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Flights Above the Fray:

The Experiences and Uncertain Future of UNHCR's Family Visit Program for Sahrawi Refugees

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Acronyms & Local Terms

CBM Confidence Building Measures [Program]

MINURSO United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara

SIM A mobile phone data card

UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

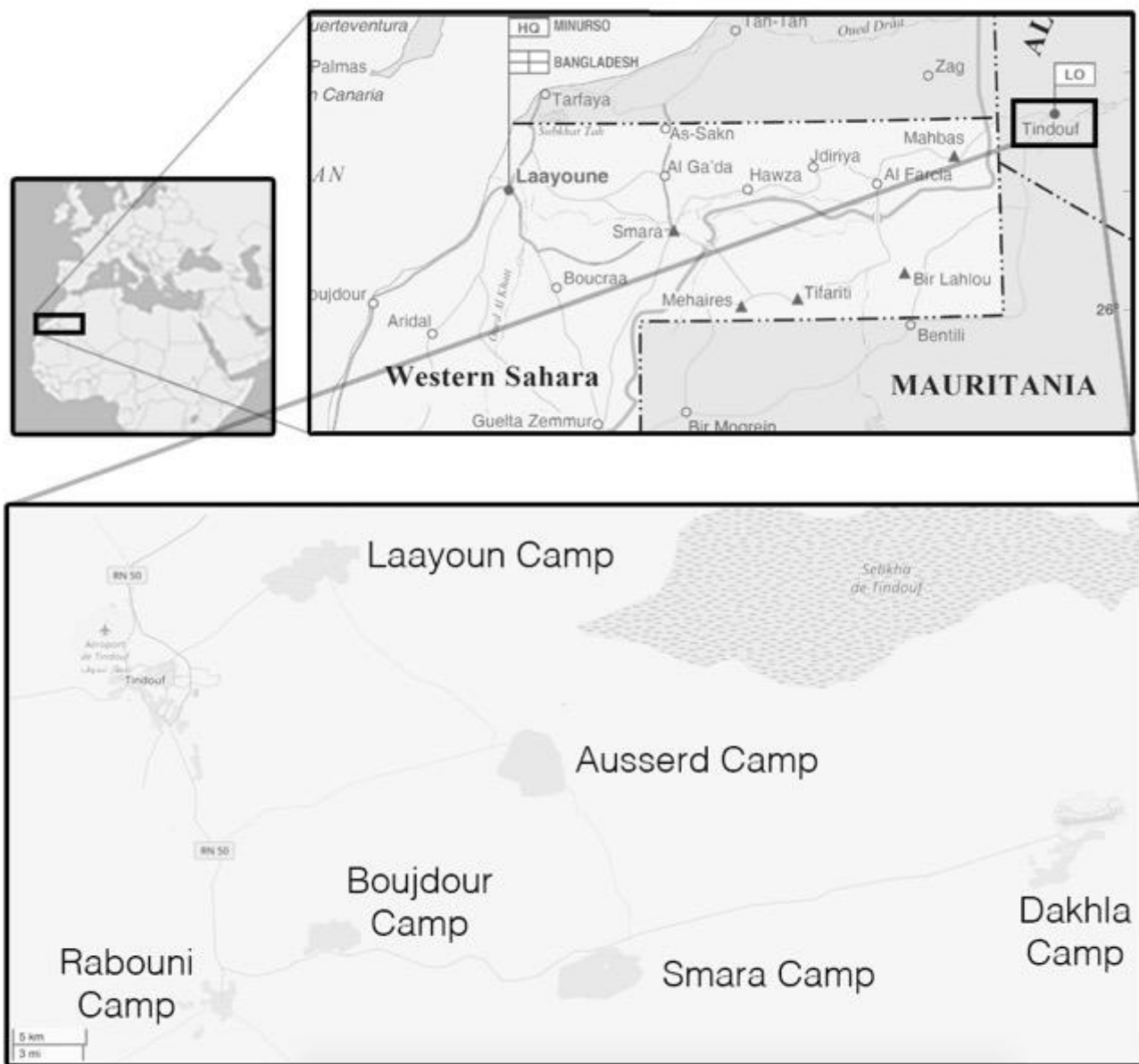
USD United States Dollar

Waliya A local governorate - a sociopolitical organizational unit. Waliyas are then divided into neighborhoods (Hai)

WFP World Food Program

Maps of the region

The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used do not imply endorsement or acceptance.



1. Introduction

January 2018. When we arrived in the Boujdour Sahrawi refugee camp, our car engine cut off and the only sound was the soft desert wind blowing sand down the corridors between tents. We were there to interview refugee families about their experiences with a UNHCR program for allowing visits of separated families, and were now some 15 km from the nearest remote desert town of Tindouf in the south-western corner of Algeria. Stepping out of our car, we stood in silence for a minute taking in the huge sky, the desert and the tents. Four children came around the corner of a nearby concrete school building on bicycles, laughing amongst themselves. They looked over at us, surprised to see visitors, and then chased each other down the road.



