

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- The Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) should reaffirm its written commitment to respect and implement the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC), including clearance of all anti-personnel mines east of the Berm, consonant with its human rights obligations.
- A resource mobilisation plan should be developed with the aim of attracting international donor support.
- Greater support should be provided to the Saharawi Mine Action Coordination Office (SMACO) to enable it to continue to coordinate mine action in Western Sahara, east of the Berm and ensure that capacity development efforts are not lost.
- Mine action in Western Sahara must not become forgotten or overlooked by the international mine action community. Support must still be given to address remaining mine, cluster munition, and other explosive remnants of war (ERW) contamination.
- SMACO should revise its strategy to include a more realistic date for completion of clearance of anti-personnel mines with annual survey and clearance targets, and a detailed budget.

UNDERSTANDING OF AP MINE CONTAMINATION

The exact extent of mine contamination across Western Sahara is not known, although the areas along the Berm¹ are thought to contain some of the densest mine contamination in the world.² The contamination is a result of fighting in previous decades between the Royal Moroccan Army (RMA) and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (Polisario Front) forces.

According to the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), the primary mine threat in Western Sahara east of the Berm, excluding both the Berm itself, restricted areas, and the buffer strip, is from anti-vehicle mines rather than anti-personnel mines; cluster munition remnants (CMR) are also a major hazard.³ As at end 2019, no areas suspected or confirmed to contain solely anti-personnel mines remained to the east of the Berm. The majority of mine contamination identified during ongoing and historical clearance efforts was from anti-vehicle mines though with some areas previously thought to contain only anti-vehicle mines found to also contain anti-personnel mines following non-technical survey conducted in the Agwanit Area of Responsibility.⁴

At the end of 2019, land in Western Sahara to the east of the Berm contained a total of 51 areas confirmed and suspected to contain mixed anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mine contamination covering a total of 275km² (see Table 1).⁵ From 2018, this is an increase of 58.74km² in total mined area and an increase of 25 confirmed hazardous areas (CHAs). According to UNMAS, this is due to previously unrecorded anti-vehicle mine contamination being found through survey and added to the database.⁵

Table 1: Mined area east of the Berm (at end 2019)⁷

Type of contamination	CHAs	Area (km ²)	SHAs	Area (km ²)	Total CHAs and SHAs	Total area (km ²)
AP mines	0	0	0	0	0	0
AV mines	27	61.90	0	0	27	61.90
AP/AV mines	5	87.11	19	126.00	24	213.11
Totals	32	149.01	19	126.00	51	275.01

AP = Anti-personnel AV = Anti-vehicle CHA = Confirmed hazardous area SHA = Suspected hazardous area

Both the north and south of Western Sahara are known or suspected to contain anti-personnel mines, with 24 areas confirmed or suspected areas with a total size of 213km² remaining to be addressed at the end of 2019, as set out in Table 2.⁸ This is a small decrease in total area from the end of the previous year when there was 216.25km² contaminated with anti-personnel mines.⁹ According to UNMAS, this decrease is due to re-survey of contaminated areas.¹⁰

Table 2: Mined area containing anti-personnel mines by province east of the Berm (at end 2019)¹¹

Province	CHAs	Area (km ²)	SHAs	Area (km ²)	Total CHAs and SHAs	Total area (km ²)
North Region	1	0.11	16	16.04	17	16.15
South Region	4	87	3	109.96	7	196.96
Totals	5	87.11	19	126.00	24	213.11

In September 2018, UNMAS reported that following non-technical survey efforts, east of the Berm, 10 of the then 27 mined areas remained, covering an estimated total of almost 120km². These areas are located within the 5km-wide buffer strip and are inaccessible for clearance.¹² Clearance of the buffer strip of mines and ERW is not foreseen in UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) Military Agreements No. 2 (with Frente POLISARIO) and No. 3 (with RAM), which, according to the UN, considerably limits the ability of MINURSO military observers to patrol and verify developments.¹³ No survey or clearance of the buffer strip was conducted during 2019.¹⁴

The RMA controls territory to the west of the Berm where it has been conducting large-scale demining. According to UNMAS, the RMA cooperates with the MINURSO mine action component and submits regular monthly reports of its activities in the Territory, west of the Berm, helping to build a clearer understanding of the mine and ERW threat across Western Sahara.¹⁵

CLUSTER MUNITION REMNANTS AND OTHER EXPLOSIVE REMNANTS OF WAR

Western Sahara also has a significant problem from CMR and other ERW (see Mine Action Review's *Clearing Cluster Munition Remnants 2020* report on Western Sahara for further information).¹⁶

NATIONAL OWNERSHIP AND PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

UNMAS Western Sahara, formerly the MINURSO Mine Action Coordination Centre (MACC), facilitates MINURSO monitoring of the ceasefire and ensures the safe passage of UN personnel. On 30 October 2019, MINURSO's mandate was extended for an additional 12 months until 30 October 2020 under Security Council Resolution 2494 (2019). UNMAS Western Sahara serves as the UN focal point for mine action activities within the MINURSO area of operations. Its contracted teams work in areas east of the Berm only. The RMA conducts its own demining in areas west of the Berm. In 2013–14, the Polisario Front, with UN support, established the SMACO, which is responsible for coordinating mine action activities in Western Sahara east of the Berm, excluding the buffer strip.¹⁷

