

WESTERN SAHARA

PROGRAMME PERFORMANCE	2017	2016
Problem understood	8	7
Target date for completion of cluster munition clearance	6	4
Targeted clearance	8	8
Efficient clearance	6	6
National funding of programme	4	4
Timely clearance	6	5
Land-release system in place	7	7
National mine action standards	9	9
Reporting on progress	5	5
Improving performance	7	6
PERFORMANCE SCORE: AVERAGE	6.6	6.1

PERFORMANCE COMMENTARY

With the return to full operational capacity and the removal of political restrictions by Morocco on United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS)-contracted mine action operations, along with an increase in available resources, progress to address cluster munition remnant (CMR) contamination in Western Sahara increased significantly in 2017. There was a near five-fold increase in clearance of CMR-contaminated area compared with 2016, although the programme was hampered by the suspension of mine action activities from March to September of that year. In 2018, UNMAS reaffirmed that clearance of all remaining CMR contamination was expected to be completed by the end of 2019 (subject to the security situation and available resources remaining unchanged).¹

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- The Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) should make a formal commitment to respect and implement the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM) and to clear all CMR east of the Berm as soon as possible.
- All efforts should be taken to complete clearance of all CMR-contaminated areas in Western Sahara by the end of 2019.
- Morocco is strongly encouraged to provide cluster strike data to other relevant stakeholders to facilitate survey and clearance of CMR.

CONTAMINATION

Western Sahara had approximately 2.6km² of confirmed hazardous area (CHA) containing CMR east of the Berm² at the end of 2017. Of the 40 CHAs in total, six cluster munition strike areas, with a total size of 0.5km², are located inside the buffer strip and are inaccessible for clearance.³ Confirmed CMR contamination was a decrease from the 44 areas totalling 4.5km² recorded by UNMAS at the end of 2016.⁴

Both the north and south of Western Sahara still contain confirmed CMR-contaminated areas, as set out in Table 1.⁵

Table 1: CMR contamination east of the Berm (at end 2017)⁶

Region	CHAs	Area (km ²)
North	15	0.88
South	25	1.73
Totals	40	2.61

The Royal Moroccan Armed Forces (RMAF) used both artillery-fired and air-dropped cluster munitions against Polisario Front forces during their conflict in Western Sahara from 1975 to 1991. According to SADR, BLU-63, M42, and Mk118 submunitions were used by the RMAF at multiple locations in Bir Lahlou, Dougaj, Mehaires, Mijek, and North Wadis.⁷

While CMR clearance had been projected to be completed by the end of 2012,⁸ discovery of previously unknown contaminated areas meant this target date was not met. New contaminated areas continued to be identified in 2017 and new strike areas are expected to be found in the future as mine action activities continue and additional information is received from local populations.⁹

The size of the six cluster munition strike areas located inside the buffer strip, with an estimated total area of 520,609m², may increase if restrictions on access to the buffer strip are lifted, allowing survey and clearance to be conducted.¹⁰ However, clearance of the buffer strip of mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) is not foreseen in MINURSO mission agreements, which according to the UN, considerably limits the ability of MINURSO military observers to patrol and verify developments.¹¹ In 2017, four previously recorded areas of CMR contamination in Mijek covering a total estimated size of 0.4km² were not made accessible for clearance due to security concerns on the part of the Polisario Front.¹²

Other Explosive Remnants of War and Landmines

Western Sahara also remains significantly affected by mines and ERW other than CMR due to the conflict (see Mine Action Review's *Clearing the Mines* report on Western Sahara for further information). The contamination remains a daily threat to the local and nomadic populations, as well as to UN personnel and humanitarian actors.¹³ According to Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), the impact of contamination is primarily socio-economic, although human accidents continue to occur. In 2017, the local mine action authority, the Saharawi Mine Action Coordination Office (SMACO), reported 13 incidents affecting 11 people.¹⁴

In 2017, mines and ERW, including CMR contamination, continued to block access to arable land and critical water sources for the local population and impeded the free movement of UN personnel on patrol routes and in areas of UN operations.¹⁵ Areas near to the Berm are considered the most heavily contaminated, however contamination from mines and ERW remains a significant risk along frequently used tracks and in close proximity to traditional settlements.

