One of Africa's oldest conflicts is in the Western Sahara, a territory in northwest Africa claimed by both the Moroccan government and pro-independence rebel forces. Serious fighting first erupted more than a quarter-century ago, when Spain, which formally ruled the territory, decided to pull out in 1976. Morocco — and at that time, Mauritania — sought to divide the area between them, but were resisted by the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y de Río de Oro, known as the Polisario Front. In 1979 Mauritania gave up its claim, with Morocco then extending its demand for sovereignty over the entire territory.

In the mid-1980s, the United Nations, in cooperation with the Organization of African Unity, initiated a mediation effort. This yielded settlement proposals that were accepted by both Morocco and the Polisario Front in 1988. A major element was agreement on a referendum to let the residents of Western Sahara decide whether they wished to be independent or belong to Morocco.