

P R E S S R E L E A S E

Brussels, 29 December 1998

14457/98 (Presse 462)
P. 159/98

**Declaration by the Presidency on behalf of the European Union
on Western Sahara**

The European Union reiterates its full support for the Settlement Plan proposed by the United Nations Secretary-General for Western Sahara, which aims at the holding of a free, fair and impartial referendum on the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara.

While the European Union took note with satisfaction of the completion of the identification of more than 147.000 applicants to the referendum, it remains deeply concerned over the continuing differences on the issue of the three tribal groupings. This question, which has led to the halt of the identification work, has been a constant source of contention between the parties and the subject to several compromise proposals.

In this context the European Union warmly welcomes the arbitration presented to the parties by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in accordance with the United Nations Settlement Plan, in order to move the identification process forward.

The European Union also welcomes the unanimous decision of the Security Council to extend the mandate of MINURSO until 31 January 1999 by Resolution 1215 (1998) of 17 December 1998, in order to allow for further consultations in the hope that they will lead to an agreement on the various protocols without undermining the integrity of the Secretary-General's proposed package or calling into question its main elements.

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The European Union expects and sincerely hopes for fruitful consultations and fully supports the assessment of the Secretary-General that the implementation of his proposal would clearly demonstrate the readiness of both parties to compromise and their willingness to accelerate the referendum process.

The European Union also strongly encourages the parties and interested States to effectively formalise the presence of UNHCR in the Territory and to conclude the refugee repatriation protocol.

Likewise the European Union stresses the need for the prompt signing of the still outstanding status-of-forces agreement on MINURSO.

The European Union reiterates its full support for the efforts of the United Nations Secretary-General towards a just, fair and lasting solution for Western Sahara. We call upon the parties to fully cooperate with the United Nations in order to make substantial and speedy progress in the implementation of the Settlement Plan in all its aspects.