Sahrawi children ride old bikes through the tents and basic buildings of the Boujdour refugee camp.

It wasn't this silent back in 2004 when the family visits were taking place. Back then the camp was noisy and busy with weekly visits organized by the UNHCR's Confidence Building Measures (CBM) office, that brought hundreds of separated Sahrawi families back and forth across the berm that separated the Western Sahara territory and the Tindouf refugee camps in Algeria (for more background on this program see Jacobsen, 2017). During the flights, minibuses crunched through the sand, rolling from Boujdour and the other four camps to the Tindouf airport, loaded with excited families, energized with anticipation about seeing their family members. Many had last seen their relatives thirty years before, and now there would be new faces too, born after the separation of the territory and only known through phone calls and photos. At the Tindouf airport, families piled into enormous, clattering MINURSO propeller planes for the journey over the rocky berm separating the towns of Laayoune, Dakhla, and elsewhere in the Western Sahara territory.

We had hitched a ride from Laayoune to Tindouf with CBM staff on one of these same MINURSO planes. They were still piloted by Russian crews who smiled when they recollected the family visits. From the air, looking down through the yellowed oval windows of the plane, we made out the dark, rocky, jagged berm—a ten-foot-high sand wall—that separates Algeria and the Western Sahara territory and separates thousands of Sahrawi families. What you can't see from the sky are the thousands of mines, which MINURSO is still clearing some twenty years after the last engagement between the conflicting Parties; nor can you make out the vehicles: UN observers, Sahrawi patrols, and Moroccan security, keeping both a sharp eye on one another.



MINURSO propeller planes used for the family visit flights by the CBM program.

The families with whom CBM works with were advised to refrain from engaging in political activities while on the visit. In the air, families were literally and figuratively above the political quarrels. To those looking down from the plane's windows, the berm represented the separation they had endured—yet for this short five day visit, the yearning to break the long isolation of children, parents, brothers, sisters, husbands, and wives far outweighed any political sentiments.

1.1 Paving the runway

The family visit flights were only achieved after years of political negotiation and logistical planning. Initially, the family visits were only an idea, discussed through a long series of talks on an Action Plan between “the Parties”: the Moroccan government and the Polisario Front. Soon after the Action Plan was agreed upon, word of the family visit program rapidly spread through the Sahrawi community; with no advertising within weeks CBM was seeing hundreds wanting to register. CBM then needed to sift through this list of registrants to prioritize the most vulnerable cases, usually the sick and the elderly for whom the flight may have been the last opportunity to see their separated children and grandchildren.

After prioritizing the list of refugees who would participate, a final roster of selected refugee beneficiaries was reviewed by UNHCR, and passed to MINURSO for checking at the airports. The list was also handed to the Parties who went through an extensive verification process of identity and security background checks, visiting homes and conducting interviews to confirm family members were who they claimed to be. If there were any changes to the beneficiary lists because a family member needed to withdraw from the program for school or work, this created snowballing disruptions throughout the process. In the early days of the program, issues with information intake on relatives' names and the exact relationship was common, requiring longer verifications that at times created controversy and delays.

While verifications were politically necessary, it had human impacts. “Sometimes a family member passed away while waiting on the verification process,” recalled one CBM local staff member. However, after one to two months when the verifications were completed, families were signed up for counseling to prepare them for their visit. These sessions were conducted by CBM in small groups of refugees at the Rabouni base camp outside of Tindouf and in the CBM office in Laayoune. Here, CBM detailed the logistics for the upcoming visit and underlined the humanitarian nature of the program: it was stressed that any politicking from refugees during the visits could endanger the entire program, and jeopardize other refugees' opportunities to see their families

on pending flights. These visits were not about making a political point, but about the human dignity of getting to see separated family again.

The counseling sessions also tried to prepare families for the emotional shock of seeing their loved ones for the first time after so many decades. The moment would be indescribable, and relatives would at once feel familiar and foreign. In truth, before the first flight, not even CBM staff knew the depth of what this experience would entail.

1.2. Cleared for takeoff

After months of exhaustive preparation, on the morning of the first flight local Algerian staff picked up families in the camps across Tindouf.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the berm, local Moroccan staff drove through neighborhoods picking up families in Laayoune. In the camps, CBM vehicles' tires spun in the sand and the dirt, loaded down with families, luggage, and gifts. The enthusiasm in the families was palpable. One elderly refugee remembered the car ride: "On my way to the airport I could feel my heart pounding quickly," he said. After arriving at the airport, the final list of families was once again confirmed by MINURSO and the Parties.

