

WESTERN SAHARA

MINE ACTION REVIEW

CLEARING CLUSTER MUNITION REMNANTS 2023

KEY DATA

CLUSTER MUNITION CONTAMINATION: LIGHT

NATIONAL ESTIMATE

2 KM²

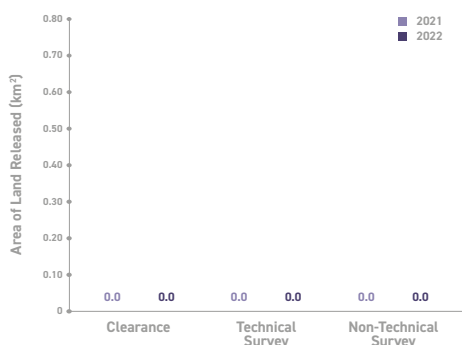
SUBMUNITION CLEARANCE IN 2022

0 KM²

SUBMUNITIONS DESTROYED IN 2022

0

LAND RELEASE OUTPUT



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) should reaffirm its written commitment to respect and implement the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM), including clearance of all cluster munition remnants (CMR), consonant with its international human rights obligations. This commitment should include annual submission of voluntary Article 7 transparency reports.
- The Saharawi Mine Action Coordination Office (SMACO) should draft a new strategy, including a new deadline for completion of clearance of CMR with annual survey and clearance targets, along with a detailed budget.
- Greater support should be provided to the SMACO to enable it to continue to coordinate mine action in Western Sahara, east of the Berm, and to ensure that capacity development efforts are not wasted.
- Mine action in Western Sahara must not become forgotten or overlooked by the international community. Support must be given to address remaining mine, CMR, and other explosive ordnance contamination.

CLUSTER MUNITION SURVEY AND CLEARANCE CAPACITY

MANAGEMENT

- Saharawi Mine Action Coordination Office (SMACO) [Western Sahara, east of the Berm]
- Royal Moroccan Army [Western Sahara, west of the Berm]

NATIONAL OPERATORS

- Royal Moroccan Army

INTERNATIONAL OPERATORS

- SafeLane Global
- Danish Refugee Council (DRC)'s Humanitarian Disarmament and Peacebuilding department

OTHER ACTORS

- United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) Western Sahara

UNDERSTANDING OF CMR CONTAMINATION

According to the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), at the end of 2022, Western Sahara east of the Berm¹ had a total of 45 confirmed hazardous areas (CHAs) containing CMR, covering a total of 2.09km².² There is no change in the contamination estimate from 2021 as no survey or clearance took place in 2022. Both the north and south of Western Sahara east of the Berm are still affected, as summarised in Table 1.³

Table 1: Cluster munition-contaminated area east of the Berm (at end 2022)⁴

Region	CHAs	Area (km ²)
North	26	0.81
South	19	1.28
Totals	45	2.09

The Royal Moroccan Armed Forces used both artillery-fired and air-dropped cluster munitions against Polisario Front military forces during their conflict in Western Sahara from 1975 to 1991. According to the SADR, the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces employed BLU-63, M42, and Mk118 submunitions at multiple locations in Bir Lahlou, Dougaj, Mehaires, Mijek, and North Wadis.⁵

On 13 November 2020, Morocco sent troops into the UN-monitored buffer zone to end Polisario Front supporters' three-week blockade of the strategic Guerguerat road. In

response, Polisario withdrew from the almost 30-year-long ceasefire and renewed attacks on Moroccan military units.⁶ According to UNMAS, this has severely impacted its clearance operations and there is believed to be new contamination from explosive remnants of war (ERW) along the Berm. To date, the renewed conflict between the Polisario Front and Morocco has been of low intensity, without any recorded use of cluster munitions.⁷ In 2022, however, the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) identified a renewed threat of landmines and ERW in the area to the east of the Berm, including in areas previously deemed safe since 2020. MINURSO advocated that the parties to the conflict share detailed information on where renewed fighting had taken place and the types of munitions used to update the mine action database.⁸

While CMR clearance had been projected to be completed by the end of 2012,⁹ discovery of previously unrecorded contaminated areas meant this target date was not met. According to UNMAS, new strike areas continued to be identified in 2013–20 as mine action activities continued and additional information was received from local populations.¹⁰ In 2022, no new areas of previously unrecorded contamination were identified and added to the database.¹¹

Of the 45 recorded CHAs, eight cluster munition strike areas covering a total estimated size of 0.5km² are located inside the buffer strip and are inaccessible for clearance.¹² Clearance of mines and ERW in the buffer strip, restricted areas, and along the Berm itself is not foreseen in the MINURSO mission agreements.¹³

OTHER EXPLOSIVE REMNANTS OF WAR AND LANDMINES

Western Sahara also remains significantly affected by other ERW and mines due to the conflict (see Mine Action Review's *Clearing the Mines* report on Western Sahara for further information).