NPA reported that in 2017, mines and ERW continued to pose a threat to the approximately 12,000 Sahrawi nomads and internally displaced persons in refugee camps who traversed contaminated areas to graze livestock, cultivate land, and visit relatives. Once cleared, the majority of land released is put to use for pasture and grazing of livestock by nomadic and semi-nomadic communities, while released land located close to village centres is used for building.¹⁶

Programme Management

MINURSO manages a Mine Action Coordination Centre (MACC), which was upgraded from a mine "cell" in February 2008. MINURSO MACC supports mine action activities, which were implemented by commercial contractor Dynasafe MineTech Limited (DML) and humanitarian mine action NGO NPA in 2017.

In 2013-14, the Polisario Front, with UN support, established SMACO which is responsible for coordinating mine action activities in Western Sahara east of the Berm and for land release activities.¹⁷

In 2017, UNMAS implemented an ongoing capacity development project with SMACO, funded for 28 months, scheduled to end in October 2018.¹⁸ It contracted a capacity development Technical Advisor to work with SMACO to improve operations and coordination with the MACC and operators. Individual training was provided to SMACO staff on all aspects of mine action programme management, including information management and support services.¹⁹ Training on operational skills such as prioritisation, tasking, marking, accreditation, the development of mine action standards, and survey and clearance methodology were also conducted. Emphasis was placed on building the programme's capacity to translate local mine action requirements into proposals and budgets with the aim of ensuring that SMACO can independently seek funds and report on progress in the future.

UNMAS stated that efforts were also aimed at regularly raising the profile of SMACO within the local and wider communities and internationally.²⁰ The construction of an office building for SMACO in 2017 with German funding was another significant contributor to increasing its capacity and effectiveness.²¹

Strategic Planning

MINURSO MACC's activities are conducted in accordance with the Strategy of the United Nations on Mine Action 2013-18 and the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS). UNMAS planned to develop a mine action strategy specific to Western Sahara in the second half of 2015.²² According to UNMAS, the strategy was finalised in 2017, yet still was considered an internal document and was not made publicly available as at May 2018.²³

UNMAS has reported that the strategy identifies priorities for tackling CMR contamination and sets a target to release all recorded cluster munition strike areas east of the Berm by the end of 2019.²⁴ It also foresees the completion of non-technical survey in 2017/18 and a 50% reduction in the total number of recorded suspected and confirmed hazardous areas remaining on the territory of Western Sahara by the end of 2022.²⁵

In 2017, NPA claimed that the development of the strategy had brought about a significant improvement in the management of mine action in Western Sahara and increased coordination between the MACC, SMACO, and the operators. Meetings were convened every two months where all mine action stakeholders provided updates on their progress against the plan and future activities, it said.²⁶

Legislation and Standards

Local mine action standards were in place and implemented in 2017. The standards were developed and finalised in 2016 by UNMAS, together with SMACO, and in coordination with mine action partners, and were planned to be translated into Arabic. They include provisions specific to the survey and clearance of CMR.²⁷ NPA reported that operators had updated their standing operating procedures (SOPs) accordingly, and that the local mine action standards set realistic benchmarks for efficient operations.²⁸ A first annual review of the standards was set to be held in 2018 with a review board consisting of representatives from UNMAS, SMACO, and all implementing partners.²⁹

The MACC identifies priorities for clearance of both cluster munition strike areas and minefield clearance to the east of the Berm in conjunction with SMACO and MINURSO. SMACO identifies priorities based on humanitarian needs for the safety and freedom of movement of local populations, while the MACC ensures that observation patrol routes are safe for military observers and the transport of logistical supplies.³⁰ NPA confirmed that operators were always consulted in priority setting to ensure sufficient resources and equipment were available to conduct operations in a given area.³¹

