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Algeria Concerned by U.S. Arms Deal With Morocco

By Henry Muller
Time-Life News Service

ALGIERS, Algeria — President Carter's proposal to sell additional arms to Morocco is causing considerable concern in Algeria, a country whose relations with the United States have been improving quietly.

The $235 million worth of reconnaissance planes, helicopters and fighter bombers are to be used by Morocco against the Polisario Front, an Algerian-backed group fighting for independence of the Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony annexed by Morocco.

Algerian officials do not accept the U.S. explanation, delivered in person by national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski last November. He said the sale will improve chances of getting Morocco's King Hassan II to negotiate a settlement to the four-year-old Sahara conflict.

Former U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young said last weekend in Algeria that he would try to influence the American decision on arms sales to Morocco.

"When the American people know your history, they will be your friend," Young said at Tindouf, a major staging area for Polisario guerrilla forays into Morocco.

Young was in Algeria on what he described as a private business trip.

Official U.S. policy was outlined last month by Harold Saunders, undersecretary of state for Middle East and South Asian affairs. Saunders told Congress that U.S. support would "enable King Hassan to negotiate from a position of strength."

"We don't understand the U.S. reasoning," a top official of the Algerian Foreign Ministry said. "If it were a question of an internal rebellion within Morocco, the help of an ally would be understandable. But it is a matter of decolonization, and your support of the Moroccans against the Polisario runs counter to the most basic principles the that United States believes in, namely the right of people to self-determination."

The Algerians, moreover, do not believe that Hassan genuinely wants to negotiate a settlement. Their doubts, they say, were confirmed by the Moroccan king's refusal to attend a recent meeting on the Saharan conflict called by a special committee of the Organization for African Unity.

Though the United States has never recognized Morocco's claim to sovereignty over the 103,000-square-mile Western Sahara, State Department officials say that U.S. support is needed to guarantee the stability of a longtime ally. A CIA study published last year said that Hassan risked following the Shah of Iran into exile if his domestic position deteriorated further.

Algerians argue that the costly Sahara war is the major destabilizing factor in Morocco, and that the surest way to ensure Hassan's political survival is to persuade him to abandon the conflict. "Unjust colonial wars have always destabilized governments," an official explained. "Look at France's Fourth Republic (which fought to retain Algeria) or Portugal (whose leaders tried unsuccessfully to retain colonies in Africa)."

The war is costing Morocco more than $1 million a day.

Algerian diplomats argue that, contrary to what is often said, they have no interest in seeing a weakening of Hassan's regime. The king, they explain, is the country's only unifying force, and his overthrow would most likely create a situation similar to that in Iran, where rival groups have been vying for power and influence at the expense of regional stability.

Though Algeria has developed an Eastern European-style socialist economy and relied on the Soviet Union for most of its weaponry, the country jealously guards its status as a nonaligned nation.

Most of Algeria's economic ties are with the West. The United States, which buys 57 percent of the country's crude oil and more than half of its natural gas, is now Algeria's main trading partner, ahead of France.

"We don't want bad relations with the United States," an official said. "On the contrary. But further Moroccan setbacks in the Sahara are inevitable, and we don't want to see a situation in which the United States is forced into an escalation. It would not be in North Africa's interest, nor would it be in the United States'."

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