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Agenda item 79: The problem of Mauritania (continued)

AGENDA ITEM 79

1. Mr. GUIRMA (Upper Volta) said it was unfortunate that Morocco had insisted on raising the question of Mauritania despite the advice and warnings of its African friends, thereby putting African solidarity to a severe test. Moreover, the arguments presented by Morocco were unconvincing. With regard to religion, for example, even if it were proved that prayers had been said for the Sultan of Morocco in Mauritanian mosques—an assertion that was challenged—that religious bond could not in any case justify political hegemony, just as the Roman Catholic Church provided Italy with no justification for ruling all Catholic countries. On the contrary, by attaining independence Mauritania would help to enhance still further the prestige of Islamic civilization.

2. The historical arguments advanced by Morocco consisted in claiming Mauritania because at a certain point in its history, whether rightly or not, that country had belonged to Morocco. If those arguments were upheld, France might one day claim Morocco, and the Upper Volta, recalling the Mossi Empire, might wish to extend its boundaries to Timbuktu. Every country could display maps showing that at some time it had held one piece of territory or another. However, as the Prime Minister of Nigeria had said in the General Assembly (893rd plenary meeting), the part of Africa which had been freed from colonialism must be left as it was at the present time, for otherwise the result would be needless conflicts which would undermine the independence of the newly sovereign States. If Morocco annexed Mauritania, Ghana might be unable to resist the cruel temptation presented to it by Togo. A chain reaction of annexations might ensue, and he wondered what would then be the fate of small countries which lived under a permanent threat, like Israel and some day, perhaps, the Upper Volta. It was time to recognize that the policy of natural frontiers was a policy of war and chaos, and to put an end to nostalgic longings for dead empires.

3. The leaders of independent Mauritania would, of course, be able to agree to any sort of arrangement aimed at peaceful coexistence with their neighbours or to any form of union they chose. However, it was not the task of the United Nations to draw up agreements or treaties on behalf of peoples; its sole obligation was to further their desire for independence.

4. It was curious to note that the League of Arab States was maintaining a position of unreserved solidarity with Morocco. Rejecting African brotherhood for Arab brotherhood, it had published pamphlets stating that the African-Asian group supported the Moroccan position. Perhaps it took its own wishes for realities; in any event, it was understimating the political awareness of a group each of whose members intended to determine its policies in complete freedom and with full knowledge of the facts, on the basis of a common ideal of justice. If, therefore, the African-Asian group had been presented in a false light, it was imperative to expose the sordid designs which were being concealed beneath a rigmarole of anti-colonialism, and were being exploited by unregenerate imperialists and colonialists in order to divide Africa.

5. The Saudi Arabian representative had referred in his statement at the 1111th meeting to the creation of the United Arab States, which would doubtless exert heavy pressure on the countries of Africa south of the Sahara. Similarly, it was Colonel Nasser's fantastic dream, as had been revealed in his book on the Egyptian revolution, to carry into the heart of the virgin forest the civilization which he was forging by dictatorship on the banks of the Nile. The Upper Volta was familiar with a different civilization, which it had shared with the Moors during their long years of association. Mauritania had also been a part of what had been known as French West Africa. If a process of dehalkanization was to be carried out, it would be done by reviving Mauritania's links with the south rather than by dragging it away to the north. In that connexion, credit was due to Tunisia, which had recognized that African brotherhood was not an empty phrase and had courageously told its erring fellow-Arabs that Morocco's scheme was not a constructive one.

6. In point of fact, Morocco's reason for claiming Mauritania was that the latter had the misfortune to be rich, at least potentially. Plagued by economic difficulties and forced to rely on foreign assistance in order to balance its budget, Morocco saw tempting possibilities in Mauritania.

7. It was, to say the least, strange to accuse France of colonialism in connexion with the question of Mauritania. The process of dismantling France's colonial empire, while it was proving painful in Algeria, had been miraculously successful in Africa, where the peoples had become independent without firing a single shot and without seeing their friendship with France spoiled. Having attained independence without rancour or bitterness, the African
peoples had entered the United Nations resolved to
take the side of justice and law and to remind those
who were forgetful that missiles, bombs and spattunias
would never replace the human conscience and that
it was that conviction, rather than the palavers of
experts, which would be the only guarantee of world
peace. There were common-sense principles which
must be observed: those of self-determination and of
refusal to exercise control over the birth of nations.

