

International

Algeria urges Morocco to quit W Sahara buffer zone

UN appoints Western Sahara envoy after two-year search

ALGIERS: Algeria, the main backer of Western Sahara's Polisario Front independence movement, called on Morocco yesterday to withdraw from a key buffer zone, after the United Nations named a new envoy. The UN on Wednesday named veteran diplomat Staffan de Mistura as its point man on the decades-old conflict, a job that had remained vacant for nearly two and a half years as the Polisario and Morocco rejected a dozen other candidates. The Algerian foreign ministry noted "with interest" Mistura's appointment, and called for the removal of Moroccan troops deployed late last year in the Guerguerat area in the far south of the territory.

They had been sent to reopen a key highway leading into Mauritania after it was blocked by Sahrawi activists who see it as violating a 1991 ceasefire deal. The "demilitarization of this zone... is the cornerstone of any credible political process aiming to find a peaceful solution to the conflict," the Algerian ministry said. It said Algeria supported UN peace efforts and voiced hope that De Mistura could "relaunch direct, serious negotiations between the Polisario Front and the Kingdom of Morocco in order to reach a solution guaranteeing the Sahrawi people can freely and authentically exercise their inalienable right to self-determination."

The UN sees the Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony, as a "non-autonomous territory", but Morocco regards it as an integral part of its territory and insists its claim to sovereignty be recognised under any peace deal.

The kingdom controls some 80 percent of the largely desert territory, which has mineral reserves and access to rich Atlantic fisheries, as well as providing a potentially strategic trade route linking Morocco with West African markets. Rabat has proposed a plan for autonomy but the Polisario insists on an independence referendum as called for under the 1990 ceasefire deal. Morocco's

tense relations with Algeria have deteriorated since Rabat last year won Washington's recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara in exchange for normalizing ties with Zionist entity.

United Nations veteran diplomat Staffan de Mistura was named Wednesday as the organization's envoy to the Western Sahara conflict, nearly two and a half years after the post had become vacant as a dozen other candidates were rejected by either Morocco or the Polisario Front rebel movement.

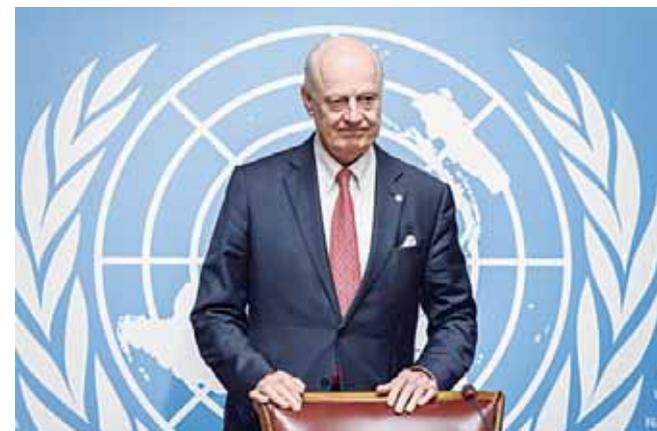
UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric called Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's nomination of the 74-year-old Italian a "positive signal," after such a long selection process. Dujarric said De Mistura would be set to take over the position, which has been empty since May 2019, on November 1.

Morocco had initially rejected De Mistura—the thirteenth name floated for the job—as envoy in May before finally accepting the nomination under pressure from the United States, according to diplomats. He will be based in Brussels, where he already lives, according to the UN.

He will succeed former German president Horst Kohler, who stepped down in 2019 after making little progress on ending the conflict despite having restarted talks between Morocco, the Polisario Front and regional powers Algeria and Mauritania.

The United States "warmly welcomes" De Mistura's appointment, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement, offering support for a political process to bring a "durable and dignified" end to the conflict. "We will actively support his efforts to promote a peaceful and prosperous future for the people of Western Sahara and the region," the statement said.

"It suits them. They cannot annul Trump's decision without altering the relationship created in the exchange between Morocco and the Zionist entity," this official said. "And they cannot confirm



GENEVA: In this file photo, UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura arrives to a press conference. —AFP

it as they would go against UN resolutions," the official said, adding that remaining on the fence allows the US to keep pressuring Morocco. The UN considers Western Sahara, a former Spanish colony, a "non-self-governing territory," with the question of its control up in the air for decades. The issue has pitted Morocco against the independence-seeking Polisario Front, which is backed by Algeria.

