

WESTERN SAHARA



CLEARING THE MINES 2022

KEY DATA

ANTI-PERSONNEL (AP) MINE CONTAMINATION: HEAVY

MINE ACTION REVIEW ESTIMATE

50km²

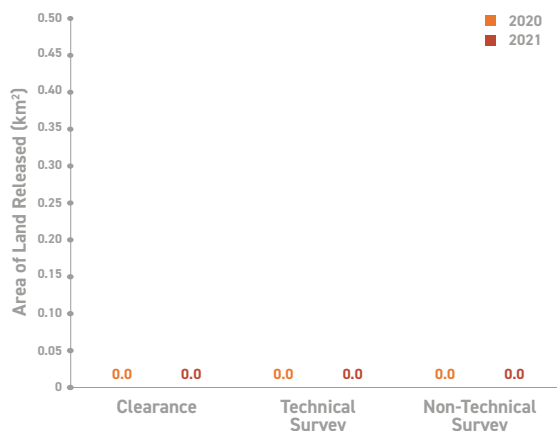
AP MINE
CLEARANCE IN 2021

0M²

AP MINES
DESTROYED IN 2021

0

LAND RELEASE OUTPUT



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.
- 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.

DEMINING CAPACITY

MANAGEMENT CAPACITY

- 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 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 2021, 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 2021, 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 212km² (see Table 1).⁵

Table 1: Mined area east of the Berm (at end 2021)⁶

Type of contamination	CHAs	Area (km ²)	SHAs	Area (km ²)	Total CHAs and SHAs	Total area (km ²)
AP/AV mines	15	86.06	10	125.66	25	211.72
Totals	15	86.06	10	125.66	25	211.72

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 the 25 areas covering an estimated total size of 212km² remaining at the end of 2021, as set out in Table 2.⁷ From 2020, the number of confirmed hazardous areas (CHAs) and suspected hazardous areas (SHAs) has remained the same while there has been a reduction in the area of CHAs by 3.99km² and a small reduction in the area of SHAs by 0.3km², which equates to an overall reduction in the estimated extent of contamination of 4.29km². This decrease is due to data cleaning and a more accurate mapping system used by the Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) Core.⁸

Table 2: Mined area containing anti-personnel mines by province east of the Berm (at end 2021)⁹

Province	CHAs	Area (km ²)	SHAs	Area (km ²)	Total CHAs and SHAs	Total area (km ²)
North Region	5	0.27	3	4.11	8	4.38
South Region	10	85.79	7	121.55	17	207.34
Totals	15	86.06	10	125.66	25	211.72

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, which are located within the 5km-wide buffer strip, are not accessible for clearance.¹⁰ Clearance of the buffer strip of mines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) is not foreseen in the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) Military Agreements No. 2 (with the Polisario Front) and No. 3 (with the RMA). This, according to the UN, considerably limits the ability of MINURSO military observers to patrol and verify developments.¹¹ No survey or clearance of the buffer strip was conducted during 2021.¹²

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; and Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 29 March 2017.

5 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 21 March 2022.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Emails from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 24 May 2022.

9 Ibid.

10 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>.

11 "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.

12 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 4 February 2022.

UNMAS reported that no previously unrecorded anti-personnel mine contamination was added to Western Sahara's information management database in 2021.¹³

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.¹⁴

Western Sahara also has a significant problem from CMR and other ERW (see Mine Action Review's *Clearing Cluster Munition Remnants 2022* report on Western Sahara for further information).¹⁵

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 29 October 2021, MINURSO's mandate was extended for an additional 12 months until 31 October 2022 under UN Security Council Resolution 2602. 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 SMACO, which is responsible for coordinating mine action activities in Western Sahara east of the Berm, excluding the buffer strip.¹⁶

In 2021, UNMAS Western Sahara provided SMACO with a US\$26,497 grant to cover some of its operating expenses. SMACO has reported to UNMAS that it has also received some funding from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). UNMAS has advocated that SMACO and the Sahrawi authorities provide their own funding to support SMACO activities. SMACO, which also receives ongoing capacity development support from UNMAS Western Sahara, is being supported to develop a resource mobilisation plan.¹⁷

UNMAS Western Sahara receives funding from the UN assessed budget for land release activities in the area east of the Berm. It received US\$3.03 million for the period 1 July 2021 to 30 June 2022.¹⁸

ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES AND ACTION

Although there is no formal environmental policy in place, UNMAS Western Sahara has reported that environmental impact is considered as part of the tasking process and implementation plan in order to minimise potential harm from demining activities.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 2021, 20% (one of five) of staff in SMACO were women in managerial/supervisory positions while in SafeLane Global (UNMAS's contractor) 14% of managerial staff (one of seven) and 4% of survey and clearance teams (one of twenty-four) were women.²⁴ 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.²⁵

13 Ibid.

14 Emails from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 4 February 2022; Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 14 September 2018; Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020; and UNMAS, "2017 Portfolio of Mine Action Projects: MINURSO".

15 Questionnaire response by Gerhard Zank, HALO Trust, 22 May 2017, and email, 17 May 2016.

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

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

18 Emails from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 4 February 2022; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 24 May 2022.

19 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 4 February 2022.

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, Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), 4 May 2019 and 14 March 2018.

24 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 4 February 2022.

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

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND REPORTING

According to UNMAS, the 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 the COVID-19 lockdown, but as at February 2022 the migration was complete and personnel were undergoing refresher training before a full switch to IMSMA Core.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 global UN Mine Action Strategy 2019–2023). In order to achieve a Western Sahara 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 February 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. A mine action work plan was in place for UNMAS in 2021, developed by UNMAS Western Sahara, in support of MINURSO's mandate.³⁰ The other objectives have still to be realised.

UNMAS Western Sahara mine action activities continue to support 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 ensures 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 that the standards are reviewed annually but that no updates were made in 2021.³⁴ As part of their national standards, SMACO require that all implementation plans consider environmental impact.³⁵

An external quality management system was in place from 2018 and implemented by UNMAS and SMACO to the east of the Berm.³⁶

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, 4 February 2022.

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, 4 February 2022.

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, 4 February 2022.

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

36 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 2021³⁷

Operator	Manual teams	Total deminers*	Dog teams	Mechanical assets	Comments
SafeLane Global (for UNMAS Western Sahara)	1	10	0	0	Decrease from 2020
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. During 2021, due to COVID-19 restrictions, 75% of personnel were stood down. The teams were scaled up after the restrictions were lifted but were still operating at 50% capacity due to the conflict. No changes to capacity were expected in 2022.³⁸

Danish Refugee Council (DRC)'s Humanitarian Disarmament and Peacebuilding sector did not conduct any survey or clearance in Western Sahara in 2021. During 2021, DRC was planning to deploy teams to conduct non-technical survey in Western Sahara east of the Berm, but was unable to do so due to restrictions from COVID-19 and the renewal of conflict between the RMA and the Polisario Front. As at February 2022, with the border between Algeria and Western Sahara opened again, and DRC was seeking funding to be able to reinstate non-technical survey. None had been secured as of writing.³⁹

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS COMPLETION

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS IN 2021

No survey or clearance of mined area was conducted in 2021 or in 2020. 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.⁴⁰

PROGRESS TOWARDS COMPLETION

Western Sahara is not a State Party to the APMBC 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 APMBC Article 7 transparency report to the UN "as a sign of the support of the Saharawi State for the goals of the Treaty".⁴¹

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 by 2023.⁴² No land release took place during 2020 or 2021 as operations were restricted by both COVID-19 and the resurgence of conflict. Western Sahara will not meet its 2023 completion date, which should now be revised along with the timed objectives in SMACO's Strategic Plan 2019–2023. As at May 2022, UNMAS were in the process of obtaining permission to restart clearance operations in safe areas.⁴³ In support of this, there is a need for increased resources and capacity at SMACO.

37 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 4 February 2022.

38 Emails from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021 and 4 February 2022.

39 Email from Catherine Smith, Regional Coordinator, DRC, 1 February 2022.

40 Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021; and UN Country Level Survey for the Monitoring & Evaluation Mechanism of the United Nations Mine Action Strategy 2019 – 2023.

41 "SADR initiative welcomed by Maputo Conference on Mine Ban", *Sahara Press Service*, 2 July 2014, at: <http://bit.ly/2GE1JqW>.

42 SMACO "Strategic Plan 2019–2023", at: <http://bit.ly/38jaGm2>.

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