiations, it came up with a plan. The proposal was that the UN, through a Special Representative of the Secretary-General should, in effect, control Western Sahara for a transitional period. The Representative would have a security unit at his disposal to maintain law and order, and in cooperation with the OAU would be responsible for the arrangement of a referendum in which the people would be asked whether they wanted independence or integration into Morocco. UN military observers would watch over a cease fire and the sites at which the Moroccan and Polisario forces would gather during the period of de facto international administration.

At the end of August 1988 this scheme was accepted in principle by both sides, and then given a fair wind by the Security Council. But a year later the parties had still not agreed on the all-important details, not least on the way in which the voting roll was to be compiled, and on the extent of the reduction in Moroccan troops prior to the transitional period. Polisario seemed to be the side which was dragging