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New violence reported in Western Sahara

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RABAT, Morocco -- New clashes erupted in the Western Sahara between Moroccan security forces and local people seeking independence for the vast, resource-rich desert region, activists said.

People in the regional capital used rocks and sticks in street battles with Moroccan police conducting house-to-house searches on Tuesday, said Brahim Ahmed, an activist for the native Saharawi people.

"Every now and then you hear something, screams and everything," he said.

Violence exploded Monday after Moroccan forces using tear-gas and high-pressure water cannons tore down a tent camp set up by some 20,000 Saharawi outside of the territory's main city, Laayoune, to protest discrimination and deprivation at the hands of the Moroccan government, activists said. The camp dwellers fought the government forces and both sides reported casualties, although the figures were conflicting could not be independently confirmed.

Laayoune is populated mainly by Moroccan settlers as a result of the central government's drive to assert control over the former Spanish territory, which it occupied when Spain left in 1975 after nearly a century of colonial rule.

The region's main autonomy movement, the Polisario Front, declared independence in 1976 on behalf of the nomadic Saharawi, who have their own Arabic dialect and distinct culture. The dispute is one of the world's longest unresolved conflicts.

The Polisario Front on Tuesday accused Morocco's government of provoking the territory's worst violence in decades in order to derail U.N.-sponsored talks on the future of the Western Sahara. The arid section of northwest Africa has teeming fishing grounds and valuable deposits of phosphates, minerals used widely to make everything from fertilizer to photocopier toner.

Morocco's official MAP news agency said four security officials were killed Monday at the Gdim Izik tent camp six miles (10 kilometers) east of Laayoune, and one was stabbed to death in unrest in the city. About two dozen other security agents were hospitalized, it said.

The Polisario said Tuesday that 11 Saharawis died in the raid on the tent city and rioting that spread to Laayoune. It said 723 people were hurt, with another 159 people unaccounted for.

Ahmed said police on Tuesday were raiding homes in Laayoune and forcing people to swear their allegiance to Morocco's king and national government.

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"You have to sing the national anthem, you have to say the Western Sahara is Moroccan," Ahmed said.

Morocco's government made no comment and did not allow foreign media access to the region.

The Polisario Front's representative in Madrid said violence broke out again Tuesday in two sections of Laayoune after Moroccan police detained large numbers of people in the city.

Bucharaya Beyun said he learned of the clashes from associates in Laayoune. Isabel Terraza, a Spanish activist who is in the city, also told The Associated Press by telephone that there were more clashes under way. She said large numbers of soldiers and police were patrolling the city.

Despite the clashes, informal talks between Morocco and the Polisario Front near New York City went ahead as scheduled on Monday and Tuesday, with delegations from the neighboring countries of Algeria and Mauritania in attendance.

U.N. special envoy Christopher Ross, who attended the talks that wrapped up Tuesday evening, said the two sides "engaged in broad and frank discussions of each other's proposals on Western Sahara in an atmosphere of mutual respect."

But Ross said each party "continues to reject the proposal of the other as a basis for future negotiations."

The envoy said the sides did agree to resume "without delay" family visits to the disputed region by air. They also will meet with the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees in Geneva "in the near future," along with representatives from Algeria and Mauritania, to work on resuming family visits by road as well, Ross said.

The U.N. envoy concluded saying: "The participants agreed to convene again in December as well as early next year to pursue, through innovative approaches, the negotiating process for which the United Nations Security Council resolutions have called."

"With what it did yesterday, Morocco wanted the negotiations to break down and thought we would not attend the negotiations. It wanted us to take the blame for the talks breaking down," Beyun said Tuesday. "It wanted us to pay for the consequences of a breakdown, but we attended." He had no information on what happened at the talks.

Laayoune is about 30 percent Saharawi, while the rest of its residents are native Moroccans that the government has moved there.

Tension has been rife since a 1991 U.N.-negotiated cease-fire that ended a 16-year guerrilla war between the Polisario and the North African kingdom.

The enmity strains relations between Morocco and Algeria, which harbors Saharawi refugee camps and backs the Polisario bid for a U.N.-sponsored referendum on the status of the territory. Previous bids to hold a referendum have fallen through due to disputes on whether native Moroccans should be allowed to vote in a referendum.

During the last round of informal talks in February, neither side budged and Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said in April that he saw no prospect of resolving the dispute in the foreseeable future.

For Morocco, Western Sahara's status as part of the national territory is a near-sacred subject - like the king and Islam - leaving little room for debate. Moroccan newspapers on Tuesday roundly applauded the police intervention at the camp and in Laayoune.

Woolfs reported from Madrid. Elaine Ganley contributed from Paris. AP Writer Anita Snow contributed from the United Nations.

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