As the planes were loaded and prepared for takeoff, CBM leadership sat on opposite ends of the berm, waiting, glued to their phones and constantly checking in with the other side: "Has it taken off yet? Has it taken off yet? We were really on edge," remembered one former CBM employee. Anything could cause a delay, from dust storms, to heat, to political interference. But as one former CBM staff person recalled, "when they finally took off," he sighed deeply, "we would breath," and then he laughed, a smile on his face.

After two hours in the air, the plane touched down. Families were taken from the airport to a processing site, and then moved in individual vehicles toward their families. They rolled through the streets, closer to their relatives than they had been in decades, passing new sights and scenes they had never seen before. In Laayoune, they peered out the windows of CBM's cars to see new roads, new buildings, new businesses and new faces, very little of which was there before 1975. And in the camps, Sahrawis saw new infrastructures too, concrete buildings scattered around the older semi-permanent tents, and young children born after the ceasefire running with brightly colored backpacks in the courtyards of schools. It was all very new, very foreign, and yet on a deeper level, "it was like going home," remembered one elderly man, his face lightening recollecting his memory.



UNHCR CBM staff worked to coordinate with the Parties while preparing refugees for the emotionally-heavy experience of the family visits.



Laayoune: After some 30 years away, family visitors arrived in places that were at once familiar and new.

2. Five days after thirty years

When they finally arrived at their family's residence, for the first time in decades these refugees saw their separated mothers, fathers, siblings, children, and grandchildren. This initial moment of reunion was profound: crowds gathered, family, friends, neighbors, everyone. "Other people would reach out and touch the arrivals as if they were their own," recalled one CBM staff member who accompanied the families. Crossing through the crowds, the family members embraced. "That [first] day, it was a day full of tears," remembered one elderly woman who saw the Western Sahara territory and her brother for the first time in 2011 since she left in the 1970s.

As another woman remembered, "The first day was filled with laughter, I had missed my family so much." Her father, elderly and in a wheelchair, was with her. "The day was filled with happiness, tears, and people. There so many people around, with happiness, and many people ululating [zgharit]," he recalled.

As he described the visit during our interview in his home, his granddaughter ran in to the shade of the tent from playing outside in the midday sun. Wearing a bright pink shirt and a red bow, she ran over to him, and he kissed her on the forehead and exclaimed: "She was on the flight with us!" His face was beaming with joy, but then became solemn as he went on, "It was 40 years of not seeing my mother." She passed away before he could see her with the visit, and yet he deeply valued being able to mourn her with his siblings, daughter, and granddaughter.

An elderly woman recalled the first day of her family visit in the winter of 2014: "All the families were there, it was a big party." Gifts were exchanged—particularly those of Sahrawi cultural significance like tea and clothing. To mark the occasion, sheep or camels were slaughtered. Large tents were rented so that the whole extended family, neighbors, and other guests could attend. The festivities continued late into the night: "we stayed up until four in the morning, talking, catching up," remembered one woman of the first night. And the remaining four days were packed with catching up, with little time for sleeping.

Yet, this joy and celebration was mixed with layers of sadness and confusion. Thirty years of separation meant relatives had changed, passed away, or been born. Relatives were profoundly familiar, and yet new and unknown. The local staff drivers remembered pulling up with the families, and being hugged and kissed in joy: "they thought we were their family," one driver said sadly, "they hadn't seen them in 30 years, and they didn't



Two Sahrawi refugee women remember the first moments of seeing their separated family members during their visit.

know what they looked like anymore. We had to say no, this is your family,” as he gestured off to the side, reenacting those moments of confusion.

One elderly Sahrawi woman remembered her visit, and expressed this complex layering of emotions that her time with her family evoked. She took part in the visit in 2014, seeing her brother and sister for the first time since 1979 with all six of her children. Speaking to us in her sitting room, she looked down into a tray of red coals that was heating a pot of tea. She fanned the coals with a small wooden bellow, and when she touched on the memory of the visit a smile warmed her face: “I’ve never felt such happiness in my life,” she said softly.

Yet her happiness was mixed with sadness. She lowered her voice when speaking about seeing her brother: “it’s different when you see someone every day... you see him, his hair is grey, his children have grown,” and her voice trailed off, thinking of the years that were missed. Both of her parents had died in the Western Sahara territory before she was able to visit. Before her trip in 2014, her family in Laayoune would send her pictures, and from time to time she would use CBM phones to speak with them, but the pictures were only tokens, and the calls typically only lasted a short ten minutes, barely enough to say hello.



After 30 years, family members had changed and aged, bringing a mix of joy and sadness to the visits.

