

Glossary

aplomb	aplomo
fluent	(hablar) con fluidez / dominar un idioma
to get by	arreglarselas
inhospitable	poco hospitalario
at all	(expresión de énfasis (negativa))
soar	disparen
plummet	caer en picado
keep things cool	mantener las cosas frescas
running water	agua corriente
gusts	ráfaga de viento
mounting	creciente
founder	fundador
back-up	soporte
taking place	ocurriendo
largely unknown	en gran parte desconocido
underprivileged	desfavorecido
grant	subvención



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Try to answer these questions based on the article

- 1) Where does Fatimetu live?
- 2) Why is it so difficult to grow anything there?
- 3) Why does this area have so many health problems?
- 4) Where do most of the people who attend the festival come from? Why?
- 5) Why did Spain colonise the Western Sahara in the 19th century?
- 6) What divides Western Sahara from north to south?
- 7) According to the UN, is the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara legal?
- 8) Why is it hard for the Spanish government to act?
- 9) Who are the Saharai children's "Spanish parents"?
- 10) How does Madrid photographer Aníbal say he would like to help?
- 11) What does Pilar hope to get which will enable her to put together a music project?

SAND SCREEN

Paul Rigg travels to the Sahara desert refugee camp where each year a group of *madrileños* puts on a unique film festival to highlight the 30-year plight of the Saharais



Photo: Paul Rigg
Six-year-old Zaina Shaban

Fatimetu Shaban, 11, manages the daily tasks of her desert *jaima* (tent) with the confidence of any adult, and she loves and cares for all the other children in her family with equal aplomb. She communicates with her mother in Arabic but turns to her fluent *castellano* for the Spanish-speaking visitors, and French to get by in Algeria where her *jaima* is based. She is an extraordinarily open, relaxed and happy girl, a fact that's all the more remarkable when you consider she lives in one of the most inhospitable places on earth.

Fatimetu's home is a camp with 165,000 other refugees in the Sahara desert. It is extremely difficult to grow anything there or in fact do anything productive at all as temperatures soar to over 50°C in the summer months, and plummet to below freezing on winter nights. Here there is no fridge to keep things cool, no running water in the spaces referred to as the kitchen or bathroom, and the food—like everything else—is full of sand, due in part to the regular gusts of wind that kick it into the air. "I am constantly having to deal with conjunctivitis and respiratory problems caused by the sand and intestinal illnesses produced by parasites in the water," says Dr Ab-ba Ali Maulud, director of the local hospital.

I meet Fatimetu at the camp's annual international film festival. Yes, you read that right. For the past five years Madrid-based charity FiSahara has been mounting a celebration of cinema in this desert land to draw attention to the plight of Fatimetu's people, the displaced Saharai of Western Sahara. "I have known about the issue of the Saharais since I came to Spain but I only really became involved when they got in touch with me after seeing a film of mine," explains founder Javier Corcuera, a Peruvian filmmaker who has made Madrid his home. "I visited the camps and the idea grew to hold the first film festival which took place in 2004. In the first year 250 people came and this year we brought 400. Now we have the opposite problem because so many people want to come and support the Saharais and we don't have enough places for them."

According to FiSahara's Sara Pujalte around 80 per cent of the people who attend the film festival are from the Spanish capital. And because Madrid is the centre of cinema in Spain, 90 per cent of the volunteers, producers, distributors, musicians and technical back-up are also *madrileños*.

Photo: Paul Rigg



Fatimetu Shaban

30 years of hurt

So why are the Saharai here in the Algerian desert? Their situation can be traced back to the Spanish colonisation of (what is now called) the Western Sahara in the 19th century. The phosphate-rich land and the abundance of fish off its coast made it an attractive place for Spain until the mid-1970s. Then King Hassan II took advantage of a period of political instability—caused by Franco's impending death—to order over 350,000 Moroccans to march into the territory, claiming that historically it had been an integral part of Morocco. The ensuing fighting

forced around 165,000 Saharais across the border into Algeria. Morocco then began constructing a series of fortified walls that now stretch for over 2,000 kilometres and divide Western Sahara from north to south. The United Nations declared the occupation illegal and issued a directive that a referendum should be held among the Saharais to decide whether or not they wish to be self-governing. Over 30 years later the Saharais are still waiting for that referendum to take place.

Successive Spanish governments have argued that they find themselves in a difficult situation. On the one hand Spain enjoys favourable fishing rights off the coast of the Western Sahara and seeks to maintain good relations with Morocco over issues such as immigration and the status of the Spanish coastal cities of Ceuta and Melilla in northern Morocco. On the other, a large number of Spanish citizens consider that the Saharais have been 'abandoned' by the Spanish government and are concerned by the lack of support for the UN directive and human rights abuses taking place while Western Sahara remains under Moroccan occupation.