8. Morocco had requested priority for the item
because of the date on which Mauraitania was to attain
independence. Since then, realizing that it was faced
with an accomplished fact, Morocco had apparently
come to favour a postponement. It would agree to
Mauraitania's independence but would try to prevent
that country's admission to the United Nations. Upper
Volta, for its part, was gratified that Mauraitania was
shortly to become independent.

9. Mr. ZABARAH (Yemen) said that the problem of
Mauraitania should be considered in the light of the
methods France was employing to retain a foothold
on the African continent by suppressing legitimate
national aspirations.

10. Instead of negotiating a settlement of the Mauraitanian
question with Morocco, France had threatened to divide a united country by announcing its intention
to grant independence to Mauraitania despite the
protests of the Mauraitanian Government. Yemens supported the legal and historical arguments
which the Moroccan representative had advanced to
prove Morroco's sovereignty over that territory. The
abundant evidence the Committee had heard and various international treaties and conventions made it clear beyond doubt that Mauraitania had always been an integral part of Morocco. Since 1912, France had sought, through a series of unilateral actions, to
declare Mauraitania a French colony, although the
treaty instituting the protectorate over Morocco had not given France any right to tamper with Moroccan boundaries.

11. Morocco wished only to restore its boundaries as
they had existed in 1912, in accordance with
historical facts, geographical and ethnic considerations, international agreements and the wishes of the peoples concerned. Although several delegations of
Mauraitanian leaders received by the King of Morocco
had reaffirmed their loyalty to the Moroccan Government, France had persisted in recent years in suppress all resistance by the Mauraitanian people in the so-called Islamic Republic of Mauraitania. The 1958 referendum and the local elections had been conducted in an atmosphere of intimidation, and the present so-called Government of Mauraitania was protected by the French army against the popular dissatisfaction.

12. In the face of France's adamant refusal to recognize Morocco's legitimate claims, the Moroccan Government, in danger of being confronted with a "fait accompli" through the grant of independence to
Mauraitania, had had no alternative but to submit the question to the United Nations in the hope of achieving a peaceful solution. The Yemeni delegation supported Morocco in its lawful claim.

13. Mr. AMMOUN (Lebanon) said that the Conference of
Foreign Ministers of members of the League of Arab States, which had opened in Lebanon on 22 August 1960, had unanimously adopted a resolution
declaring the unreserved support of the Governments of the Arab States for the Moroccan Government in its claim concerning the unity of Morocco and Mauraitania.

14. It might be asked how the Arab Governments could thus take a stand the apparent consequence of which was to deny independence to an Arab country and to oppose its admission to the United Nations. They could surely not disregard the contribution that Mauraitanian unity could make to the Arab group in the United Nations, which, like the African-Asian group or the Latin American group, was one of the regional or ethnic groups that proposed to co-operate collectively within the United Nations for the purpose of carrying out, in common, the work of the Organization. In that regard, the Arab group supported the resolution it had adopted in Lebanon only because it firmly believed that it was contributing to the achievement of the purposes and principles of the United Nations, in particular the fundamental right of peoples to self-determination and respect for their sovereignty and territorial integrity. The position
taken by the Arab States accordingly proved that they were not seeking their own interests but those of Mauraitania itself.

15. Without wishing to repeat the historical and juridical arguments which had been stated by the representative of Morocco and which had determined the decision taken by the League of Arab States, he nevertheless felt it necessary to draw attention to the historical reality of the Almoravide dynasty which had governed Morocco as a whole. Whether Mauraitania had governed Morocco or Morocco had governed Mauraitania was immaterial. While, as the French representative had stated, France has not claiming sovereignty over the British Isles on the pretext that they had been invaded by William the Conqueror—any more than Lebanon was claiming Ireland, Cyprus, or Carthage, to which Phoenician civilization had extended—France had nevertheless, quite justly, won back Alsace and Lorraine, just as Italy had recovered the Trentino and Yugoslavia had achieved unity. Those examples sufficed to show that Morocco was not trying to shape the realities of the twentieth century according to the model of an out-of-date map. Moreover, the General Act of the International Conference of Algieras of 1906, which had so long served to justify the presence of the French in Morocco, had now, merged in another light, as justification for the claim of the people of the Maghreb to territorial integrity.

16. However, in the final analysis, it was the will of
the people that must be considered. As the Moroccan representative had stated (110th meeting), throughout its long history Morocco had always been a well-defined geographical entity comprising a community of people speaking the same language, professing the same religion and cherishing the same ideals and aspirations. It was not only a common language and religion, but above all a common stock of aspirations which, ultimately, constituted a nation—the basis of the State.