A third woman had a similar recollection of happiness layered with sadness when she was struck with the realization of all the time that was lost: “What I will not forget is the difference that I noticed in my dad’s age,” she said. He had lived a Bedouin life, she shared; he traveled nomadically on long trips through the desert with goats and camels until the territorial separation when he settled down in the town of Dakhla. “I remembered him as a young, strong dad,” she recalled as she thrust her arms out mimicking his strength, “[but] when I saw him he was old, and in weak health. He was lying down a lot, and suffered from memory loss.”

2.1. A humanitarian achievement

We cannot overemphasize the humanitarian impact of the flights conveyed by both the Sahrawi refugees and the UN staff interviewed. The visits had a clearly profound cathartic impact on refugees’ psychological wellbeing. Even ten years after participating in the program, each refugee remembered their emotional experience with the CBM visit endearingly and powerfully. One elderly woman recalled, “The trip changed me a lot, it was all that I needed, time with my father and extended family.” One former CBM officer recalled: “People are thankful for these trips...to this day people still remember what we did for them as staff. [In Tindouf] I was sitting down, drinking tea with a group of people, and a man thanked me for helping organize his trip. The man was on the second flight out, and he was able to see his dad. A week after he had returned, he learned that his dad passed away.”

Another woman refugee echoed these feelings: “The trip impacted me personally, I had a better mental state, I felt better after seeing my father. But it left me longing for more.” The visits were a powerful moment in families’ internalization of the trauma of departure, of displacement, of fractured relations, and of loss. The old, stressed images of separated family members that were frozen in memory were transformed through the visits into living, breathing people. These visits to homeland were critical to the healing process. As one woman recalled, “We forgot about our suffering, the conflict. We were living in happiness with the visits...The atmosphere of the visit lets you forget the 42 years of suffering.”

The visits broadened and strengthened refugees’ relationships with their families. “I think this program really helped bring families closer together,” said an elderly woman. She went on to describe how since her visit she began communicating much more regularly with her family, and felt she now has a more meaningful relationship with them.

More broadly, the visits strengthened connections beyond immediate family, building relationships with refugees’ whole community and with Sahrawi culture. “Even if they weren’t in their family, the whole community came out to see them,” recalled one of the CBM local staff in Laayoune, remembering how their vehicles were always surrounded by crowds of people upon arrival – family, extended family, neighbors, and others from across town. “Families are separated and though they couldn’t always see their own family, they had these visitors and they treated them like their own,” another local CBM staff person added.

One elderly woman recalled her changed perceptions of cultural inheritance and belonging during the visit: “Growing up I heard a lot about Western Sahara, I have a strong connection to the place and family there. When I landed, I felt that sense of belonging to the place.” She glanced over at her daughter seated beside her, looked at us and said proudly, “you are nothing without your nation...When I landed, I knew that I would never forget that that land is where my mother is buried.” The flights not only connected family members, but also connected generations, lineages, strengthened community and preserved culture.



“The trip impacted me personally, I had a better mental state, I felt better after seeing my father. But it left me longing for more,” remembered one refugee.

2.2 The landing

“The last day, that was the hardest,” recalled one refugee beneficiary, a sentiment that was echoed by not only every other beneficiary, but the UN staff too. One elderly woman conveyed the refugees’ collective feeling: “The five days were very short, it felt like five hours!” Keeping the visits short was necessitated by operational demands of CBM: with thousands of registrants in line for visits, and with the number of plane seats limited, the staff calculated that any longer visits would drag the wait to decades. However, the short five days were never remembered as a reason not to go on the visits, or a reason why the visits weren’t a moving experience: “of course the five days are not enough, but people need to benefit on these trips,” said one refugee woman, who visited her brother in 2011.

After so much commotion, touching down from the return flight left refugees feeling awash. “I felt empty after returning. What to do?” remembered an elderly woman of the sensation of returning home after seeing her brother for the first time since the conflict in Laayoune. As she described her first day after returning from the visit her eyes slumped with a heavy expression. As she spoke, she looked over at a baby crib in the corner of the room, not rocking, with an infant grandchild curled inside sleeping silently. Her face, the room, and her memory of the return was all very still.



“I felt empty after returning. What to do?” remembered one Sahrawi refugee.

3. Downing the flights

By 2006, the family visit flights had been refined to a well-oiled procedure, with the Parties coordinating “very smoothly,” between UNHCR and MINURSO. The period between 2006 and around 2010 were thought of as the smoothest, most productive years. Additionally, by 2006 “when the donors recognized the humanitarian benefits of this program, they began contributing,” allowing for program expansion. MINURSO upgraded their flights to meet demand for the visits, beginning to fly large Boeing aircraft seating over 100 refugees on each flight, instead of just 30 as they had before.

