

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- The Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic 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 international human rights obligations. This commitment should include the annual submission of a voluntary Article 7 report.
- The Saharawi Mine Action Coordination Office (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.
- A resource mobilisation plan should be developed with the aim of attracting international donor support.
- Greater support should be provided to 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.

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 2020, no areas suspected or confirmed to contain solely anti-personnel mines remained to the east of the Berm. Most mine contamination identified during ongoing and historical clearance efforts was from anti-vehicle mines though some areas previously thought to contain only anti-vehicle mines were found to also contain anti-personnel mines following non-technical survey conducted in the Agwanit Area of Responsibility.⁴

At the end of 2020, land in Western Sahara to the east of the Berm contained a total of 25 areas confirmed or suspected to contain mixed anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mine contamination covering a total of 216km² (see Table 1).⁵ The

main difference in the type of contamination from the data reported in 2019 is that all contamination is now reported as mixed anti-personnel and anti-vehicle mines, at the end of 2019, it was reported that 27 confirmed hazardous areas (CHAs) containing anti-vehicle mines totalled 61.9km².⁶ According to UNMAS, the anti-vehicle mine contamination has been recategorised as mixed anti-vehicle mine and anti-personnel mine and is included in the contamination estimate.⁷

Both the north and south of Western Sahara are known or suspected to contain anti-personnel mines, with the 25 areas covering an estimated total size of 216km² remaining at the end of 2020, as set out in Table 2.⁸ From 2019, the number of CHAs has increased by ten and the amount of area has increased by 2.94km² while the number of suspected hazardous areas (SHAs) has decreased by nine and the area has decreased by 0.04km². Overall, the total number of hazardous areas has increased from 24 to 25 and the total area has increased by 2.91km².⁹ UNMAS reported that no previously unrecorded anti-personnel mine contamination was added to Western Sahara's information management database in 2020.¹⁰ According to UNMAS, this increase was due to change in survey method as teams began to use a vehicle-assisted box survey method, which allowed them to cover larger areas and record new hazards.¹¹

Table 1: Mined area east of the Berm (at end 2020)¹²

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	0	0	0	0	0	0
AP/AV mines	15	90.05	10	125.96	25	216.01
Totals	15	90.05	10	125.96	25	216.01

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

Table 2: Mined area containing anti-personnel mines by province east of the Berm (at end 2020)¹³

Province	CHAs	Area (km ²)	SHAs	Area (km ²)	Total CHAs and SHAs	Total area (km ²)
North Region	5	0.26	3	4.10	8	4.36
South Region	10	89.79	7	121.86	17	211.65
Totals	15	90.05	10	125.96	25	216.01

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.¹⁴ 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 the Polisario Front) and No. 3 (with the Moroccan army), which, according to the UN, considerably limits the ability of MINURSO military observers to patrol and verify developments.¹⁵ No survey or clearance of the buffer strip was conducted during 2020.¹⁶

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.¹⁷

Western Sahara also has a significant problem from CMR and other ERW (see Mine Action Review's *Clearing Cluster Munition Remnants 2021* report on Western Sahara for further information).¹⁸

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 2020, MINURSO's mandate was extended for an additional 12 months until 30 October 2021 under UN Security Council Resolution 2548. 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.¹⁹

In 2020, UNMAS Western Sahara provided SMACO with €50,000 funding to cover some of its operating expenses. SMACO also receives ongoing capacity development support from UNMAS.²⁰

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.²¹ UNMAS has a gender strategy as part of its overall country strategy.²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴

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 2020, 43% of staff in UNMAS Western Sahara were women with 14% in supervisory roles although there are only seven staff in total (both national and international). In SafeLane Global (UNMAS's contractor), 17% of operational roles were held by women. 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 camps. All national deminers, both male and female, are Sahrawi.²⁵

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 2015.²⁶ 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 2019.²⁷ This did not occur and was further delayed due to COVID-19 lockdown. As at March 2021, this process was still ongoing.²⁸

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 2023.²⁹

As at March 2021, none of these objectives had been achieved and UNMAS reported delays in progress due to the suspension of operations as a result of COVID-19. The yearly work plan was suspended in 2020 due to COVID-19, although there had also been no mine action work plan in 2019.³⁰

UNMAS Western Sahara mine action activities continue to be in support of MINURSO's mandate.³¹ 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.³²

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 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.³³ UNMAS reported in March 2021 that the standards are reviewed annually and that no updates were made in 2020.³⁴

An external quality management system was in place from 2018 and implemented by UNMAS and SMACO to the east of the Berm.³⁵

OPERATORS AND OPERATIONAL TOOLS

Table 3: Operational clearance capacities deployed in 2020³⁶

Operator	Manual teams	Total deminers*	Dog teams	Comments
SafeLane Global (for UNMAS Western Sahara)	2	24	0	No change from 2019
Totals	2	24	0	

* Excluding team leaders, medics, and drivers.

