Armed Conflict

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Morocco Analysis: Polisario Front claims attacks against Moroccan forces in several locations in Western Sahara region on November 14; tensions to stay high, limited hostilities remain possible

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Executive Summary:

- On November 13, Morocco announced the launch of a military operation in the buffer zone of Western Sahara's Guerguerat to end the "provocations" by the Polisario Front. This is a highly notable development given the observance of a long-term ceasefire in the region.
- The Polisario Front denounced Morocco's move on November 13 and its military wing, the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army (SPLA), claimed attacks against Moroccan military forces across several positions in the Morocco-controlled Western Sahara region on November 13-14. This points to the potential for additional attacks and limited confrontations over the coming hours and days.
- While tensions will remain high, a broad escalation in hostilities between the two parties remains unlikely overall given that Morocco has indicated that it secured the Gueguerat border crossing and has refrained from additional military action over recent hours, suggesting that this was its primary objective for the operation. This may change should the Polisario Front escalate the scope of attacks against Moroccan targets.
- There is also a potential threat of a spillover of clashes into Algerian territory given that the locations of several attacks claimed by the Front are in close proximity to Algeria's western border with Morocco and Western Sahara.
- **Those operating or residing in Morocco are advised to avoid all travel to border areas with the Western Sahara region given the potential for a flare-up of hostilities in the area over the coming hours and days. Consult with us at intel@max-security.com or +44 20-3540-0434 for itinerary-based consultation and on-ground contingency support options.**

Please be advised:

Statements from the Morroccan government, media:

- On November 13, Morocco's official news agency reported that the Guerguerat border crossing between Morocco and Mauritania had been "completely secured by the establishment of a security cordon by the Royal Armed Forces (FAR)".

- The Moroccan authorities stated that the operation “took place in a peaceful manner, without clashes or threat to the safety of civilians”.
- The Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs further stated that “Morocco remains firmly attached to the preservation of the ceasefire” and that the operation “aims to consolidate the ceasefire by preventing the recurrence of such serious [provocative] acts”.
- The Moroccan authorities announced that during the operation, members of the Polisario Front “opened fire” on its soldiers, without causing casualties.
- The official news agency also reported that members of the Front “set fire to the tents they had erected” and fled towards the “East and the South under the eyes the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO)”.
- An unconfirmed pro-Morrocco report indicates that the leader of the Polisario Front and President of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), Brahim Ghali, left the group’s headquarters, located in Tindouf in Algeria.

Polisario Front’s stance:

- The Polisario Front reportedly issued a statement on November 13 claiming that “war has begun” and that “Morocco has liquidated the ceasefire”, which was signed in 1991. An official reportedly further stated that the “Sahrawi troops are engaged in legitimate self-defense and are responding to the Moroccan troops”.
- The former Prime Minister of the SADR reportedly issued a statement on November 13 calling on the “Sahrawi people to close their ranks and to show determination and bravery to counter the attacks and liberate the country at the cost of sacrifices”.
- On November 13, the Polisario Front’s military wing, the Sahrawi People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) claimed to have attacked several Moroccan sites at unspecified locales in response to the breach of the ceasefire agreement.
- On November 14, the SPLA claimed to have attacked Moroccan positions in Mahbes, Haouza, Aousserd, and Farsia, which caused “loss of life and material damages to the Moroccan armed forces”.

Statements by international actors, stakeholders:

- On November 13, UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres expressed “grave concern regarding the possible consequences of the latest developments” but “is determined to do everything possible to remove all obstacles to the resumption of the political process”.
- Algeria’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, on November 13, “strongly” condemned “serious violations” of the ceasefire and called for the “immediate cessation” of military operations. He further called on both parties to “show a sense of responsibility and restraint”.

Background:

The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) is a self-declared state claiming authority over the disputed territory of Western Sahara, which is presently controlled by Morocco. After Spain withdrew from the region in 1976, the Polisario Front, a politico-military organization based in Algeria and composed largely of Sahrawis, the inhabitants of Western Sahara, declared independence as well as the establishment of a government-in-exile. It was engaged in armed conflict for control of the Western Sahara territory with Morocco and Mauritania until 1991. The SADR is now recognized by approximately 50 governments and is a full member of the African Union.