But even in these glossiest years, the flights always faced challenges. There were many temporary stoppages throughout the ten years of the flights—sometimes innocuous, such as when summer heat and the Ramadan holiday month made logistics of the flights untenable—and sometimes controversial, such as when disagreements would break out between the Parties over verifications of beneficiary lists. These disputes about verifications—whether due to political machinations or simply bureaucratic difficulties—impacted the relationships between the beneficiaries, the Parties, and the UN. Despite CBM local staff’s attempts to explain the political nuances of the verification process, families still lost trust in the UN when they were registered only to be later prevented from participating.

It was this discord over verifications that was cited as the reason for the final stoppage to flights in 2014. By then, the political value of the program had run its course. By 2014, the principal value of the flights to the Parties was increasingly under question, resulting in tension and hostility between their leadership. When a disagreement emerged over some four names on the beneficiary list, each side was unwilling to concede that there may have been misrepresentation, miscommunication, or simply misunderstandings about the lists of beneficiaries. The Parties were unwilling to move past this disagreement over a handful of names, and stopped the program for all families, wholesale. No agreement on resuming flights has since been achieved. A former CBM officer shook his head in frustration when recalling the end of the flights: “This was all stopped for politics. If it’s three or four or ten or twenty names that caused problems, not everyone should have to suffer because of this.”

Some of the Parties’ leadership was dismissive of the humanitarian mission: “Do you think you’re building confidence by giving a child a SIM card to talk to her mother? No ... the family visit is kind of nice, but it’s not a durable solution.” Some of these leaders did not see or acknowledge the irony in their own ability to use political connections and personal wealth to see family while the average Sahrawi does not have the political or the financial means to do the same.

Entrenched, the Parties fixated on the numerous small challenges with the family visit program to justify a lack of effort in reinitiating them. It was said that the flights started too late after the conflict—which began in 1976, but family visits only starting in 2004—that families experienced harassment from security services while visiting, that the visits were too expensive for hosting families, and that the political goal of building confidence between the Parties was seen as a failure.

It should be noted that these issues with the family visits were only cited by representatives of the Parties, never by refugee beneficiaries themselves unless prompted by guiding questions. All beneficiaries remembered a constant security presence, but none described their experiences with security as harassment or intimidation, a theme that was supported by interviews with UN staff, including UN police who acted as observers to Algerian, Moroccan, and Polisario security throughout the visits.

Only one refugee beneficiary interviewed—an old former Polisario soldier crippled in the fighting—recalled experiences with security services as a cause for friction. Speaking about his visit, he sat on a small cushion, shrouded in the shade of the tent, his wheelchair sitting off to the side and his grey hair knotted from the dryness of the desert. He spent most of his interview avoiding questions about personal experiences to talk accusatorily about politics. He pointed with his finger, jabbing at the air as if he was hitting targets while he named the countries he blamed, one after another, for the Sahrawi's prolonged troubles, his voice cracking with a frustration.

The issue of costs of the visits was also only emphasized by representatives of the Parties, and was only brought up by refugee beneficiaries when we raised the idea. The costs were indeed high: refugee families would rent large party tents, buy animals for slaughter, meals for all who attended, and gifts as a gesture of good will, including traditional clothes and tea. But no one spoke of regretting their visit because of the costs incurred, and everyone interviewed perceived the emotional benefit of the visit as much more valuable than any financial costs.

“The problems, yes they were real, like the cost, but they are immaterial compared to something this important,” remembered one middle-aged refugee man. There were also adaptations that allowed families to manage the costs without significant burden: “Neighbors, families would chip in to help the receiving family cover the costs,” remembered a former CBM officer. The highly collective nature of Sahrawi culture had no problem distributing costs throughout the community.

One elderly woman described her adaptation, balancing the custom of gift giving with her financial constraints. She spoke to us while sitting in a sparsely decorated tent, the only furniture being a single bureau in one corner, and a stack of blankets in another corner situated next to a faded pink children's tricycle. “Friends and family



Refugees remembered the costs and logistical challenges with the visits, but weighed these lightly next to the social gains of seeing long-separated family members.

would give more than just money, some people would bring food, goats...[but] I took what I could because I'm not working. I took the traditional dress as a gift...The people, the neighbors, and family would help each other with the receiving family because the most important thing for them is the happiness of the family."

Inside of her tent before our interview, this elderly woman had set up an elaborate spread of cookies, dates, and milk, and a second table covered with a silver tray where she prepared a kettle of tea on a bed of incense-laden coals. However, her generosity of welcoming was betrayed by the tent's surroundings: World Food Program (WFP) bags of imported grain sat around the corner of the tent, and as we spoke we were occasionally interrupted by the bray of goats, held in an adjacent wire pen as a means of semi-subsistence pastoralism.

