

WESTERN SAHARA



MINE ACTION PROGRAMME PERFORMANCE

For 2016

For 2015

Problem understood	7	7
Target date for completion of mine clearance	3	3
Targeted clearance	6	7
Efficient clearance	7	7
National funding of programme	3	3
Timely clearance	1	4
Land release system in place	8	8
National mine action standards	8	7
Reporting on progress	4	5
Improving performance	5	5
PERFORMANCE SCORE: AVERAGE	5.2	5.6

PERFORMANCE COMMENTARY

Progress to address remaining mine contamination in Western Sahara was hindered in 2016 by a six-month shutdown of United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS)-contracted demining operations due to a political issue with Morocco. No areas containing anti-personnel mines were cleared in 2016. Overall land release of areas affected by anti-vehicle mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) increased slightly, to just under 4.5km². The priority for mine action operations in Western Sahara east of the Berm, according to UNMAS, remained non-technical survey of all suspected hazardous areas (SHAs) in order to better define and reduce the inflated estimates of the size of hazardous areas recorded in a 2008 survey.¹

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- The Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) should formally commit to respect and implement the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (APMBC), including to clear all mine contamination east of the Berm as soon as possible.
- Morocco should ensure freedom of access and unhindered movement of all civilian UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) staff and take all necessary measures to facilitate the conduct of demining.
- The draft mine action plan for Western Sahara should be finalised and made publicly available.

CONTAMINATION

The exact extent of mine contamination across Western Sahara is not known, although the areas along the Berm² are thought to contain some of the densest mine contamination in the world.³ 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 UNMAS, the primary mine threat in Western Sahara east of the Berm, excluding both the Berm itself and the buffer strip, is from anti-vehicle rather than anti-personnel mines; cluster munition remnants are also a major hazard.⁴ It stated that, as at the end of 2016, only a limited number of areas suspected to contain anti-personnel mines remained to the east of the Berm,

and the majority of mine contamination identified during ongoing and historical clearance efforts was from anti-vehicle mines.⁵

At the end of 2016, land in Western Sahara to the east of the Berm contained a total of 36 confirmed and suspected mined areas covering a total of more than 252km², as set out in Table 1.⁶ This is almost 4.5km² less than at the end of 2015, according to UNMAS's estimate of contamination.⁷

Seven of the thirty-six areas, covering a total of 61.9km², are located within the 5km-wide buffer strip and are inaccessible for clearance.⁸ Clearance of the buffer strip of mines and 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.⁹

Table 1: Mine contamination east of the Berm (as at end-2016)¹⁰

Type of contamination	CHAs	Area (km ²)	SHAs	Area (km ²)
AP mines	0	0	1	0.1
AV mines	13	3.3	13	94.2
AP/AV mines	2	0.5	8	153.9
Totals	15	3.8	22	248.2

AP = Anti-personnel AV = Anti-vehicle CHAs = Confirmed hazardous areas

Both the north and south of Western Sahara are known or suspected to contain anti-personnel mines, as set out in Table 2.¹¹

Table 2: Areas containing anti-personnel mines by province east of the Berm (as at end-2016)¹²

Province	CHAs	Area (km ²)	SHAs	Area (km ²)
North Region	2	0.53	6	8.3
South Region	0	0	3	145.7
Totals	2	0.53	9	154.0

The figure of 154km² of remaining anti-personnel mine contamination is not consistent with the figure at the end of 2015, less reported release during the year. This figure would be just under 180km². UNMAS has sought to justify the huge difference by reference to the peculiarities of the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) database in Western Sahara.¹³

In 2016, UNMAS continued to prioritise non-technical survey of SHAs to obtain a more accurate picture of the remaining threat. In 2015, a number of confirmed mined areas were reclassified as SHAs in the IMSMA database prior to non-technical survey intended to better define the parameters and size of the areas.¹⁴

A survey in 2006–08 by an international non-governmental organisation (NGO), Landmine Action, later renamed Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), initially identified 37 mined areas on the east of the Berm, nearly half of which were in Bir Lahlou, followed by Tifariti, Mehaires, and Agwanit.¹⁵ According to UNMAS, five mined areas were addressed in 2012–16, but new mined areas continued to be identified. No new anti-personnel mine contamination was identified in 2016.¹⁶