Showing solidarity

As a result of this concern from Spanish citizens, an act of solidarity has taken place that is without precedent in Western Europe and largely unknown to many foreigners living in Spain. Every year, 10,000 families throughout the Iberian Peninsula welcome Saharai children into their homes for several months at a time. Saharai refugee children like Fatimetu speak Spanish so fluently because they have spent time with people they call their "Spanish parents".

Other acts of solidarity include donations of cars, lorries and equipment from Spanish town halls and Autonomous Communities. Fatimetu's younger sister, Zaina, 6, for example, regularly wears a bright red T-shirt with the words 'Sahara Marathon' and 'Comunidad de Madrid' emblazoned across it. This full-scale desert marathon, now an annual event, last took place in February, when the climate is thankfully cooler.

And another event is the annual Sahara International Film Festival, held in the most underprivileged refugee camp of Dajla, 170 kilometres from the nearest town.

"The event has generated a lot of interest from the media, particularly since Javier Bardem visited last year," Corcuera continues. "Bardem started a campaign to collect 500,000 signatures to put pressure on the Spanish government to give diplomatic status to the Frente Polisario [a movement that works for a 'free' Sahara] because at the moment they don't have it. We expect to deliver this petition to the government shortly."

Is there hope for a resolution to the problem? "Well, each year you can see that the people here are a little bit more desperate but they have never lost their hope. They want to return to their land—and us too. We don't want to have a festival here, we want to do it in a free Sahara in front of the sea, and we will continue doing it here until one day we can do it there."

Longing for freedom

In July Fatimetu is looking forward to what will be her final trip to see her "Spanish mother" in the País Vasco, because after that other children like her younger sister will need places. If the political stalemate continues, she will just have to go on living with the punishing temperatures here every summer. As there is hardly any work in the camps, she will simply live off any international aid that is sent—and wait. Like tens of thousands of Saharai children here, all they can do is hope that one day they will be able to return to the land of their ancestors. When Fatimetu is asked what she would like different, she answers that she is very happy with everything and that she would only like one change: "I would like to see a free Sahara. That is the one thing I want most in my life."

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www.festivalsahara.com & www.todosconelsahara.com



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Free downloadable glossary and worksheet available for this article at www.in-madrid.com/didactic.html

The FiSahara Festival experience

Following a five-hour bus drive through the desert, a landscape dotted with abandoned and collapsing adobe houses mark the first sign of the refugee camps. These slowly give way to occupied dwellings and the distinctive and colourful *jaima* tents that populate the territory. Large open areas around the tents are broken up only by the ubiquitous circular steel goat and camel pens.

On the first day many things have novelty value such as walking barefoot across the sand, drinking sweet green tea and chatting or checking out the festival schedule inside an adobe hut during the hottest hours. Latin American and political films such as 'Ché' and 'Los Limoneros', were among the most popular here in 2009, with the biggest movies being shown in the huge outdoor cinema, under the stars.

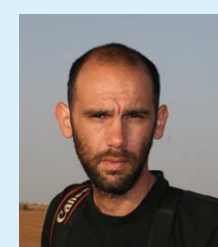
I'd love a cool drink but there is no fridge. I don't mind not showering properly but that is because I know it is only for a few days. The dust is in my throat and there is sand in the food. As time passes a feeling of oppression starts to bite. It is worth remembering that the Saharais have had over 30 years of this.

And then, on the other hand, there are the joyful moments of bumping into an acquaintance and sharing your experiences. Or going to a retro-futuristic concert far away in the dunes where musicians dressed in traditional white gowns lay down funky grooves on their electric guitars. And then there's perhaps the best part of all: the warmth and hospitality of the Saharai people—and especially of the children—who show so much love, joy and hope despite the harsh conditions surrounding them.

Who goes there? Festival-goers talk

Amelia, magician, 29, Madrid

"I wanted to do this trip because I believe in the cause of the Saharai people and I wanted to experience the festival. I also wanted to do some magic here and promote the activities of the association 'Amigos Pueblos Saharais de Alcobendas y San Sebastian de los Reyes'. I have experienced the Festival as a happy, emotional, simple, natural and human event."



Anibal, photographer, 30, Madrid

"It is stimulating for me from a work point of view and I wanted to get to know the Saharais. It interests me politically. The people here open their doors to you and show you how their lives are. They wait morning and night to ensure you are well. Because of that I'd like to return and help by, for example, bringing medicines."

Pilar, therapist, 39 & her partner **Oscar**, 42, Madrid

"I came because I wanted to see the situation for myself and put together a music project for the children. I hope to get a grant to establish this project and get a visa so that I can come and go when I want. For me the idea of coming here is to be able to see what I can do for them and what I can contribute. It has been a very powerful and emotional experience for me."



Alba, photographer, 27, La Coruña, Galicia

"Two years ago a friend told me about this Festival and I have wanted to go since then. I wanted to take photos, see some films, raise awareness and encourage others to come and get to know the Saharai people and the situation they find themselves in. It has been a great experience and one to repeat. We need to go out and tell people about it."