

By continuing to use this site you consent to the use of cookies on your device as described in our [cookie policy](#) unless you have disabled them. You can change your [cookie settings](#) at any time but parts of our site will not function correctly without them.



FINANCIAL TIMES

Home UK World Companies Markets Global Economy Lex Comment Management Personal Finance Life & Arts
 Africa Asia-Pacific Europe Latin America & Caribbean Middle East & North Africa UK US & Canada The World Blog Tools

September 17, 2014 7:45 am

Battle for oil fuels Africa's lengthy conflict

By Javier Blas, Africa Editor



Polisario Front soldiers take part in a parade for the 35th anniversary celebrations of their independence movement for Western Sahara from Morocco

When the drillship *Atwood Achiever* begins the search for oil off the coast of Western Sahara later this year, it will not only test geology, but also plunge into a 40-year-old conflict in what some call Africa's last remaining colony.

Western Sahara, an arid and sparsely populated strip of land larger than the UK, has been occupied by Morocco since 1975, when Spain abandoned its former colony. Since then its indigenous Sahrawi people have fought an often-violent campaign for independence while the UN has sought to broker a peace deal.

The oil exploration campaign, which could have implications for drilling in other contested regions such as Kurdistan in Iraq and Somaliland in the Horn of Africa, is now reinvigorating the battle over the territory's future.

"If they find oil, it will turn things upside down," says Erik Hagen of Western Sahara Resource Watch, a non-governmental organisation that opposes the drilling.

The state of the art *Atwood Achiever* will drill on behalf of New York-listed [Kosmos Energy](#), UK-listed [Cairn Energy](#) and the state-owned oil company of Morocco. [Total of France](#) plans to drill next year while many others in the industry are watching closely.

But the drilling at the block known as Cap Boujdour is highly controversial: detractors insist it is outright illegal; supporters disagree, even though many also acknowledge that the campaign will test international law. The reason is the complex status of Western Sahara, the world's only non-self governing territory without a legal administering authority.

The debate centres around a UN legal ruling from 2002 that drilling in the territory would be legal if it were done for the "benefit of the peoples" living there.

But the ruling, known by the name of the UN's top legal counsel at the time, Hans Corell, goes on to outline that if further exploration was "to proceed in disregard of the interests and wishes of the people of Western Sahara, [it] would be in violation of the international law".



All international oil companies that have in the past attempted to drill there, including Kerr-McGee of the US, have withdrawn before doing so amid pressure from human rights campaigners and investors.

Kosmos and Morocco's National Office for Hydrocarbons and Mines, its partner, signed a declaration late last year that promised "local populations and their representatives" would be consulted and would "benefit equitably" if oil were found.

But the declaration did not say how the population would be consulted, or whether this meant Rabat would talk to the self-styled government of the territory that calls itself the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, which operates from exile across the border in Tindouf, Algeria.



About half the population of Western Sahara live in camps, some still housed in tents 40 years after the conflict started.

In the past, Rabat has ignored the Sahrawi and the Tindouf government. Mr Corell, author of the UN legal opinion, fears this will happen again. "There is no proper consultation with the representatives of the Sahrawi people and Morocco does not allow the Sahrawi to organise themselves politically," he says.

Kosmos, which made its name in 2007 by finding a big oilfield in Ghana where others had failed, insists the drilling falls squarely within the UN legal opinion.

Bill Hayes, Kosmos senior vice-president, says oil exploration could even help bring an end to the prolonged fight over Western Sahara. "Some experts believe discovery of oil offshore could lead to a resolution of the conflict, after 40 years of ongoing dispute," he says.

But the Sahrawi government disagrees. "Petroleum exploration serves as a further pretext to justify Morocco's illegal occupation of Western Sahara," it says.

Although Western Sahara has barely made headlines in recent years, its conflict has remained intractable. The Polisario independence movement waged a guerrilla war against Morocco until 1991, when a UN-brokered ceasefire opened the doors for a referendum over the territory's fate.

Petroleum exploration serves as a further pretext to justify Morocco's illegal occupation of Western Sahara

- Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic government

But the referendum has not taken place due to disagreements over who can vote. Rabat, after annexing the territory, flooded the area with settlers who probably now outnumber the indigenous Sahrawis.

Diplomats believe the only hope of a settlement may be direct negotiations between Rabat and the Polisario, the political wing of the Saharawi government in Tindouf. But neither side has an incentive to compromise and the oil drilling campaign could harden the position of Morocco.

Mr Corell says: "The more resources are found in Western Sahara and its maritime zone, the less will be the incentive for Morocco to fulfil the UN resolutions and international law".

[Tweet this quote](#)

For Morocco, an oil-importing nation, finding petroleum is key for economic development. Abdelkader Amara, the country's oil minister, this year told the Asharq al-Awsat newspaper that Morocco was getting closer to fulfilling its dream of becoming an African oil producing nation.

"We are [a] few metres away from the finish line in the oil exploration race."

TIMELINE: Western Sahara

1884: First formal Spanish settlements in Western Sahara.

1947: Phosphate deposits discovered in north of the territory.

1956: Morocco gains independence from France.

1967: Beginning of Sahrawi independence movement, predecessor of the Polisario Front.

1975: Morocco launches the so-called Green March to force Spain to relinquish Western Sahara. Spain starts withdrawal and signs the Madrid agreement that lets Morocco take control of the northern two-thirds of the territory, while Mauritania acquired the southern third.

1976: Spain completely withdraws from the territory. The Polisario Front begins a guerrilla war against Morocco and Mauritania, with the support of Algeria.

1979: Mauritania relinquish its share of Western Sahara.

1991: UN-brokered ceasefire between Morocco and the Polisario Front, which includes a plan for a referendum to be held a year later. The referendum never took place.

2000: James Baker, former US Treasury and State Department secretary, launches two plans to break the deadlock: both fail.

2001: Morocco grants oil licences to Total of France and Kerr-McGee of the US.

2014: Kosmos Energy and Cairn Energy plan first oil exploration well in Western Sahara

RELATED TOPICS Oil, United Nations

Some experts believe discovery of oil offshore could lead to a resolution of the conflict, after 40 years of ongoing dispute

- Bill Hayes, Kosmos senior vice-president

Content recommended for you

Related articles

What Obama can learn from George W Bush

Jim Murphy says Labour must apologise to Scottish voters

Space tourism is a high risk publicity strategy

Tax casts shadow over Dublin's tech fair

Ankara's talks with Abdullah Ocalan enter perilous phase

Syrian jihad lures disaffected Tunisian youth into foreign war

Could the sanctions on Russia backfire?

China's carmakers stuck in reverse, despite upgrades

Stock exchanges consider more than money

Neptune reaps the reward of solid foundations

Printed from: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/458a9ea6-3cc3-11e4-871d-00144feabdc0.html>

Print a single copy of this article for personal use. Contact us if you wish to print more to distribute to others.

© THE FINANCIAL TIMES LTD 2014 FT and 'Financial Times' are trademarks of The Financial Times Ltd.