17. For the benefit of those representatives of African
countries who had expressed apprehension with regard to the problem of Mauraitania, it should be made clear that it was not because independent Mauraitania within its present frontiers was the creation of France that the Arab countries were opposed.
to its admission to the United Nations as a sovereign State. If France had granted Mauritania independence in accordance with the duly expressed wishes of the population, it could only have been congratulated. Other peoples—African peoples—had attained independence with its consent, if not with its assistance, and were occupying their rightful place in the United Nations. Their will was the surest guarantee of their sovereign independence, to which they were strongly attached; in any case, whatever the solution applied to the problem of Mauritania, it must not set an unfortunate precedent or give cause for apprehension. Lebanon itself had been constituted under the French Mandate; and if it had no fears for its independence and its territorial integrity, that was due to the will of its people. The fact that the territorial status of several countries had been established under French administration mattered little, provided that the peoples concerned were attached to that status and to the independence they had won. If the pan-African aspirations voiced by the leaders of a number of African countries were eventually realized, there could be no reason to contest them. Why then should the national aspirations of Mauritania and Morocco, if they wished to be united, or rather to restore their unity, be contested? The claim for the unification of Morocco and Mauritania need engender no fears, if it was based on the right of self-determination. It might be asked whether the sovereign will of the people had been ascertained in Mauritania, and whether the people had legally made known its decision. In point of fact, the three options offered to Mauritania after the establishment of the Fifth French Republic had not included the choice of rejoining Morocco; to do so and having been prevented from it by conquest and occupation and by treaties drawn up without Morocco's consent; at a time when it did not enjoy external sovereignty. No one, therefore, could contend that by deciding in the referendum of September 1958 to leave the French Community, Mauritania had wished to stand apart from the Maghribi nation. Consequently, it was manifestly premature to sanction Mauritania's independence as a separate State vis-à-vis Morocco; and so long as the will of the Mauritanian people in that respect was in dispute, the United Nations should reserve its decision.

18. The draft resolution which was to be introduced would in no way propose that a nation should be denied the right to set up an independent State and to be admitted to the United Nations. However, it would warn against imposing any solution that might endanger peace and security in that part of the world. It would reaffirm the principle of respect for the independence, unity and territorial integrity of all States and recommend that the two parties concerned should abide by that principle. Member States would thus be asked to ensure respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter, whose guardians they were. The sponsors of the draft resolution hoped that the Committee and the General Assembly would be convinced of that before the United Nations was called upon to decide on Mauritania's request for admission. Of course, the United Nations could reject that request if it did not meet the conditions laid down in Article 4 of the Charter. That, however, was not the proposal of the sponsors of the draft resolution, who were merely asking Member States not to interpret for themselves a will which had not yet been legally determined, thereby ratifying a "fait accompli" to the detriment of legality. It was for Mauritania to say whether it wished to join the United Nations as an independent State or as an integral part of Morocco, and it should be given the opportunity to do so. Otherwise, the will of a people might be denied under cover of endorsing its independence and sovereignty.

19. Mr. TOURA GABA (Chad) asked Morocco not to impede Mauritania's accession to independence and to leave it to time to remove most of the present sources of friction. Later, the two countries might enter into a federation, if both wished to do so.

20. In view of their common language, religion, race and interests, Morocco and Mauritania were historically and spiritually called upon to live in harmony. But the ties between Mauritania, Senegal and Mali were no less ancient and solid. Mali and Senegal too could claim part of Mauritania; but that would be detrimental to peaceful coexistence between peoples of different races and to the Negro-Maghribi civilization. The reasons which had led Mauritania's other neighbours to refrain from interference should be equally valid for Morocco, and should persuade it to be patient. Morocco, with its glorious heritage and promising future, could not shirk its elementary duty to set an example of caution. Otherwise, it would be acting against the highest interests of Africa, of which it has aspired to be one of the major spokesmen. Patience and forbearance were Moslem virtues. Time was on the side, not of either of the contending parties, but of the larger African entity.

21. Mr. ADEEL (Sudan) said that no one could deny the incontestable reality of the geographical, historical, ethnic, spiritual, juridical and political factors which had always made Morocco and Shangri—which had been named Mauritania after the French occupation—a single entity. It was strange that the representative of France had expressed surprise to hear Morocco adducing geographical arguments although it had no common frontier with Mauritania. Had not France itself consistently asserted that certain territories separated by it by thousands of kilometres, such as Madagascar or Algeria, were an integral part of the metropolitan country? Of course, Mauritania was not Moroccan in the sense that certain overseas territories had been regarded as French.