SafeLane Global (formerly Dynasafe MineTech Limited, DML) was the implementing operator for UNMAS Western Sahara, conducting survey and clearance in 2020. There was no change in operational capacity in 2020 from the previous year and no change was planned for 2021.³⁷

Danish Demining Group (DDG) did have funding in 2020 for non-technical survey in Western Sahara east of the Berm, however, due to the restrictions introduced as part of the COVID-19 outbreak and then the renewal of conflict from November 2020, DDG was not able to deploy any teams after they received training in March. As at April 2021, with the border with Algeria still predominantly closed, DDG (now known as Danish Refugee Council's Humanitarian Disarmament and Peacebuilding sector) have had to reorientate activities and they no longer have funding to conduct survey in Western Sahara.³⁸

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS COMPLETION

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS IN 2020

There was no survey or clearance conducted of mined area in 2020.³⁹ This is a decrease from the 0.20km² of mined area which was cleared by SafeLane Global for UNMAS Western Sahara in the north and south regions during 2019.⁴⁰ According to UNMAS, the absence of survey and clearance during 2020 was due to the partial suspension of clearance operations in accordance with COVID-19 protocol, with only the explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) response team on standby for emergency EOD and route verification tasks.⁴¹

PROGRESS TOWARDS COMPLETION

Western Sahara is not a State Party to the APMBBC and cannot adhere as the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic is not recognised as a State by the UN Secretary-General. In June 2014, however, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic submitted a voluntary APMBBC Article 7 transparency report to the UN "as a sign of the support of the Sahrawi State for the goals of the Treaty".⁴²

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.⁴³ In 2020, UNMAS Western Sahara reported that it needed 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 2023.⁴⁴

However, there has been a massive decrease in clearance output from 2018 to 2020 in Western Sahara with no mined areas cleared during 2020 due to operations being partially suspended because of the outbreak of COVID-19 and the resurgence of conflict.⁴⁵ The 2023 completion date was always ambitious but now looks impossible and should be revised along with the timed objectives in SMACO's Strategic Plan 2019–2023. Additional resources and capacity, along with support to SMACO, also need to be secured urgently.

- 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 erstwhile Berlin Wall and second in length today only to the Great Wall of China.
- 2 See UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS), "About UNMAS in Western Sahara", updated May 2015, at: <http://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 Leon Louw, Programme Manager, UNMAS, 30 March 2021; Edwin Faigmane, Programme Officer, UNMAS, 18 June 2020; Robert Thompson, Chief of Operations, UNMAS, 31 July 2019; Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018; Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 29 March 2017.
- 5 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021.
- 6 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.
- 7 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 11 May 2021.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 28 July 2020.
- 10 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021.
- 11 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 11 May 2021.
- 12 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 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: <http://bit.ly/2Yxg1nv>.
- 15 "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.
- 16 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021.
- 17 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 14 September 2018; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020; and UNMAS, "2017 Portfolio of Mine Action Projects: MINURSO".
- 18 Questionnaire response by Gerhard Zank, HALO Trust, 22 May 2017; and email, 17 May 2016.
- 19 Response to questionnaire by Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 24 February 2014, and email, 25 February 2014; and email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 6 August 2020.
- 20 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021.
- 21 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018.
- 22 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021.
- 23 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.
- 24 Emails from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 4 May 2019 and 14 March 2018.
- 25 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021.
- 26 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018.
- 27 Email from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 31 May 2019.
- 28 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021.
- 29 SMACO "Strategic Plan 2019–2023", at: <http://bit.ly/38jaGm2>; and email from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 31 July 2019.
- 30 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021.
- 31 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.
- 32 Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 6 August 2020.
- 33 Emails from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 29 April 2019; and Dandan Xu, UNMAS, 28 June 2019.
- 34 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021.
- 35 Emails from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 29 April 2019; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 28 July 2020.
- 36 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Email from Catherine Smith, Regional Coordinator, DDG, 18 April 2021.
- 39 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021.
- 40 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 29 July 2020.
- 41 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021.
- 42 "SADR initiative welcomed by Maputo Conference on Mine Ban", *Sahara Press Service*, 2 July 2014, at: <http://bit.ly/2GE1JqW>.
- 43 SMACO "Strategic Plan 2019–2023", at: <http://bit.ly/38jaGm2>.
- 44 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 6 August 2020.
- 45 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021.