Assessments & Forecast:

1. The development comes amid decades-long tensions between Morocco and the Polisario Front over the disputed territory of Western Sahara. In 1991, the UN brokered a ceasefire that ended a conflict that began in 1975 and established a peacekeeping mission to monitor the truce and oversee the implementation of a referendum on the territory's status. Since then, negotiations have largely stalled and the talks involving the UN, the Polisario Front, Morocco, as well as the neighboring countries of Mauritania and Algeria, have been suspended over past months.
2. Tensions have been recently exacerbated following the Polisario Front's reported erection of several barricades in Guerguerat, which led to a halt of civilian and commercial traffic between Morocco and Mauritania since October 21. On November 9, the Polisario Front threatened to end the ceasefire with Rabat following indications that Morocco had deployed troops along the separation wall near Guerguerat. Against this background, Morocco's latest military operation and the reported clashes between the two parties on November 13 are highly notable given the lack of direct hostilities over the past years.
3. The Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs' statement on Rabat's commitment to the ceasefire signals that Morocco is not interested in further escalating the hostilities with the Polisario Front at the current juncture. This is further bolstered by the fact that the Moroccan authorities announced that they had secured the Guerguerat border crossing a few hours after the launch of the military

operation. This indicates that Rabat's main priority was to reopen the border crossing in order to ensure the flow of goods and civilians between the Kingdom and Mauritania. By stressing that the military operation did not represent a threat "to the safety of civilians", the Moroccan authorities also aim to project that their forces are committed to preserving civilian lives, while securing the area.

4. However, statements by several officials of the Polisario Front, which considers Morocco's military operation to be a breach of the 1991 ceasefire, indicates that the Front deems Rabat's move as a trigger for renewed conflict. This is illustrated by the call made by the SADR's former Prime Minister urging the local population to "show determination to counter the attacks", which highlights the Polisario Front's attempt to mobilize its constituents in retaliation to the Moroccan military operation. By claiming that Morocco has breached the terms of the ceasefire, the Polisario Front likely seeks to portray Rabat as the aggressor, and thereby justify the potential launching of attacks against Moroccan targets. This may enable the Polisario Front to bring attention to, and garner some international condemnation of, Morocco's military operation in Guerguerat, which serves the overall narrative of the group's opposition to Rabat's claims of sovereignty over Western Sahara.
5. **FORECAST**: Overall, tensions between Rabat and the Polisario Front are likely to remain high over the coming days. As evidenced by the Front's claimed attacks on November 13-14, there is a potential for additional attacks against Moroccan military positions in the latter's controlled border areas in Western Sahara, near Moroccan border areas. This may lead to limited, back-and-forth hostilities between Morocco and the Polisario Front over the coming days. However, although the SPLA had reportedly deployed surface-to-air missiles in undisclosed locations along the Moroccan-Western Sahara wall in October 2018, the de-facto border between Western Sahara and Morocco, the lack of overall offensive activities over recent years renders it unclear whether such systems have received the proper level of maintenance required and to what degree SPLA members are still trained to use them effectively. Therefore, taken together with Morocco's aforementioned limited objectives of its military operation, a broad escalation of the conflict remains unlikely at the current juncture. Both actors will likely seek to uphold their image as responsible actors that do not seek to endanger the lives of local civilians. However, this may change should the Polisario Front escalate the scope of attacks against Moroccan targets and inflict casualties on Moroccan troops.
6. **FORECAST**: Meanwhile, the fact that the Moroccan army reportedly repelled an attack near Mahbes on November 13, and the SPLA claimed attacks on November 14, located in close proximity to the Algerian border, points to the potential threat of spillover into the Algerian territory. This is due to the fact that the Polisario Front controls several Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf, along the border with Morocco and Western Sahara. Therefore, tensions will likely be elevated in the Moroccan-controlled area along the Algerian border. Furthermore, due to Algeria's known long-standing support for the Polisario Front, the latest development may further strain relations between Rabat and Algiers over the coming weeks.

Recommendations:

1. Travel to Rabat, Casablanca, and Marrakech may continue while adhering to security precautions regarding crime, civil unrest, and militancy.
2. Avoid all travel to border areas with Western Sahara given the potential for a flare-up of hostilities in the region over the coming hours. **Consult with us at intel@max-security.com or +44 20-3540-0434 for itinerary-based consultation and on-ground contingency support options.**
3. In major cities, remain vigilant in the vicinity of public squares, government buildings, Jewish community centers, and police stations, as these areas serve as focal points for protests and militant attacks. Alert authorities to unattended or otherwise suspicious packages or baggage, particularly in crowded areas.