22. The French representative had accused Morocco of expansionism. If Sudan had had the slightest suspicion that that was true, it would never have decided to support the Moroccan case, for it had the greatest respect for the people of Mauritania and the honourable and outstanding part they had played in the history of the region. At the 116th meeting of the representative of France, seeking to win over a number of countries, in particular the African States, had alleged that a quarrel was being picked with a young African State on the point of attaining its independence. The argument advanced by the Moroccan and other delegations had dispelled any doubts that might have been lingering on that score. The fact was that Morocco was accusing France of having failed to abide by the pledge it had given in 1905 at the International Conference of Algiers to respect the sovereignty and independence of the King of Morocco and the integrity of his domains, which, under the Convention signed at Berlin on 4 November 1911 between France and Germany, had comprised all the parts of North Africa between Algeria, French West African States and Morocco.
Africa and the Spanish colony of Rio de Oro. Long before the establishment of the French protectorate, Morocco had fought bravely to defend its sovereign provinces against French penetration. Once the protectorate had been established, northern Morocco had been unable to continue assisting the southern part of the country, which had carried on the struggle against domination. But when they had regained their freedom, the Moroccans of the north had resumed their peaceful attempts to free their southern compatriots. So there could be no question of action against a young African State.

23. The people of Morocco, led by a national hero, King Mohammed V, had always fought for the complete eradication of colonialism. Morocco had been one of the first countries to go to the assistance of the Congo. The Moroccan units under United Nations command included many Mauritanians who had voluntarily enlisted in the service of the King of Morocco. Moreover, the Moroccan representative's analysis of the Mauritanian Constitution, in his statement at the 1109th meeting, made it quite clear what Mauritanian's Independence, which was allegedly in danger, actually amounted to.

24. The Senegalese representative had said (1111th meeting) that self-determination was the only principle on the basis of which a people's future could be decided; he had also observed that there were two political tendencies in Mauritania, one favourable to union with Morocco and the other to independence. He agreed with the Senegalese representative with regard to the principles and facts involved. However, self-determination was a right accorded to peoples and not to segments of peoples. It could not be invoked for the purpose of dismembering well-established political entities.

25. The right of self-determination could be exercised only in an atmosphere of complete freedom. However, the French representative had stated that in the referendum of 28 September 1958 on the constitution the peoples of the overseas territories had been permitted to choose between the status quo and immediate independence with the right of becoming autonomous members of the Community. France had proposed no other alternative, even though it had been well aware that the great majority of the population of Mauritania desired reunification with Morocco and that the latter was entitled to be consulted regarding the territory's future. As was generally known, many nationalist leaders, including the Emir of Trarza, who was a member of the Moroccan delegation, had left Mauritania in protest against the repressive policies pursued there and against the way in which the referendum had been carried out.

26. He wished to emphasize that Morocco had no annexationist or integrationist designs and was not opposing independence for another nation but was seeking to block an attempt to dismember a nation against its will. Such attempts ran counter to the trend of the times, as was evidenced, for example, by the present movement for unity in Europe. Africans, who were striving for the unity of their continent, must oppose with all the means at their disposal any attempt to thwart their efforts in that direction.

27. Mr. SLM (Tunisia), exercising his right of reply, said that he was touched by the complimentary references that had been made to him, but wished to dispel any misunderstanding as to his position on the matter. His delegation had been surprised to hear some speculation in the course of the meeting concerning his country's position on the Mauritanian problem, on which his delegation had not yet expressed its views. It was not customary to engage in such speculation in discussing questions before the Committee, and his delegation would appreciate it if other delegations refrained from anticipating its position.

28. Mr. COULIBALY (Ivory Coast) said that the Moroccan request which would lead to rejection of the forthcoming international recognition of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania was discoursing, coming as it did from a country that had itself only recently achieved national independence. The reaction was worth considering, however, in view of the annexationist tendency it revealed and of the danger it would create if it became a precedent.

