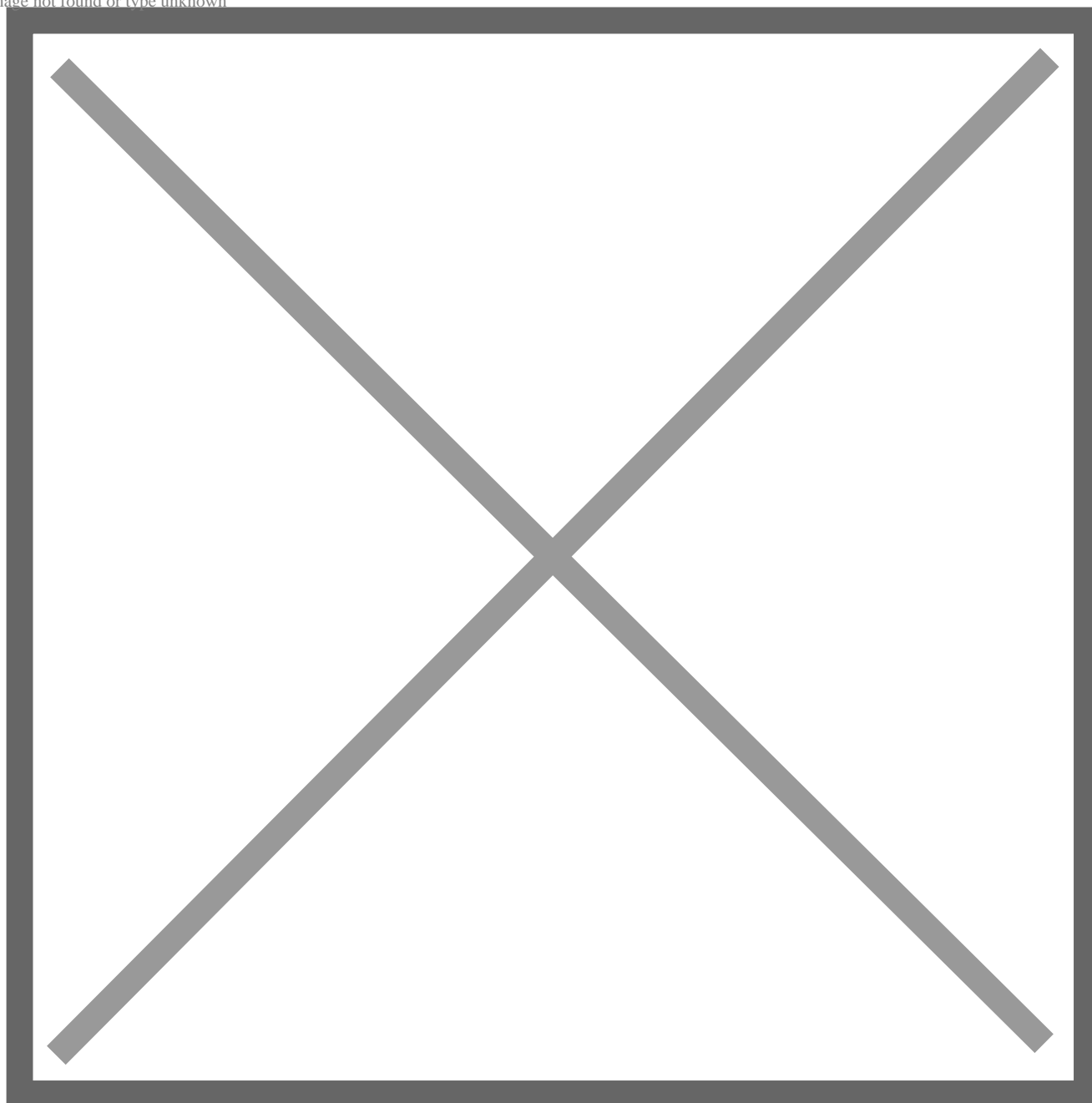


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Western Sahara

RICK MCEDWARD

Rick McEdward, D.I.S. (Intercultural Studies, Fuller Graduate Schools, Pasadena, California) is a pastor, church planter, and missionary. He spent 11 years pastoring and church planting in the Washington Conference, North American Division. In 2001 he and his wife Marcia moved their family to Colombo, Sri Lanka where they served for four years as missionaries. From 2005-2009 he served as director of Adventist Mission at the Southern Asia-Pacific Division in the Philippines. He later became associate director of the Institute of World Mission prior to his appointment as director of the Global Mission Centers at the General Conference, where he worked for 5 years. In 2016 he and his wife moved to Beirut, Lebanon to take up responsibility as president of the Middle East and North Africa Union. Rick and Marcia have two children.

Western Sahara is a desert area on the northwest coast of Africa. It is bordered on the north by Morocco, the east and south by Algeria and Mauritania, and the west by the Atlantic Ocean. It has an area of 102,700 square miles (266,000 square kilometers) and a population in 2020 of 652,271.¹

The territory was controlled by either Spain or Morocco for more than 400 years. In 1958 Spain made the area one of its provinces—Spanish Sahara. In 1976 Spain ceded the territory to Morocco and Mauritania and it was renamed Western Sahara.²

The population is predominately Arab and Berber nomad pastoralists called Sahrawis.

As a result of decades of war between the Kingdom of Morocco and an independence organization called the Polisario Front (1975-current), and due to a lot of landmines in the pastoral areas, herdsmen were forced to give up the pastoral life for settled jobs.³ Today 86 percent of Western Sahara is urbanized. The population has tripled since 1994 as a result of an open policy of Moroccan resettlement in Western Sahara. The predominant religion is Sunni Islam.

Shortly thereafter, the Polisario Front which was supported by Algeria, proclaimed a new Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. In 1979 Mauritania withdrew its claims to the territory. Fighting between Morocco and the Polisario Front continued until 1991. At that time a ceasefire was agreed upon but was contingent upon a UN referendum to determine whether Western Sahara should become independent or remain a part of Morocco.⁴

As of 2020 Morocco controls three-quarters of the territory west of a berm that was constructed to create separation of pro-Moroccan forces and people loyal to the Polisario Front. The largest city in Western Sahara is Laayoune, where approximately 40 percent of the country lives.

At times tensions rise between Sahrawis and Moroccans who have migrated to Western Sahara. Since the 1980s many Sahrawis have immigrated to Europe, while more than 90,000⁵ remain in camps organized by the Polisario Front. Western Sahara has served as a migration hotspot for Sub-Saharan Africans who use it as a launching point to Spain's Canary Islands.⁶ Western Sahara's economy is based on fishing, pastoral nomadism, and phosphate mining.⁷ Due to the desert climate, most of the food for the urban areas is imported.⁸

Less than one percent of Sahrawis are believers in Christ.⁹ A small number of Moroccan Christians reside in Western Sahara, along with a group of foreign resident Roman Catholics.¹⁰ Due to political, security, and religious issues, Western Sahara is considered an unentered area in the North Africa Region. Currently there is no Seventh-day Adventist work in Western Sahara.

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