

WESTERN SAHARA

MINE ACTION REVIEW

CLEARING THE MINES 2023

KEY DATA

ANTI-PERSONNEL (AP)
MINE CONTAMINATION: HEAVY

50 KM²

(MINE ACTION REVIEW ESTIMATE)

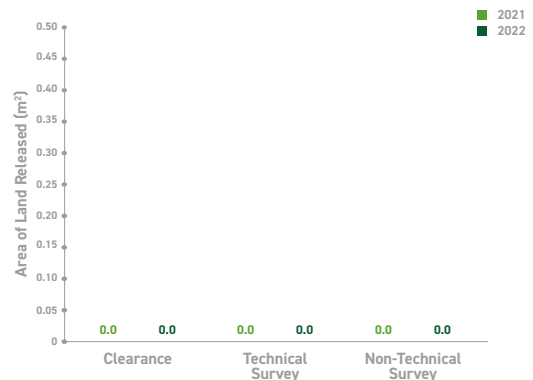
AP MINE
CLEARANCE IN 2022

0 M²

AP MINES
DESTROYED IN 2022

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 draft a new strategy, including a new deadline for completion of clearance of anti-personnel (AP) mines with annual survey and clearance targets, along with a detailed budget.
- Greater support should be provided to SMACO to enable it to continue to coordinate mine action 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 still be given to address the remaining mine, cluster munition, and other explosive ordnance 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 Humanitarian Disarmament and Peacebuilding sector (DRC)

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 contain some of the densest mine contamination in the world. The contamination is a result of fighting in previous decades between the Royal Moroccan Army 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 (AV) mines rather than AP mines; cluster munition remnants (CMR) are also a major hazard.² No areas suspected or confirmed to contain *solely* AP mines remain to the east of the Berm. Most mine contamination identified during ongoing and historical clearance efforts was from AV mines though some areas

previously thought to contain only AV mines were found to also contain AP mines following non-technical survey (NTS) conducted in the Agwanit Area of Responsibility.³ In 2022, the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) identified a renewed threat of landmines in the area to the east of the Berm, including in areas previously deemed safe since 2020, but did not confirm any new contamination. MINURSO called on the parties to the conflict to share detailed information on where renewed fighting had taken place and the types of munitions used so that it could update the mine action database.⁴

At the end of 2022, land in Western Sahara to the east of the Berm contained a total of 25 areas confirmed or suspected to contain mixed AP and AV mine contamination covering a total of 212km² (see Table 1).⁵ This is unchanged from the previous year.

Table 1: Mined area east of the Berm (at end 2022)⁶

| Types 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 |

CHA = Confirmed hazardous area SHA = Suspected hazardous area

Both the north and south of Western Sahara are known or suspected to contain AP mines, with the 25 areas covering an estimated total size of 212km² remaining at the end of 2022, as set out in Table 2.⁷

Table 2: Mined area containing AP mines by province east of the Berm (at end 2022)⁸

| 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 NTS 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.⁹ 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 Royal Moroccan Army). This, according to the UN, considerably limits the ability of MINURSO military observers to patrol and verify developments.¹⁰ No survey or clearance of the buffer strip was conducted during 2022.¹¹

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 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018.

3 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.

4 Report of the Secretary-General, Situation concerning Western Sahara, UN doc. S/2022/733, 3 October 2022.

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

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

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

9 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>.

10 "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.

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

UNMAS reported that no previously unrecorded AP mine contamination was added to Western Sahara's information management database in 2022.¹²

The Royal Moroccan Army controls territory to the west of the Berm where it has been conducting large-scale demining. According to UNMAS, the Royal Moroccan Army 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.¹³

Western Sahara also has a significant problem from CMR and other ERW (see Mine Action Review's *Clearing Cluster Munition Remnants 2023* report on Western Sahara for further information).¹⁴

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 SMACO, which is responsible for

coordinating mine action activities in Western Sahara east of the Berm, excluding the buffer strip.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

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

¹² Ibid.

¹³ 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".

¹⁴ Questionnaire response by Gerhard Zank, HALO, 22 May 2017; and email, 17 May 2016.

¹⁵ Response to questionnaire by Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 24 February 2014, and email, 25 February 2014; and email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 6 August 2020.

¹⁶ Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 25 April 2023.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Emails from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 4 February 2022; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 21 March 2022.

¹⁹ Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 24 May 2022.

²⁰ Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.

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

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 3.²⁵ Since becoming operational in 2023, however, the number of women employed by SafeLane Global has increased to eight.²⁶

Table 3: Gender composition of SMACO and SafeLane Global²⁷

| Entity | Total staff | Total women employed | Total staff in managerial or supervisory positions | Total women in managerial or supervisory positions | Total staff in operational positions | Total women in operational positions |
|------------------|-------------|----------------------|--|--|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| SMACO | 4 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Safe Lane 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 explosive ordnance risk education in Rabouni and the five Sahrawi refugee camps. All national deminers, both male and female, are Sahrawi, considered an ethnic minority group.²⁸

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 2015.²⁹ 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 2019.³⁰ 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.³¹

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 2023.³²

In 2022, SMACO 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.³³ The other objectives have still to be realised and UNMAS has reported that the UN Mine Action Strategy for 2023–2026 is being developed.³⁴ A mine action work plan was in place for UNMAS in 2022, developed by UNMAS Western Sahara, in support of MINURSO's mandate.³⁵

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

35 Ibid.

UNMAS Western Sahara mine action activities continue to support MINURSO's mandate.³⁶ 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.³⁷

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.³⁸ UNMAS reported that the standards are reviewed annually but that no updates were made in 2022.³⁹

An external quality management system was in place from 2018 and implemented by UNMAS and SMACO to the east of the Berm.⁴⁰

OPERATORS AND OPERATIONAL TOOLS

SafeLane Global (formerly Dynasafe MineTech Limited, DML) was the implementing operator for UNMAS Western Sahara in 2022 (see Table 4). The teams were operating at 50% capacity due to the conflict.⁴¹

Table 4: Operational clearance capacities deployed in 2022⁴²

| 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.

UNMAS expected to restart demining operations in 2023, which they believe could see increased capacity.⁴³

Danish Refugee Council (DRC)'s Humanitarian Disarmament and Peacebuilding sector was seeking funding to be able to reinstate NTS in 2022.⁴⁴

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS COMPLETION

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS IN 2022

No survey or clearance of mined area was conducted in 2022 or in 2021. 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

³⁶ Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.

³⁷ Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 6 August 2020.

³⁸ Emails from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 29 April 2019; and Dandan Xu, UNMAS, 28 June 2019.

³⁹ Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 25 April 2023.

⁴⁰ Emails from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 29 April 2019; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 28 July 2020.

⁴¹ Emails from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 4 February 2022; and Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 25 April 2023.

⁴² Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 25 April 2023.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Email from Catherine Smith, Regional Coordinator, DRC, 1 February 2022.

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.⁴⁵

Between 1 September 2021 and 31 July 2022, the Royal Moroccan Army reported that it had released more than 134km² of land west of the berm and destroyed 52 AP and AV mines (not disaggregated), as well as 770 ERW.⁴⁶

PROGRESS TOWARDS COMPLETION

Western Sahara is not a State Party to the APMBC and cannot adhere to the treaty 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 Sahrawi State for the goals of the Treaty".⁴⁷

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 No land release took place during 2022 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 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 (BAC) in May.⁴⁹ To support continued land release, there is an urgent need for increased resources and capacity at SMACO.

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

46 Report of the Secretary-General, Situation concerning Western Sahara, UN doc. S/2022/733, 3 October 2022.

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

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

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