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 27 October 2022, under UN Security Council Resolution 2654, MINURSO's mandate was extended for an additional 12 months until 31 October 2023.

UNMAS Western Sahara serves as the UN focal point for mine action activities within the MINURSO area of operations. Its contracted teams work only in areas east of the Berm. The Royal Moroccan Army conducts its own demining in areas west of the Berm. In 2013–14, the Polisario Front, with UN support, established the Saharawi Mine Action Coordination Office (SMACO), which is responsible for coordinating mine action activities in Western Sahara east of the Berm, excluding the buffer strip.¹⁴

1 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.

2 Email from Elhadji Kebe, Chief Mine Action Programme, UNMAS, 25 April 2023.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 SADR Voluntary CCM Article 7 Report, dated 20 June 2014, Form F.

6 International Crisis Group, *Time for International Re-engagement in Western Sahara*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing No. 82, 11 March 2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3mPfygl>.

7 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 24 May 2022.

8 Report of the Secretary-General, Situation concerning Western Sahara: S/2022/733, 3 October 2022

9 Email from Karl Greenwood, Chief of Operations, Action on Armed Violence/Mechem Western Sahara Programme, 18 June 2012.

10 Emails from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 29 April 2019; Dandan Xu, UNMAS, 28 June 2019; and Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018.

11 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 25 April 2023.

12 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 21 March 2022; The buffer strip is an area 5km wide, east of the Berm.

13 "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara", UN doc. S/2017/307, 10 April 2017, p. 8.

14 Response to questionnaire by Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 24 February 2014, and email, 25 February 2014; and email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 6 August 2020.

In 2022, no financial support was provided to SMACO. There was some funding available from Spain but this was dependent on the resumption of demining operations. Spain approved a request from UNMAS to extend the timeframe of the grant should demining operations resume.¹⁵

In 2022, UNMAS Western Sahara was solely funded by MINURSO to support its mandate in Western Sahara by ensuring the safe passage of military observers.¹⁶

ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES AND ACTION

UNMAS Western Sahara reported that environmental impact is considered as part of the tasking process and implementation plan in order to minimise potential harm from demining activities.¹⁷ This includes waste disposal procedures for rubbish and grey and black water disposal; how and where to set up camps; and how to dismantle camps without leaving an operational footprint.¹⁸

As part of their national standards, SMACO have a policy on environmental management with a requirement that all implementation plans consider environmental impacts.¹⁹

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 Front.²⁰ UNMAS has a gender strategy as part of its overall country strategy.²¹ 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.²² 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.²³

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 2022, there was only one woman employed by SMACO and two by SafeLane Global (UNMAS's contractor), as illustrated in Table 2.²⁴ Since becoming operational in 2023, however, the number of women employed by SafeLane Global has increased to eight.²⁵

Table 2: Gender composition of SMACO and SafeLane Global²⁶

Entity	Total staff	Women employed	Total staff in managerial or supervisory positions	Women in managerial or supervisory positions	Total staff in operational positions	Women in operational positions
SMACO	4	1	1	0	2	1
SafeLane Global	47	2	11	0	18	2

Through SMACO, UNMAS also supports the Sahrawi Mine Action Women's Team (SMAWT), an all-female organisation working on risk education in Rabouni and the five Sahrawi refugee camps. All national deminers, both male and female, are Sahrawi, considered an ethnic minority group.²⁷

15 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 25 April 2023.

16 Ibid.

17 Emails from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 4 February 2022; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 21 March 2022.

18 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 24 May 2022.

19 Ibid., 18 June 2020.

20 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018.

21 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021.

22 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.

23 Emails from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 4 May 2019 and 14 March 2018.

24 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 25 April 2023.

25 Ibid., 30 May 2023.

26 Emails from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 25 April 2023 and from Hadi Kodeih, SafeLane Global Limited, 30 May 2023.

27 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021; and SMAWT newsletter, March 2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3yN542U>.