29. Various representatives had pointed out how hard it would be to redraw the map of the world if one wished to reverse all the geographical changes that had occurred in the course of history. To take an example, the Ivory Coast and Ghana could each claim the other's territory, on the strength of historical arguments. Such intellectual exercises would lead to chaos and might set off a world war. Since Morocco was claiming the territory between its present frontiers and Senegal, the same expansionist aspirations might one day lead the countries of North Africa to demand that their frontiers should extend to the Niger. Morocco would seem to have forgotten its recent bondage, its heroic struggle and glorious independence, or perhaps it had put behind it the memory of the years of strife spent by the independent African countries and also by the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, which in its turn had, like Morocco, vindicated its right to independence and to national existence. What, from the Moroccan point of view, had become of the noble idea of an African brotherhood, united in diversity?

30. The United Nations could not contradict itself by accepting a claim that smacked of the outdated colonial system. It did not discourage the fusion of countries that decided to share each other's fortunes, of which there were already several examples, but it was not entitled to hand one country over to another, even if only by a moral judgement based on obsolete historical considerations. Morocco had submitted the question very late in the day, and the Ivory Coast delegation agreed to discuss it only out of deference to the United Nations and in the hope of an unambiguous ruling that would serve as a warning to any expansionism based on specious arguments. People were too quick to forget that Mauritania was an entity which had been formed in suffering and that the bonds thus forged were always the basic elements in the formation of a nation. Morocco seemed to wish to reverse the course of history by demanding that a republic should now become part of a monarchy. If the United Nations adopted the Moroccan point of view, the time might come when one North African country would encroach upon Mali, another upon the Niger, another upon the Sudan or Chad, and so on.

31. He hoped that the question would go no further than the First Committee and would not be the occasion of regrettable disputes between Africans in the plenary.
32. Mr. PAZHWA (Afghanistan) said that, though Afghanistan was not an Arab country, it had close spiritual and cultural affinities with the Arab world, which bound it directly to the people of Mauritania. Also Afghanistan had close and friendly relations with France which it wished to maintain. Its approach to international problems was not based on religious considerations. Its main concern was the welfare of the Mauritanian people and the creation of peaceful and friendly relations among peoples with common interests at the present and in the future. Whatever action might be taken by the United Nations or by the parties concerned, the most essential consideration was to avoid anything that could harm relations between the peoples of Mauritania and Morocco, on the one hand, and of Morocco and France on the other.

33. The Afghan delegation expressed its deep sympathy with the delegation of Morocco. Morocco had an undeniable right to interest itself in the welfare of the Mauritanian people. The historical, political and cultural arguments in favour of that interest could not be ignored. The separation of territories by alien Powers was unacceptable in any circumstances, and particularly if it took place during a period of foreign domination. Finally, the territory of Mauritania was geographically a natural continuation of Morocco, and the population of Mauritania was a natural continuation of the tribal population living within the present borders of Morocco.

34. However, the most important consideration remained the will of the peoples, which should be ascertained in all such situations. That could not be done unless it was determined freely by the people themselves without any influence whatever. The referendum that had been mentioned could not therefore be taken as having fully ascertained the will of the people of Mauritania. Not only had all rightful elements of the population to participate in a free referendum, but they had also to be given the chance to choose, by their right of self-determination, from among any alternatives which could fulfill their aspirations. A referendum which had allowed the Mauritanians to choose only among limited alternatives could not be considered fair and adequate.

35. Those were the principles that would guide the Afghan delegation in taking a position on the measures proposed to the Committee. In the interest of future relations between the parties concerned, a peaceful solution should, if not sought at the present stage, be recommended, and should be based on the free consent of all segments of the population of Mauritania.

36. Mr. TOURE Ismaïl (Guinea) said that his delegation was as determined as ever to thwart any attempt at creating a division between North Africa or Arab Africa, on the one hand, and the so-called Africa south of the Sahara or Black Africa, on the other. Such a division would be harmful to the evolution of the entire continent.

37. In his delegation's opinion it would be naïve to believe that Morocco harboured imperialistic and annexationist ambitions. During the discussion of the Mauritanian problem his delegation would not lose sight of the solidarity that should prevail among all the peoples of Africa in their struggle against new political, economic and cultural forms of colonialism. It was determined to draw international attention to the danger which the establishment of military bases in Africa represented, both for the evolution of Africa and for peace in general.

38. However, the right of self-determination of all peoples had to be respected, including that of the Mauritanian people; the only possible course therefore was to appeal to the two parties to find a peaceful solution.

39. Problems of colour and religion were of small importance compared with the basic problem of restoring a people's legitimate rights and guaranteeing its sovereignty. As presented by Morocco, the present problem was that of safeguarding the genuine independence of Mauritania, as distinct from a sham independence serving as a cloak for neo-colonial schemes.

The meeting rose at 5.30 p.m.