In 2017, UNMAS reported that gender policies were implemented in accordance with UNMAS, UNOPS, and MINURSO guidelines, as well as with direction from the Polisario.³² NPA stated that gender mainstreaming considerations were included in its Memorandum of Understanding with SMACO, in NPA's internal strategy documents, and taken into account during recruitment processes. Additionally, during survey efforts are made to ensure the needs of men, women, girls, and boys are taken into consideration for more effective and efficient operations.³³

Quality Management

An external quality management system was in place in 2017 and implemented by MINURSO MACC, which consisted of inspection visits for the accreditation of multi-task teams (MTTs) as well as visits during clearance. UNMAS reported that a total of 42 quality assurance (QA) visits were carried out on CMR tasks during the year, a significant increase compared with 2016.³⁴ NPA likewise confirmed a considerable increase in QA activities in 2017, which it said was due to the relocation of the MACC to Tindouf, Algeria, with easier access to territory under Polisario control. It reported that two accreditation missions and three QA visits were carried out on its CMR clearance operations during the year.³⁵

This compared to 2016, when no external QA/QC was carried out on demining activities in April–September owing to the expulsion of UNMAS and MINURSO staff from Western Sahara by Morocco.³⁶

Information Management

According to UNMAS, the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) database for Western Sahara improved appreciably as a result of an ongoing data audit initiated at the end of 2015, which continued

throughout 2017.³⁷ UNMAS confirmed that information on CMR is recorded separately from ERW and explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) spot tasks, and that a revised SOP for data management was introduced, putting a stronger emphasis on verification of information.³⁸ In 2017, UNMAS reported that there was regular support from the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) to correct database errors, and plans were under consideration to upgrade the database to the latest IMSMA Core software version.³⁹

NPA noted significant improvements in information management during the year, with better coordination and monthly updates from the database sent to operators, and easier access for SMACO to receive trainings at the MACC's relocated office in Tindouf.⁴⁰

Operators

DML and NPA were the implementing operators conducting CMR survey and clearance in Western Sahara in 2017. UNMAS reported that the overall mine action capacity in Western Sahara in 2017 consisted of nine MTTs and one community liaison/survey team, with a total of 116 operational staff in the field, 18 support staff, and 8 senior staff.⁴¹ This included six DML teams and one community liaison/survey team, of which four teams were tasked on CMR operations during the year.⁴² NPA deployed two manual teams to clear CMR-contaminated areas and a large-loop detector to facilitate CMR clearance.⁴³

This is an increase from 2016, when in January–November, there were a total of five MTTs (three DML teams and two NPA teams), with one DML team deployed to conduct CMR survey and clearance. At the end of 2016, new funding from Germany allowed additional DML teams to be deployed and assigned to CMR survey and clearance.⁴⁴ NPA did not carry out any tasks related to CMR contamination in 2016.⁴⁵

LAND RELEASE

Total CMR-contaminated area released by clearance was just over 6.1km² in 2017.⁴⁶ This was a near five-fold increase compared with 2016, when just over 1.21km² was cleared, hampered by the political suspension of mine action activities in March–September.⁴⁷ The return to full freedom of movement for all civilian MINURSO and UNMAS staff to implement mine action operations, along with an increase in resources and capacity, accounted for the substantial rise in productivity to address CMR contamination in 2017.⁴⁸

Survey in 2017

In 2017, 57 areas with a size of just over 1.45km² of CMR contamination were confirmed through survey, including nearly 0.69km² by DML and 0.77km² by NPA.⁴⁹ This is a significant increase in the size of CMR-contaminated area identified in 2016, when DML confirmed five previously unrecorded strike areas with a size of 0.25km² through its survey activities.⁵⁰