Despite families not seeming particularly flustered by the challenges of the visits, these problems became an excuse for the Parties to avoid finding common ground and to not reengage in the flights. With political squabbles keeping the flights grounded, refugee families suffered. "It's a disaster," said one woman refugee beneficiary, "there are family members that are dying, and no chance to see them." A former CBM officer who worked with the flights for two years frowned: "It's a shame this program ended," she said as she looked down at her empty coffee cup, tipping it toward herself and seeing only grinds left at the bottom, "it's sad. Very sad for those families."

3.1 Grounded flights

"When the flights first ended, many people came to the CBM office upset asking why," remembered one CBM officer. "Families would ask that we start them again, but very quickly they figured out they were over, and they stopped coming." News of the program's cessation spread quickly throughout the camps, and soon "no one ever came" to CBM's Rabouni office. Since then, the UNHCR CBM presence has been quiet in Rabouni, Laayoune. Despite this lack of a clear role after the end of the flights, the CBM office was mandated to continue its presence in Tindouf. This was intended to signal a readiness to get started immediately whenever the Parties agreed, but to the average Sahrawi, CBM's presence without action communicated apathy and undermined Sahrawi's confidence in the UN. As one elderly man—a beneficiary of the program—recalled, "The stop in the CBM program broke the hope of refugees that were registered to go on the trip. Refugees lost their trust in the office. There is a frustration that the UN is not doing enough to help the situation."

Without renewed programming or efforts to inform families about why the flights stopped, this perception of CBM's apathy has persisted. In the almost four-year period between this research project's visit to the camps in 2018 and the end of the flights in 2014, CBM officials only visited the camps once for a general focus group discussion between Polisario leadership and a range of humanitarian actors, and then only to discuss general agendas, mostly of INGOs, not CBM specifically.



Since the cessation of the family visit flights, few Sahrawi refugees come to the UNHCR Rabouni base camp.

Since June 2017, the CBM program has tried changing their reputation. In Tindouf, CBM is building new structures, such as a records storage facility for archived documents. Built from local supplies by local workers, these put CBM “outside the wire” nestled among the houses, shops, and offices of average Sahrawis. Further, new CBM personnel have begun the long process of rekindling and developing interpersonal relationships with camp coordinators and other Sahrawi humanitarian liaisons. In the relatively short time of our visit, we could already see an attitudinal change from our first day’s initial visit and our final day debrief with Sahrawi leaders. Meanwhile, in Laayoune, similar meetings have been held with leadership to begin to develop rekindled relationships.

One representative of the Parties made the point of showing his growing respect and appreciation for the current CBM Head of Operations, describing him as innocent, well intentioned, authentic, and honest, in stark contrast to his dislike for much of the previous CBM leadership. During a meeting, he spoke frankly: “I wish you had been here when the flights started... this was a beautiful program. We’ve seen it was frozen by politicians, but now we see it is in some ways coming back to life.”

3.2 Youth, held in a holding pattern

One of the deepest, and least spoken about impacts of the cancellation of the flights was the effect on Sahrawi youth, who, born after the conflict, have little investment in the old, drawn out political sentiments of their elders.

We interviewed an elderly woman and her daughter who took part on the second to last trip before the family visits ended. The daughter only spoke once during the interview, spending the rest of the conversation mindlessly pouring tea from cup to cup, balancing its temperature and sugar content, while staring blankly up at a muted television mounted on the far wall. “Going on the trip allowed me to live in the moment,” she said. She didn’t speak again until we left, when she offered a simple goodbye, and by reflex looked back at the TV even though a power outage had left its screen black.

That afternoon back in Tindouf we walked through a Sahrawi market where everything from electronics to sand art is sold by Sahrawi vendors to a mix of Algerians, international aid workers, and West African migrant workers. We struck up a conversation with a young Sahrawi boy manning a stall selling scarves while his father was away. He was fluent in Algerian Arabic, Hassaniya Arabic, and Spanish from spending four summers away on an exchange program with a Spanish family.



The Sahrawi market in Tindouf: With few other opportunities, refugee children spent their days working here.

We asked what he saw for his future, and he replied his hope was to be taken into Italy on a smuggling boat. Another Sahrawi boy sitting in the tent, inattentive to our chitchat, suddenly opened his eyes at the mention of Italy, looked over at his friend and nodded approvingly, smiling.

In a later interview, we spoke with an elderly woman whose son entered the tent toward the end of the interview. He had been on the flight with her as a teenager, and was now almost thirty. On hearing CBM was present for research, he immediately began announcing his economic inopportunity and underemployment relative to his education. He framed the flights as only a five-day respite from being “trapped,” but then made sure to let us know he has in fact travelled extensively on his own—to Spain, Western Sahara and Switzerland—and that he speaks three languages—Arabic, Hassaniya, and Spanish. He seemed frustrated, speaking sarcastically about the UN programs, drawing laughs from the *Waliyah* coordinator, and even a few laughs from his mother, although she looked at him skeptically.

