Travel

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Global Alert: Polisario Front reportedly deploys surface-to-air missile systems alongside Moroccan Western Sahara Wall, threatens commercial airlines

Please be advised

- Reports from October 26 indicate that the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army (SPLA), the Polisario Front's military wing, has deployed surface-to-air missile systems in undisclosed locations along the Moroccan Western Sahara Wall, which is the de-facto border between Western Sahara and Morocco.
- According to reports citing an unnamed official in the organization, the move is meant to show that the SPLA is "fully combat ready to protect Sahrawi airspace". The official warned foreign commercial airlines not to "enter Saharawi airspace without authorization".
- The official furthermore stated that the organization sent warning letters to several foreign commercial airlines, specifically naming a Netherlands-based company, urging them to refrain from operating in disputed territories.

Assessments & Forecast

The Polisario Front is known to possess several types of surface-to-air missile systems, which include the following:

- 2K12 Kub/SA-6 "Gainful" with a range of 20 km and flight ceiling of 7 km.
- 9K33 Osa/SA-8 "Gecko" with a range of at least 9 km and flight ceiling of at least 5 km.
- 9K31 Strela-1/SA-9 "Gaskin" with a range of at least 4.2 km and flight ceiling of at least 3.5 km.
- 9K32 Strela-2/SA-7 "Grail" man-portable air-defense system (MANPADS) with a range of at least 3.7 km and flight ceiling of at least 1.5 km.

These system pose varying degrees of threat to civil aviation, either by targeting airliners at a cruising altitude or slow and low-flying aircraft approaching for landing or immediately after take-off. While the SPLA have downed Moroccan fighter aircraft using these systems in the past, it has been several decades since they were last used operationally, and it is unclear if the systems have received the proper level of maintenance required and to what degree SPLA members are still trained to use them effectively.

In addition, given the overall lack of offensive activities by the Polisario Front in recent years, and the degree of international backlash that will be associated with such a hostile move, it is not very likely that the group will target a civilian airliner in the immediate

term. Instead, the threats are likely meant as rhetoric to pressure Morocco and the UN into making concessions regarding Western Sahara’s international status. In addition, it is meant to portray the Polisario Front as an independent, capable, and prominent international actor. Nonetheless, it cannot be entirely ruled out that these systems will be used against an airliner, even if in case of mistaken identity.

Recommendations

1. It is advised to avoid conducting nonessential flights over Western Sahara, given the threat issued to civilian aircraft. Those conducting essential travel in the area are advised to maintain cruising altitudes higher than at least 7 km.
2. Continue monitoring Polisario Front and SPLA activities and related publications to evaluate the level of threat posed to your interests.
3. Contact us at intel@max-security.com or +44 20-3540-0434 for itinerary and contingency support options.