Table 2: CMR survey in 2017⁵¹

Operator	SHAs cancelled	Area cancelled (m ²)	SHAs confirmed as contaminated	Area confirmed (m ²)	Area reduced by TS (m ²)
DML	0	0	53	687,211	0
NPA	0	0	4	767,361	0
Totals	0	0	57	1,454,572	0

Clearance in 2017

In 2017, there was a near five-fold increase compared to the previous year in the area of CMR contamination cleared, with the clearance of 62 cluster munition strike areas with a size of just over 6.1km² and the destruction of 688 submunitions and 27 items of other UXO.⁵² This compares to the clearance of 17 CMR-contaminated areas with a total size of 1.2km² in 2016.⁵³

Additionally, in 2017, DML conducted a total of 27 EOD spot tasks, locating and destroying 33 items of UXO, while NPA carried out 22 EOD spot tasks destroying 81 items of UXO.⁵⁴

As noted above, UNMAS attributed the significant increase in CMR clearance in 2017 to an increase in resources and teams deployed on CMR tasks and a return to full productivity, compared to the six-month suspension of activities due to the political crisis in 2016.⁵⁵ NPA reported that at the end of 2017, only two areas of CMR contamination remained to be addressed in its area of operations in Bir Lahlou.⁵⁶

Table 3: Clearance of cluster munition contaminated-areas in 2017⁵⁷

Operator	Areas cleared	Area cleared (m ²)	Submunitions destroyed	Other UXO destroyed*
DML	58	4,964,087	631	27
NPA	4	1,142,779	57	0
Totals	62	6,106,866	688	27

* UXO = unexploded ordnance other than unexploded submunitions

ARTICLE 4 COMPLIANCE

Western Sahara is neither a state party nor a signatory to the CCM and therefore does not have a specific clearance deadline under Article 4. However, the SADR submitted a voluntary CCM Article 7 transparency report to the UN in 2014, stating that "By submitting its voluntary report, the SADR would like to reaffirm its commitment to a total ban on cluster munitions as well as its willingness to accede to the Convention on Cluster Munitions and be bound by its provisions".⁵⁸ The SADR also has obligations under international human rights law to clear CMR as soon as possible.

Despite the significant increase in clearance output in 2017, UNMAS reported that delays to clearing confirmed CMR-contaminated areas continued as a result of restrictions on accessing certain areas of the buffer strip established by various MINURSO mission agreements.⁵⁹ NPA cited other challenges to operations, including working in a remote desert environment allied to serious difficulties with the procurement of certain equipment and materials.⁶⁰ Temperatures of up to 60 degrees Celsius, strong winds, sandstorms, and heavy rain during the wet season can also cause mine action activities to be suspended.⁶¹

Under Western Sahara's draft mine action strategic plan, all recorded cluster munition strike areas to the east of the Berm, outside of the buffer strip, should be released by 2019.⁶² UNMAS expected to complete clearance of all cluster munition contamination in the Northern Sector (Bir Lahlou, Mehaires, and Tifariti districts) east of the Berm by the end of 2018.⁶³ It did not expect a change in funding in 2018.⁶⁴

NPA's priority for 2018 was to clear all cluster munition strikes in its area of operations in Bir Lahlou by the end of June. As at the end of May, it was on track to do so. It then planned to deploy teams to Agwanit in the south to clear the last remaining province with CMR contamination in Western Sahara. However, it expected significant logistical challenges for operations to complete clearance of Agwanit as the areas are very remote and scarcely populated. Nevertheless, NPA remained confident that clearance of all CMR in Western Sahara can be completed by the end of 2019.⁶⁵

Table 4: Five-year summary of CMR clearance

Year	Area cleared (m ²)
2017	6,106,866
2016	1,208,930
2015	1,841,225
2014	1,756,566
2013	985,000
Total	11,898,587