This outburst was not an anomaly. One CBM officer recollected an encounter several months earlier when frustrated Sahrawi youth—drawn together for a focus group discussion with a U.S. diplomatic mission—openly mocked the Americans, saying that although they weren’t joining the Islamic State at the moment, if they were left unsupported for too long they surely would become another finger on the hand of the West’s ISIS boogeyman. The CBM officer laughed at the recollection, seeing through the youths’ threat as political cunning by young men who felt the need to vent their frustrations while cleverly playing to the fears of superficial Western analysts.

These three youths are not simply anecdotes, they are visions of the future in the Western Sahara region. As the tired political gridlock grinds on, if humanitarian programs like CBM remain absent, youth will search for vitality along these three trajectories: apathy, flight, and strife.



Without durable solutions or humanitarian programs, Sahrawi youth are held in a precarious position.

4. New flight paths between families?

Since the end of the flights, some separated families have found alternative ways of seeing each other, such as visiting each other in a neighboring country like Mauritania or Spain. Representatives of the Parties suggested that these alternatives make the flights unnecessary. However, self-arranged visits come with difficulties that make them unfeasible for most families. One refugee beneficiary described the issues with alternative family visits: “It’s so difficult for families to see each other without this [CBM] program, specifically for those families that don’t have the means,” She said. After a pause, her mouth curled down in a frown, and she went on: “It’s difficult for me to go and visit because of passport and visa issues, and financial constraints...I felt sorry for the people that didn’t get to benefit, and I feel for those that don’t have the means to arrange their own visits to other locations.”

Interviewees who had both gone on a CBM flight and also visited their families on their own estimated the cost of hosting a family for a CBM visit was around USD 2,000—including the tent, the animal for slaughter, and all of the gifts and meals. This cost was shared among extended family and friends. By contrast, they estimated the cost of a visit without CBM to another country like a border town in Mauritania—including a place to stay and transportation there and back—would be around USD 6,000, a cost that would only be shouldered by the immediate family.

CBM local staff said they know of some individuals who were able to meet since the program stopped, but those individuals tended to be moneyed and politically connected. “Those without financial means need to see their families most, but can’t; those with money can see family anytime anywhere—in Spain, in the U.S. even—they don’t need this program,” said one CBM local staff member.

4.1 Uncertain flight plans

The day we were scheduled to leave Tindouf, our MINURSO flight was grounded due to dust storms. It takes a confluence of factors to get a plane up in the air in the Sahara Desert. It can’t be too hot, the air must be clear, approvals must come from the place of departure, and the place of arrival, and all passengers and crew must show up at the right place and the right time. It is not an easy exercise, and the assurance of a flight taking off and landing as planned is never guaranteed.

Stuck in Tindouf another day, we had coffee in the Rabouni base camp’s café, a concrete octagon with simple metal chairs and tables dispersed throughout the dimly lit fluorescent space. We were soon joined by a former CBM officer, who, despite having worked in other offices and being away from Tindouf for several years, still gets questions from refugees about the status of the flights every time he returns. He spoke enthusiastically, gesturing with a hand that sloshed about a small, steaming paper cup of espresso: “still today when I come to the camps on mission, people come up to me asking: ‘when will they start again?’”

Later that day after lunch in the Rabouni dining hall—a makeshift cooking area in a storage tent—we brought our trays back to the kitchen and the cook struck up a conversation with us in Arabic. “How was the meal? How did we like Tindouf? What had we been up to?” he asked. Upon hearing that we were conducting research with CBM he broke out in a smile and began to speak about how wonderful the family visits had been. “When will the flights start again?” he asked as he took our trays. As we left the dining hall heading back to our vehicle, our local staff driver commented, “You hear this all the time. Seeing old staff, even old CBM vehicles, people get excited about what this might mean for the flights.”

The following day, the sky cleared, and our flight across the berm took off. Back in Laayoune, a senior MINURSO official described the current status and the future of the program in no uncertain terms: “Without political pressure from the UN Special Representative or the Special Envoy, the Parties won’t restart anything.” Despite this frank acknowledgment of the political deadlock, the representative was clear that in the meantime there is space, and need for humanitarian action.

There were however a group of political leaders on both sides of the berm who saw humanitarian value in the CBM office’s work. Speaking to one representative of the Parties in his dark concrete office—cold from January winds and a recent rare desert rain—he saw the flights through a compassionate eye: “These visits were journeys of tears: it started with crying, and it ended with crying,” he said as he looked down, his voice filling with the same mixture of layered emotions we heard from the refugee beneficiaries. He had seen his mother on the other side of the berm only once since the ceasefire in 1991.