In 2019, UNMAS Western Sahara had a grant of \$53,937 to cover capacity building and some operating expenses for SMACO. UNMAS also supported SMACO to develop its own internal strategy for 2019–23, which includes a communications and resource mobilisation strategy.¹⁸

GENDER AND DIVERSITY

UNMAS has reported that gender policies are implemented in accordance with UNMAS, the UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS), and MINURSO guidelines, as well as with direction from the Polisario.¹⁹ UNMAS also reported that gender has been mainstreamed into Western Sahara's national mine action work plans and the SMACO 2019–23 mine action strategy.²⁰ During survey, efforts are made to consider the needs of men, women, girls, and boys to ensure more effective and efficient operations, despite challenges presented by conducting survey activities targeting Bedouin populations.²¹

UNMAS reported there is equal access to employment for qualified women and men in survey and clearance teams in Western Sahara, east of the Berm, including for managerial level/supervisory positions. In 2019, 9% of operational roles in SafeLane Global were held by women and at a managerial level this was 7%. In SMACO, there is one woman at managerial level out of five positions.²²

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND REPORTING

According to UNMAS, the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) database for Western Sahara, east of the Berm, improved as a result of an ongoing data audit initiated at the end of 2015.²³ The Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) has also provided ongoing support to correct database errors, and an upgrade to the latest database software version, IMSMA Core, was scheduled to take place in August 2019.²⁴ However, as at June 2020, the updating of standard operating procedures (SOPs) for information management and the gradual shift to IMSMA Core had been suspended because of COVID-19 lockdown.²⁵

PLANNING AND TASKING

In 2019, SMACO developed its strategy for mine action in Western Sahara, east of the Berm, covering 2019–23 in line with the newly published global UN Mine Action Strategy 2019–2023. In order to achieve a Western Sahara that is free of the impact of mines and ERW, SMACO has established the following timed objectives:

- to implement efficient and effective communication with national and international organisations by 2019.
- to establish an effective mechanism for data collection of accidents and victims which will be shared with partners according to the SMACO Data Protection Policy by 2019.
- to establish sustainable and constant funding of SMACO by 2020.
- to ensure availability of human resources to comprehensively manage mine action by 2020.
- to fully implement a professional management structure within SMACO by 2021.
- to create a discussion platform (think tank) for a national victim rights protection policy by 2022.
- to establish a national employment policy for mine action activities by 2023.²⁶

As at June 2020, it is not known if Western Sahara, east of the Berm, achieved its objectives for 2019. UNMAS reported there was no mine action work plan for 2019 or 2020 and that UNMAS Western Sahara mine action activities continue to be in support of MINURSO's mandate.²⁷

UNMAS and SMACO identify priorities for clearance of both minefields and cluster munition strikes to the east of the Berm in conjunction with MINURSO. Priorities are identified based on humanitarian needs for the safety and freedom of movement of local populations, while UNMAS Western Sahara facilitates the ceasefire and ensuring the safe passage of UN personnel.²⁸

LAND RELEASE SYSTEM

STANDARDS AND LAND RELEASE EFFICIENCY

Local mine action standards were developed and finalised in 2016 by UNMAS, together with SMACO, and in coordination with mine action partners. A first annual review of the standards was completed in November 2018 with a review board consisting of representatives from UNMAS, SMACO, and all implementing partners. No significant changes were made, and UNMAS reported in June 2019 that translation of the standards into Arabic had been completed and shared with SMACO.²⁹

An external quality management system was in place from 2018 and implemented by UNMAS and SMACO to the east of the Berm.³⁰

OPERATORS AND OPERATIONAL TOOLS

Table 3: Operational clearance capacities deployed in 2019

Operator	Manual teams	Total deminers*	Dog teams	Mechanical assets*	Comments
SLG (for UNMAS Western Sahara)	2	20	0	0	Multi-tasking teams
SLG (for UNMAS Western Sahara)	1	3	0	0	Survey and Route Verification Team
Totals	3	23	0	0	

* Excluding team leaders, medics, and drivers. ** Excluding vegetation cutters and sifters.