Rabat, which controls 80 percent of the vast soil-rich desert territory—bordering rich fishing grounds—has proposed a plan for Western Sahara self-governance under Moroccan sovereignty. —AFP

15 years on, editors warn time up for justice in Politkovskaya murder

MOSCOW: Russians commemorated yesterday the killing of investigative journalist Anna Politkovskaya 15 years ago on President Vladimir Putin's birthday, while her newspaper warned time had run out to punish the masterminds of the murder. Politkovskaya, a fierce critic of Putin and the Kremlin's wars in Chechnya, was gunned down on October 7, 2006, in the entrance hall of her apartment block in central Moscow. She was 48 years old.

Falling on Putin's birthday, the killing of a top investigative reporter—who worked for Russia's leading independent newspaper Novaya Gazeta and contributed to Western publications including the Guardian—sent shockwaves around the world. "Fifteen years after the murder of our journalist, the statute of limitations on the crime has expired. By law, only a court can extend it," Novaya Gazeta wrote on the eve of the anniversary. "Otherwise, the masterminds will go unpunished." The commemorative events at Novaya Gazeta's editorial offices come amid an unprecedented crackdown on the opposition and independent media, with authorities imprisoning Russia's top opposition



MOSCOW: In this file photo, a woman holds a portrait of slain Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya during a rally marking the 10th anniversary of her murder in Moscow. —AFP

politician Alexei Navalny. After all this time, investigators have yet to say who ordered the apparent contract killing, and Novaya Gazeta says the authorities have no real interest in pursuing the investigation any further for political reasons.

Putin's spokesman said yesterday it was "very difficult" to investigate contract killings. "We would all of course like for the instigators of this crime—both who ordered and executed it—to be punished," Dmitry Peskov told reporters. Asked if the Kremlin would be in favor of extending the statute of limitations for Politkovskaya's murder, Peskov said that the "inevitability of punishment" for such crimes was paramount. —AFP

Gunmen kill 24 people in northern Nigeria

KANO, Nigeria: Gunmen raided two villages in northwest Nigeria killing 24 people, police and residents said yesterday, in the latest attacks by gangs of criminals. Northwest and central Nigeria have for years been plagued by heavily-armed gangs called bandits who raid villages, kidnap residents and loot and burn homes. Military operations are ongoing in the region, with the army saying last week it had "neutralized" nearly 300 bandits, but attacks have continued.

On Tuesday, motorcycle-riding bandits stormed two villages in Katsina and nearby Zamfara in separate attacks, killing residents and burning homes, according to the police and residents. In the first attack, dozens of bandits rode into Yasore village in Batsari district around 0500 GMT, opening fire on residents and torching homes, said Katsina's police spokesman Gambo Isah. "The bandits killed 10 people and wounded many others in the attack on the village," Isah said.

"They burnt houses and shops after stealing

provisions," he added. News of the attack was slow to emerge as Batsari is one of 13 districts affected by a telecom shutdown that local authorities have imposed in an effort to disrupt criminal activities. Later the same day, around 100 bandits on motorcycles besieged Kuryan Madaro village in neighbouring Zamfara state, killing people and seizing money and mobile phones from residents. "The bandits came in around 9:00 pm (20:00 GMT) and laid siege on the village, making escape difficult for the people," resident Hamisu Malami said.

"Some of them went door-to-door asking people to surrender their mobile phones and money and those who resisted were shot, including those who tried to flee," said Malami.

"They killed 14 people and injured many others," he said. Malami spoke from the state capital Gusau where telecom service was restored last week. His account was supported by another resident Bashiru Maiwada. Police and officials in the state have not responded to inquiries about the incident.

Authorities suspended telecommunications last month in Zamfara, where most of the attacks take place, and parts of Katsina, Sokoto and Kaduna states, to disrupt the criminal networks. The gangs, who maintain camps in Rugu forest straddling those four states, have been increasingly targeting schools where they kidnap students for ransom. —AFP