Neither survey nor clearance has been conducted in the 5km buffer strip to the east of the Berm. The extent of contamination west of the Berm remains unknown, and as of 2017, no survey had been carried out there.¹⁷ 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, helping to build a clearer understanding of the mine and ERW threat across Western Sahara.¹⁸

The significant mine, unexploded submunition, and other UXO contamination in Western Sahara continues to pose a daily threat to the local, nomadic, and refugee populations, along with UN personnel and military observers, and humanitarian actors.¹⁹ Contamination from mines and ERW negatively impacts socio-economic growth and development, limiting access to fluctuating and seasonally dependent water sources vital for animal herding and small-scale agriculture on which local populations depend.²⁰

PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

In Western Sahara, UNMAS contracts a survey/clearance capacity through implementing partners, with quality assurance performed externally by UNMAS staff in accordance with the International Mine Action Standards (IMAS). Survey and clearance were implemented by commercial contractor Dynasafe MineTech Limited (DML) and NGO Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) in 2016.²¹

In September 2013, the Polisario Front established a local mine action coordination centre (the Saharawi Mine Action Coordination Office, SMACO), which is responsible for coordinating mine action in Western Sahara east of the Berm and for land release activities.²² SMACO, which was established with UN support, started its activities in January 2014.

Strategic Planning

MINURSO's mine action activities are conducted in accordance with the UN Mine Action Strategy for 2013–18. UNMAS planned to develop a mine action strategy specific to Western Sahara in the second half of 2015.²³ As at September 2017, the strategy was still considered a draft and not publicly available. UNMAS reported that ongoing discussions with MINURSO and SMACO continued, with a target date of July 2018 for the strategy's release, while a multi-year workplan remained in place.²⁴ According to UNMAS, the strategy foresees completion of non-technical survey in 2017/2018; release of all recorded cluster munition strike areas east of the Berm by the end of 2019; and a 50% reduction in the total number of recorded SHAs and CHAs remaining in Western Sahara by the end of 2022.²⁵

UNMAS reported that the MINURSO mine action component identifies priorities for mine clearance to the east of the Berm in conjunction with SMACO. Priorities for mine clearance are areas that restrict MINURSO from carrying out its mandate and areas established with SMACO that hinder the safety of movement of local communities.²⁶

Standards

In 2016, UNMAS, together with SMACO, finalised the development of local mine action standards applicable east of the Berm, in coordination with mine action partners. In May 2017, UNMAS reported that the standards had been disseminated to all mine action stakeholders and that their implementation was jointly monitored by the MINURSO mine action component and SMACO, pending their official certification by SMACO.²⁷ As at April 2017, the standards were said to be in the process of being translated into Arabic.²⁸

Quality Management

An external quality management system is in place and is implemented by the MINURSO mine action component, which consists of inspection visits for the accreditation of MTT teams as well as during clearance. UNMAS reported that, during 2016, a total of 25 quality assurance (QA) visits were conducted to assess mine clearance tasks.²⁹

According to NPA, SMACO also conducted external QA and quality control (QC) activities. In April–September 2016, however, no external QA/QC was carried out on demining activities owing to the expulsion of UNMAS and MINURSO staff from Western Sahara by Morocco.³⁰

Information Management

UNMAS claimed that significant improvements were made to the IMSMA database for Western Sahara in 2016 as a result of an ongoing data audit initiated at the end of 2015, which filtered out duplicate information. Revised standing operating procedures for data management were also introduced with a stronger emphasis on the verification of information, it said.³¹

UNMAS initiated a project, funded by Germany, to build SMACO's capacity for information management, which included training a local Information Management Officer in 2016. NPA reported that the management of the IMSMA database by the MINURSO mine action component and SMACO had improved, with better access, coordination, and communication between the two entities following the relocation of UNMAS to Tindouf, Algeria, in September 2016.³²

LAND RELEASE

No areas containing anti-personnel mines were cleared in 2016. An area thought to contain mixed anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mine contamination was cleared, but no anti-personnel mines were found.³⁴

In 2016, DML was reported to have cancelled two SHAs where anti-personnel mines had been suspected, covering nearly 0.46km², and confirmed two SHAs with a size of 0.53km² as containing anti-personnel mines.³⁵