The day after this meeting, we interviewed an older woman who went with her mother to visit her uncle in 2014, one of the last visits. As we entered her tent, she said as an aside, “it’s cold out this morning,” and began briskly fanning the hot coals warming a pot of tea. As she described her visit—adrift in her memory—she lost focus on the coals, and they cooled to black. When she finished her story of her visit, she paused, asking us why the flights were stopped. The CBM officer with us responded, “that’s for the Parties to decide.” The Sahrawi coordinator sitting with us shifted his weight, and began poking at the coals beneath the tea kettle, stoking the black embers back to a red glow. We asked the woman what other projects she would suggest for CBM in the future, and she looked up from the tea kettle, her eyes glowing: “restart the flights.” The coordinator smiled, nodding, but did not speak, and began to warm his hands over the now-red coals.



5. Additional readings

For additional context on the CBM program, readers are referred to:

American Institutes for Research. (2017). UNHCR Confidence Building Measures: Tindouf, Algeria, Trip Report and Recommendations on Sahrawi Youth Programme. Washington, D.C., American Institutes for Research.

Benson, E., 2009. (2009). "Confidence-building measures in Western Sahara." Forced Migration Review **33**, 56-58.

Jacobsen, K. (2017). A frozen conflict and a humanitarian program that works: UNHCR's Confidence Building Measures in Western Sahara. Medford, MA, Feinstein International Center.

For historical background on the Western Sahara conflict, see:

Hodges, T. (1983). Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War. United Kingdom, Lawrence Hill & Company.

For more recent background on the Western Sahara situation, see:

Boukhars, A. and A. O. Amar (2011). "Trouble in the Western Sahara." The Journal of the Middle East and Africa **2**(2): 220-234.

Muller, L. (2012). From Camp to City: Refugee Camps of the Western Sahara, Manuel Herz.

Mundy, J. (2007). "Performing the nation, pre-figuring the state: The Western Saharan refugees, thirty years later." Journal of Modern African Studies **45**(2): 275-297.

For more information on collective memory of political events, trauma, and recovery, see:

Diemer, M. A. and S. R. Ali (2009). "Integrating Social Class into Vocational Psychology: Theory and Practice Implications." Journal of Career Assessment **17**(3): 247-265.

Pennebaker, J. W., Paez, D., Rim, B., & Paez, D. (1997). Collective Memory of Political Events: Social Psychological Perspectives, Psychology Press.

Porter, M. and N. Haslam (2005). "Predisplacement and Postdisplacement Factors Associated with Mental Health of Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons: A Meta-analysis." Journal of the American Medical Association **294**(5): 602-612.

Ralph, D. and L. Staeheli (2011). "Home and Migration: Mobilities, Belongings and Identities." Geography Compass **5**(7): 517-530.

Varvin, S. (1998). "Psychoanalytic psychotherapy with traumatized refugees: integration, symbolization, and mourning." Am J Psychotherapy **52**(1): 64-71.

6. A note on methods

The scope of study focused on personal experiences with CBM, and avoided political, procedural, or logistical lines of inquiry. We were most interested in the human experiences with CBM, personal reflections, and the humanitarian impact of CBM activities. The final report was written in a style and tone intended to convey the subjective experiences of beneficiaries.

Prior to arrival in Laayoune, researchers conducted a desk review of UNHCR and academic reporting on Western Sahara and CBM programming. Conversations with current CBM leadership clarified the context, scope of research, and potential lines of inquiry. These two sources of information allowed for identification of key informants and selection of family beneficiary interviewees in the Tindouf camps.

Selection of family beneficiaries was supported by Polisario field coordinators, based on demographic criteria including age and gender, dates of participation in the family visits from 2004-2014, and types of family relationships between those separated and reconnected by the visit (e.g. mother and son, husband and wife, brother and sister). Upon selection, CBM coordinators briefed the beneficiaries on the purpose of interviews, and received initial consent for participation. The researchers met the families in their homes or tents, spent time getting to know them, and received their consent prior to beginning the formal interview.

Family interviews were conducted in Arabic using an interview schedule, with questions pre-translated with Hassaniya dialect assistance from CBM staff and Polisario CBM coordinators. Refugee interviews were typically conducted individually; when relatives who were also beneficiaries were available, then interviews were conducted in groups of two or three. Key informant interviews with UN experts and representatives of the Parties were conducted in the language most comfortable for the interviewee—Arabic, English, or French—and followed a semi-structured format. These expert interviews were usually conducted individually. In addition, we conducted two focus group discussions with UN local staff in Laayoune and Tindouf.

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