SafeLane Global (formerly Dynasafe MineTech Limited, DML) was the implementing operator for UNMAS Western Sahara, conducting survey and clearance in 2019. There was a decrease in overall operational capacity from 2018 as Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) had made the "difficult decision" to close down its programme, effective on 1 January 2019, after releasing the last known contaminated areas in Bir Lehlou province in August 2018.³¹

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS COMPLETION

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS IN 2019

In 2019, a total of 0.20km² of mined area was cleared by SafeLane Global for UNMAS Western Sahara in the north and south regions. Of this 0.14km² was mixed mine contamination with four anti-personnel mines and 42 anti-vehicle mines found and destroyed, and 0.06km² was solely contaminated with anti-vehicle mines, see Table 4.³² This is a massive decrease from 2018 when a total of nearly 3.71km² of mixed mined area was released: more than 2.38km² through clearance and 1.32km² through survey.³³

Table 4: Mine clearance in 2019³⁴

Region	Operator	Area cleared (m ²)	AP mines destroyed	AV mines destroyed	UXO destroyed
North	SLG (for UNMAS Western Sahara)	143,421	4	42	476
South	SLG (for UNMAS Western Sahara)	58,895	0	8	0
Totals		202,316	4	50	476

AP = Anti-personnel AV = Anti-vehicle UXO = Unexploded ordnance

Western Sahara is not a State Party to the APMBC. In June 2014, however, the SADR submitted a voluntary APMBC Article 7 transparency report to the UN "as a sign of the support of the Sahrawi State for the goals of the Treaty".³⁵

In SMACO's new mine action strategy 2019–23, the vision is for Western Sahara to be free of the impact of mines and ERW.³⁶ UNMAS Western Sahara needs to maintain its level of funding of \$3.265 million per year and to secure an additional \$2 million per year to clear all known mine and ERW contamination in the territory of Western Sahara, east of the Berm, and outside the buffer strip, restricted areas, and the Berm itself by 2023.³⁷

This is almost two years earlier than UNMAS' previous estimate, which had sought to release all high and medium hazardous areas in Western Sahara east of the Berm by 2025.³⁸ Temperatures of up to 60 degrees Celsius, strong winds, sandstorms, and heavy rain during the wet season can cause mine action activities to be suspended delaying progress.³⁹

In 2019, with the loss of NPA as a key mine action implementer, along with the cessation of both German and Norwegian funding for mine clearance activities, the future of Western Sahara's mine action programme remained uncertain. Additional resources and capacity, along with support to SMACO, needed to be secured urgently. There was a massive decrease in clearance output from 2018 to 2019 in Western Sahara and UNMAS reported that as at June 2020, operations had been partially suspended due to the outbreak of COVID-19, putting the already unrealistic 2023 completion date even further out of reach.⁴⁰

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- 1 A 2,700km-long defensive wall, the Berm was built during the conflict, dividing control of the territory between Morocco on the west and the Polisario Front on the east. The Berm is 12 times the length of the Berlin Wall and second in length only to the Great Wall of China.
- 2 See UNMAS, "About UNMAS in Western Sahara", updated May 2015, at: bit.ly/2MEmsjN; and Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), "Making life safer for the people of Western Sahara", London, August 2011.
- 3 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018.
- 4 Emails from Robert Thompson, Chief of Operations, UNMAS, 31 July 2019; Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018; Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 29 March 2017; and Edwin Faigmane, Programme Officer, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.
- 5 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.
- 6 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 28 July 2020.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Email from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 31 July 2019.
- 10 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 29 July 2020.
- 11 Email from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 31 July 2019.
- 12 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 14 September 2018. The buffer strip is an area 5km wide east of the Berm. MINURSO, "Ceasefire Monitoring Overview", undated but accessed 1 June 2016, at: bit.ly/2Yxg1nv.
- 13 "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara", UN doc. S/2017/307, 10 April 2017, p. 8; and email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 6 August 2020.
- 14 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.
- 15 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 14 September 2018; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020; and UNMAS, "2017 Portfolio of Mine Action Projects: MINURSO".
- 16 Questionnaire response by Gerhard Zank, HALO Trust, 22 May 2017; and email, 17 May 2016.
- 17 Response to questionnaire by Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 24 February 2014, and email, 25 February 2014; and email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 6 August 2020.
- 18 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June and 6 August 2020.
- 19 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018.
- 20 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.
- 21 Emails from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 4 May 2019 and 14 March 2018.
- 22 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.
- 23 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018.
- 24 Email from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 31 May 2019.
- 25 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.
- 26 SMACO "Strategic Plan 2019-2023", at: bit.ly/38jaGm2; and email from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 31 July 2019.
- 27 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.
- 28 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 6 August 2020.
- 29 Emails from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 29 April 2019; and Dandan Xu, UNMAS, 28 June 2019.
- 30 Emails from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 29 April 2019; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 28 July 2020.
- 31 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 4 May 2019.
- 32 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 29 July 2020.
- 33 Email from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 31 July 2019.
- 34 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 29 July 2020.
- 35 "SADR initiative welcomed by Maputo Conference on Mine Ban", Sahara Press Service, 2 July 2014, at: bit.ly/2GE1JqW.
- 36 SMACO "Strategic Plan 2019-2023", at: bit.ly/38jaGm2.
- 37 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 6 August 2020.
- 38 Emails from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 10 May and 29 March 2017; and Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 21 April and 18 May 2016.
- 39 UNMAS, "About UNMAS in Western Sahara", updated January 2017, at: bit.ly/2MEmsjN.
- 40 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.