According to UNMAS, in 2016, nearly 4.5km² of anti-vehicle mine contamination was released in 2016, of which 328,355m² was by clearance and 4,037,993m² cancellation by non-technical survey.³⁶ This is a slight increase from 2015, when nearly 4.4km² of area containing anti-vehicle mines and ERW was released: 502,901m² by clearance and 3,881,967m² cancelled through non-technical survey.³⁷ As was the case in 2016, all tasked areas were contaminated with anti-vehicle mines and no anti-personnel mines were located during clearance.³⁸

ARTICLE 5 COMPLIANCE

Western Sahara is not a state party to the APMB. In June 2014, however, the SADR submitted a voluntary APMB Article 7 transparency report to the UN "as a sign of the support of the Sahrawi State for the goals of the Treaty".⁴³ The SADR has obligations under international human rights law to clear mines as soon as possible, including by virtue of being a state party to the 1981 African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights.

As noted above, in 2016, the six-month suspension of operations negatively affected UNMAS' yearly operational targets. NPA cited other challenges to operations, including working in a remote desert environment allied to serious difficulties in procuring certain equipment and materials.⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵

Operators

In January–November 2016, a total of five Multi-Task Teams (MTTs) were in Western Sahara. Two MTTs were deployed by NPA to conduct mine clearance, along with two of three teams contracted from DML. In November 2016, new funding from Germany allowed three additional DML teams to be deployed, making a total of eight operational MTTs. Of these three additional DML teams, two were assigned to mine survey and clearance tasks.³³

In 2016, nearly 0.74km² of area containing anti-vehicle mines was released by DML, of which 195,862m² was cleared and 548,892m² was cancelled by non-technical survey, locating and destroying 17 anti-vehicle mines.³⁹ By the end of the year, NPA had cleared a total of 132,493m² in two areas contaminated with anti-vehicle mines in Bir Lahlou, with the destruction of six anti-vehicle mines. It released a further 0.13km² through technical survey and cancelled a total of almost 3.5km² during the year.⁴⁰ This compared to 2015, when NPA cancelled nearly 0.25km² by non-technical survey and reduced a further 0.1km² through technical survey, with DML confirming 0.29km² as mined.⁴¹

To the west of the Berm, according to a UN Secretary-General report, RMA reported, improbably in the view of Mine Action Review, that it had cleared more than 218km² in territory under its control between April 2016 and April 2017.⁴²

Following a visit by former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to Sahrawi refugee camps in southern Algeria in March 2016 and his use of the term "occupation" to describe the political status of Western Sahara, Morocco ordered the expulsion of 83 civilian staff members of MINURSO, including all UNMAS international staff. This resulted in the suspension of demining in Western Sahara east of the Berm from 20 March to 15 September 2016.⁴⁶

On 29 April 2016, the UN Security Council voted to extend MINURSO's mandate in Western Sahara for one year until 30 April 2017. In doing so, it emphasised strongly "the urgent need for the mission to return to full functionality", noting that MINURSO had been unable to fully carry out its mandate as the majority of its civilian component had been prevented from performing their duties.⁴⁷ The mandate was subsequently updated for an additional year until the end of April 2018.⁴⁸

UNMAS reported that mine action operations returned to full capacity in September 2016, when it relocated to Tindouf, Algeria. In March 2017, it stated that there were no restrictions on movement in UNMAS's areas of operations east of the Berm.⁴⁹ NPA raised concerns, however, that the events of 2016 could complicate access to the Berm and negatively affect donor interest in Western Sahara.⁵⁰

Under Western Sahara's new draft mine action strategic plan, non-technical survey is to be completed in 2017/18 and the number of recorded SHAs and CHAs reduced by 50% by the end of 2022.⁵¹ MINURSO MACC reported that priorities in 2017 would be the completion of non-technical survey in five districts east of the Berm, with the survey of six SHAs. It predicted that the increase in demining capacity in November 2016 would be maintained throughout the year as operational funding for the additional teams had been secured for 24 months.⁵²

In 2017, NPA planned to deploy an additional MTT with the capacity to carry out battle area clearance (BAC), explosive ordnance disposal (EOD), and survey, alongside its mine clearance operations. It planned to complete survey and clearance of all SHAs and CHAs in Bir Lahlou province, including non-technical survey of three SHAs with a recorded size of more than 3.5km². It also intended to start operations in an area suspected to contain anti-personnel mines close to the buffer strip near the Berm.⁵³

