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# *Senate, Edward M. Kennedy*

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## SENATOR KENNEDY CALLS FOR GREATER PROGRESS ON WESTERN SAHARA REFERENDUM

Senator Edward M. Kennedy today praised the Senate for calling for greater progress on a long-stalled referendum on self-determination for the people of the Western Sahara.

Since 1988, the United Nations has sought to organize a free, fair, and open referendum in the Western Sahara, the former Spanish colony that Morocco has illegally occupied since 1975.

Kennedy said, "A solution to the conflict over the Western Sahara will enhance security and stability in Northern Africa. After more than ten years of delay, the people of the Western Sahara should be permitted to determine for themselves who will govern them."

Kennedy, Republican Senator Gordon Smith, and Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy sponsored an amendment accepted by the Senate on the State Department Reauthorization Bill to require the State Department to report on progress on the referendum. The bill, including the Western Sahara amendment, was passed by the Senate yesterday.

The International Court of Justice, the Organization of African Unity, the United States, and many other nations throughout the world have not recognized Morocco's claim to the Western Sahara, but Morocco's occupation continues. Tens of thousands of the Sahrawi people languish in refugee camps in southern Algeria and have been denied the opportunity to determine their own future.

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A UN referendum was originally scheduled for 1992. It has since been delayed many times, primarily due to the resistance of the Government of Morocco. The referendum is now scheduled for July 2000.

In the 1997 Houston Accords, achieved under the leadership of former Secretary of State James Baker, and in a UN plan last December, the international community called for the conclusion of the voter registration process and a referendum. Morocco subsequently agreed to allow the referendum to occur by July 2000.

Senator Kennedy praised the Administration's efforts to resolve this longstanding dispute. He urged the State Department to make it clear to both parties to this dispute that the United States expects the people of the Western Sahara to be allowed to exercise their right to self-determination in a free, fair, and open referendum by July 2,000.

"Morocco has been a faithful ally of the United States for more than 200 years," said Kennedy, "but its refusal to allow the people of the Western Sahara to determine their own political future undercuts America's efforts to promote democracy worldwide."

The Kennedy-Smith-Leahy amendment requires the State Department to report on January 1,2000 and again on June 1 ~ 2000 on specific steps being taken by the Government of Morocco and by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro (POLISARIO) to ensure a free, fair, and open referendum by July 2000 for the people of the Western Sahara to choose between independence and integration with Morocco.

The State Department reports will include a description of preparations for the referendum. and the extent to which free access to the territory will be guaranteed for independent and international organizations, including election observers and international media. Human rights organizations and other international organizations must also be permitted to observe the referendum.

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In addition, the reports will include a description of current efforts by the Department of State to ensure that the referendum will be held, and an assessment of the likelihood that the July 2000 date will be met.

The reports will also include a description of obstacles, if any) to the voter registration process and other preparations for the referendum, and efforts being made: by the parties and the United States Government to overcome those obstacles. Finally, the reports will include an assessment of progress being made in the repatriation process.

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