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Moroccan police officers wearing face masks patrol Ain Diab beach in Casablanca, Morocco, Wednesday, Sept.23, 2020. (AP)

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- Western Sahara, a vast swathe of desert on Africa's Atlantic coast, is a disputed former Spanish colony

NOUAKCHOTT/MAURITANIA: Around 200 Moroccan truck drivers stuck on the desert border between Mauritania and disputed Western Sahara have appealed to Rabat and Nouakchott to swiftly intervene.

In a statement carried by the Mauritanian news agency Alwiam, the drivers said they were stuck on the Mauritanian side of the border near Guerguerat, without access to drinking water, food, shelter or medicine, with some suffering from chronic illnesses.

Guerguerat is located on southern coast of Western Sahara, along the road leading to Mauritania, some 380 km north of Nouakchot.

It is in a buffer zone patrolled by a UN peacekeeping force.

Alwiam said the drivers of produce trucks were returning from Mauritania and sub-Saharan Africa but "militias affiliated with separatists" had stopped them from crossing.

The drivers' statement, dated Thursday, did not specify how long they had been stranded.

Western Sahara, a vast swathe of desert on Africa's Atlantic coast, is a disputed former Spanish colony. Rabat controls 80 percent of the territory, including its phosphate deposits and its fishing waters. The Algerian-backed Polisario Front, which fought a war for independence from 1975 to 1991, demands a referendum on self-determination.

Morocco, which maintains that Western Sahara is an integral part of the kingdom, has offered autonomy but insists it will retain sovereignty.

HIGHLIGHT

The drivers of produce trucks were returning from Mauritania and sub-Saharan Africa but 'militias affiliated with separatists' had stopped them from crossing.

The drivers appealed to the governments of Mauritania and Morocco to "work as quickly as possible to end the crisis," and to provide them with food and medicine.

They also urged the UN to "play their role in protecting the buffer zone and the border crossing, which provides a gateway for work for thousands of drivers, farmers and traders."

Officials in Mauritania have not commented on the situation.

In recent weeks, Moroccan media outlets said Sahrawi separatists had set up roadblocks and stopped passage across the border, but AFP was not able to independently verify the reports. The UN also cited isolated incidents at Guerguerat in a recent report.

Negotiations on Western Sahara involving Morocco, the Polisario, Algeria and Mauritania have been suspended for several months.



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