In keeping with previous estimates, UNMAS estimated that all high and medium hazardous areas in Western Sahara east of the Berm, including mined areas, could be released by 2025.⁵⁴

- 1 Email from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 29 March 2017.
- 2 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.
- 3 See UNMAS, "About UNMAS in Western Sahara", updated May 2015, at: <http://www.mineaction.org/programmes/westernsahara>; and Action on Armed Violence (AOAV), "Making life safer for the people of Western Sahara", London, August 2011, at: http://www.aoav.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Making_life_safer_for_the_people_of_western_sahara1.pdf.
- 4 Email from Graeme Abernethy, Programme Manager, UNMAS, 7 September 2017.
- 5 Email from Virginie Auger, Associate Programme Officer, UNMAS, 29 March 2017.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Response to questionnaire by Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 18 May 2015. The extent of contamination in Moroccan-controlled territory to the west of the Berm remains unknown.
- 8 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 7 September 2017. The buffer strip is an area 5km wide east of the Berm. MINURSO, "Ceasefire Monitoring Overview", undated but accessed 1 June 2016, at: <https://minurso.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?tabid=11421&language=en-US>.
- 9 "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara", UN doc. S/2017/307, 10 April 2017, p. 8.
- 10 Email from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 29 March 2017.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid. This includes areas recorded as having mixed anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mines.
- 13 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 21 September 2016.
- 14 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 24 August 2016.
- 15 Email from Penelope Caswell, Field Programme and Geographic Information System Manager, AOAV, 18 May 2010.
- 16 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 7 September 2017.
- 17 UNMAS, "2017 Portfolio of Mine Action Projects: MINURSO (UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara)", at: http://www.mineaction.org/sites/default/files/print/country_portfolio6947-951-76005.pdf.
- 18 UNMAS, "2017 Portfolio of Mine Action Projects: MINURSO".
- 19 Ibid. and emails from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 29 March 2017; and Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 26 April 2016 and 18 May 2015.
- 20 Ibid.; and UNMAS, "2016 Portfolio of Mine Action Projects: MINURSO".
- 21 Email from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 15 March 2017.
- 22 Response to questionnaire by Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 24 February 2014; and email, 25 February 2014.
- 23 Email from Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 5 June 2015.
- 24 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 7 September 2017.
- 25 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, Programme Manager, NPA, 8 April 2017.
- 26 Emails from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 15 and 29 March 2017.
- 27 Email from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 17 May 2017.
- 28 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 8 April 2017.
- 29 Email from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 29 March 2017.
- 30 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 8 April 2017.
- 31 Emails from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 24 April 2017 and 29 March 2017.
- 32 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 8 April 2017.
- 33 Email from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 10 May 2017.
- 34 Email from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 29 March 2017.
- 35 Ibid.; and email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 7 September 2017.
- 36 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 24 August 2016.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 7 and 26 September 2017.
- 40 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 8 April 2017.
- 41 Emails from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 4 May 2016; and Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 26 April 2016; and response to questionnaire, 18 May 2015.
- 42 "Report of the UN Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara", UN doc. S/2017/307, 10 April 2017, p. 8.
- 43 "SADR initiative welcomed by Maputo Conference on Mine Ban", Sahara Press Service, 2 July 2014, at: <http://www.spsrasd.info/en/content/sadr-initiative-welcomed-maputo-conference-mine-ban>.
- 44 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 8 April 2017.
- 45 UNMAS, "About UNMAS in Western Sahara", updated January 2017, at: <http://www.mineaction.org/programmes/westernsahara>.
- 46 "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara", UN doc. S/2017/307, 10 April 2017, p. 8; R. Gladstone, "Morocco Orders U.N. to Cut Staff in Disputed Western Sahara Territory", *The New York Times*, 17 March 2016; and What's in Blue: Insights on the work of the UN Security Council, "Western Sahara: Arria-formula Meeting, Consultations, and MINURSO Adoption", 26 April 2016; and email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 7 September 2017.
- 47 UN Security Council Resolution 2285, 29 April 2016.
- 48 UN Security Council Resolution 2351, 28 April 2017.
- 49 Email from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 29 March 2017.
- 50 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 8 April 2017.
- 51 Email from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 29 March 2017.
- 52 Ibid.
- 53 Email from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 8 April 2017.
- 54 Emails from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 10 May and 29 March 2017; and Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 21 April and 18 May 2016.