- 1 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, Programme Manager, UNMAS, 1 March 2018; and Dandan Xu, Associate Programme Management Officer, UNMAS, 16 July 2018.
- 2 A defensive wall (the Berm) was built during the conflict between the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (Polisario Front) forces, dividing control of the territory between Morocco on the west, and the Polisario Front on the east.
- 3 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018. The buffer strip is an area 5km wide, east of the Berm.
- 4 Email from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 17 May 2017.
- 5 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018.
- 6 Ibid. Bir Lahlou (also spelled Bir Lehlou), Mehaires (also spelled Meharrize) and Tifariti are considered to make up the north, and Mijek and Agwanit the south. Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 9 June 2015.
- 7 SADR Voluntary CCM Article 7 Report, Form F, 20 June 2014; and Cluster Munition Monitor, "Cluster Munition Ban Policy: Western Sahara", updated 12 August 2014, at: http://www.the-monitor.org/index.php/cp/display/region_profiles/theme/.
- 8 Email from Karl Greenwood, Chief of Operations, Action On Armed Violence/Mechem Western Sahara Programme, 18 June 2012.
- 9 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018.
- 10 Emails from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 15 March 2017; Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 23 May 2016; and Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 27 May 2016. The six areas were identified in a 2008 survey.
- 11 "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara", UN doc. S/2017/307, 10 April 2017, p. 8, at: <http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/N1709720.pdf>.
- 12 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 18 and 31 May 2018.
- 13 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018.
- 14 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, Programme Manager, NPA, 14 March 2018.
- 15 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018.
- 16 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 14 March 2018.
- 17 Response to questionnaire by Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 24 February 2014, and email, 25 February 2014.
- 18 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018.
- 21 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 14 March 2018.
- 22 Email from Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 5 June 2015.
- 23 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March, 5 May, and 18 May 2018.
- 24 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 18 May 2018; and Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 24 April and 29 March 2017.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 14 March 2018.
- 27 Emails from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 24 April and 29 March 2017; El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 8 April 2017; and Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 31 May 2018.
- 28 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 14 March 2018.
- 29 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018.
- 30 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018.
- 31 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 14 March 2018.
- 32 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018.
- 33 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 14 March 2018.
- 34 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018.
- 35 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 14 March 2018.
- 36 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 8 April 2017.
- 37 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018.
- 38 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018; and Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 24 April and 29 March 2017.
- 39 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018.
- 40 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 14 March 2018.
- 41 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018.
- 42 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 18 May 2018. Of the six DML teams contracted by UNMAS, three were funded by the mission and three by the German Federal Foreign Office.
- 43 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 14 March 2018.
- 44 Email from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 10 May 2017.
- 45 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 8 April 2017.
- 46 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 20 May 2018; and El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 20 and 27 May 2018.
- 47 Emails from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 15 March 2017; and Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 21 April 2016.
- 48 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 18 May 2018.
- 49 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 22 May 2018; and El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 20 and 27 May 2018.
- 50 Emails from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 15 March 2017; and Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 21 April 2016. DML declined to provide data directly to Mine Action Review and requested that UNMAS data be used instead. Email from Melanie Villegas, Project Executive, DML, 3 March 2017.
- 51 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 22 May 2018; and El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 20 and 27 May 2018.
- 52 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 20 May 2018; and El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 20 and 27 May 2018.
- 53 Email from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 15 March 2017.
- 54 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018; and El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 20 May 2018.
- 55 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018.
- 56 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 14 March 2018.
- 57 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 20 May 2018; and El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 20 and 27 May 2018.
- 58 SADR Voluntary CCM Article 7 Report, Form F, 20 June 2014; and Cluster Munition Monitor, "Cluster Munition Ban Policy: Western Sahara", updated 12 August 2014.
- 59 Email from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 15 March 2017.
- 60 Emails from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 8 April 2017 and 14 March 2018.
- 61 UNMAS, "About UNMAS in Western Sahara", updated January 2017, at: <http://www.mineaction.org/programmes/westernsahara>
- 62 Emails from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 29 March 2017; and Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 31 March 2018.
- 63 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Emails from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 14 March and 31 May 2018.