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 2015.²⁸ 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 2019.²⁹ This was further delayed due to the COVID-19 lockdown, and IMSMA Core finally became fully operational in March 2022, with all data successfully migrated.³⁰

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 2019–2023.³¹

No specific objectives relate to CMR in the strategy for mine action in Western Sahara, east of the Berm, but SMACO has established the following general objectives in order to achieve a Western Sahara free of the impact of mines and ERW:

- 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 2023.³²

In 2022, SMACO had developed a form for accident and victim data collection in Western Sahara, east of the Berm and victims, following a series of workshops with stakeholders, which had been approved by the Sahrawi Ministry of Defence. The resultant form is available in both Arabic and English. The other objectives have still to be realised and UNMAS has reported that the UN Mine Action Strategy for 2023–2026 is currently being developed.³³ A mine action work plan was in place for UNMAS in 2022, developed by UNMAS Western Sahara, in support of MINURSO's mandate.³⁴

UNMAS Western Sahara mine action activities continue to be in support of MINURSO's mandate.³⁵ UNMAS and SMACO identify priorities for clearance of both minefields and cluster munition strikes 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.³⁶

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. UNMAS reported in June 2019 that translation of the standards into Arabic had been completed and shared with SMACO.³⁷ UNMAS reported that the standards are reviewed annually but that no updates were made in 2022.³⁸

An external quality management system was in place from 2018 and implemented by UNMAS and SMACO to the east of the Berm.³⁹

28 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018.

29 Email from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 31 May 2019.

30 Emails from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 4 February 2022; and Nadine Hussein, UNMAS, 30 May 2023.

31 Emails from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 21 March 2022.

32 SMACO, "Strategic Plan 2019–2023", at: <http://bit.ly/38jaGm2>; and email from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 31 July 2019.

33 Emails from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 25 April 2023 and 30 May 2023.

34 Ibid.

35 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.

36 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 6 August 2020.

37 Emails from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 29 April 2019; and Dandan Xu, UNMAS, 28 June 2019.

38 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 25 April 2023.

39 Emails from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 29 April 2019; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 28 July 2020.

OPERATORS AND OPERATIONAL TOOLS

Table 3: Operational clearance capacities deployed in 2022⁴⁰

Operator	Manual teams	Total deminers*	Dog teams	Mechanical assets	Comments
SafeLane Global (for UNMAS Western Sahara)	1	10	0	0	No change from 2021
Totals	1	10	0	0	

* Excluding team leaders, medics, and drivers.

SafeLane Global (formerly Dynasafe MineTech Limited, DML) was the implementing operator for UNMAS Western Sahara in 2021. UNMAS expected to restart demining operations in 2023, which they believe could lead to an increase in capacity.⁴¹

Danish Refugee Council (DRC) had hoped to restart non-technical survey in 2022.⁴²

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS COMPLETION

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS IN 2022

No cluster munition-contaminated area was released through survey or clearance or submunitions destroyed during spot tasks in 2022 or 2021.⁴³ According to UNMAS, the absence of survey and clearance during the two years was due to the partial suspension of clearance operations in accordance with COVID-19 protocols as well as the ending of the three-decade-long ceasefire between Morocco and Polisario in November 2020. This led to the suspension of survey and clearance operations due to Polisario's refusal to approve them. This meant that only the explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) response team were on standby for emergency EOD and route verification tasks.⁴⁴

PROGRESS TOWARDS COMPLETION

Western Sahara is neither a State Party nor a signatory to the CCM—it is not recognised as a State by the UN Secretary-General and therefore cannot formally adhere to the treaty—and hence 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 “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”.⁴⁵ The SADR has obligations under international human rights law to clear CMR as soon as possible.

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, were to be released by 2019.⁴⁶ UNMAS expected to complete clearance of all CMR contamination in the Northern Sector (Bir Lahlou, Mehaires, and Tifariti districts) east of the Berm by the end of 2018.⁴⁷ This did not happen, however, and in SMACO's mine action strategy 2019–23, the vision is for Western Sahara to be free of the impact of mines and ERW by 2023.⁴⁸ Western Sahara did not meet this date, which should now be revised along with the elaboration of a new strategic plan.

UNMAS Western Sahara has been advocating for the resumption of demining operations east of the Berm. The Royal Moroccan Army gave its approval in August 2022 with the Polisario Front following suit in January 2023. In April 2023, demining teams were remobilised and retrained with the first teams deployed for battle area clearance in May.⁴⁹ To support continued land release, there is an urgent need for increased resources and capacity at SMACO.

40 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 25 April 2023.

41 Ibid.

42 Email from Catherine Smith, Regional Coordinator, DDG, 1 February 2022.

43 Emails from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 4 February 2022; and Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 25 April 2023.

44 Emails from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021; and Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 25 April 2023; and UN Country Level Survey for the Monitoring & Evaluation Mechanism of the UN Mine Action Strategy 2019–2023.

45 SADR Voluntary CCM Article 7 Report, Form F, 20 June 2014.

46 Emails from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 29 March 2017; and Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 31 March 2018.

47 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018.

48 SMACO, “Strategic Plan 2019–2023”, at: <http://bit.ly/38jaGm2>.

49 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 30 May 2023.