

WESTERN SAHARA

MINE ACTION REVIEW

CLEARING CLUSTER MUNITION REMNANTS 2024

KEY DATA

CLUSTER MUNITION CONTAMINATION: LIGHT

NATIONAL ESTIMATE

2 KM²

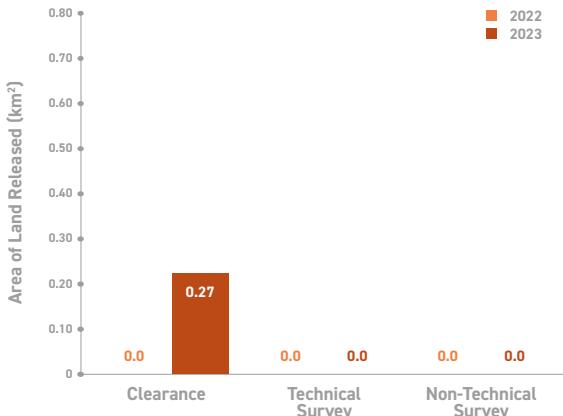
SUBMUNITION CLEARANCE IN 2023

0.27 KM²

SUBMUNITIONS DESTROYED IN 2023

33

LAND RELEASE OUTPUT



KEY DEVELOPMENTS

In 2023, multi-task teams were redeployed for battle area clearance (BAC) for the first time since 2020, following the resumption of conflict between the Polisario Front and Morocco after nearly 30 years of ceasefire. Although the renewed conflict has remained low intensity without any recorded use of cluster munitions, new areas of previously unrecorded cluster munition remnants (CMR) contamination continue to be identified. In 2023, 61,716m² of cluster munition-contaminated area was added to the database.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) should reaffirm its 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 SMACO to enable it to continue coordinating mine action in Western Sahara east of the Berm and to ensure that the remaining explosive ordnance contamination is addressed.

CLUSTER MUNITION SURVEY AND CLEARANCE CAPACITY

MANAGEMENT

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

NATIONAL OPERATORS

- Royal Moroccan Army

INTERNATIONAL OPERATORS

- SafeLane Global
- Danish Refugee Council (DRC)

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 2023, Western Sahara east of the Berm¹ had a total of 45 confirmed hazardous areas (CHAs) containing CMR, covering a total of 2.08km².² The small decrease in contamination from 2022 reflects the clearance that took place in 2023. Both the north and south of Western Sahara east of the Berm are still affected by CMR, as summarised in Table 1.³

Table 1: Cluster munition-contaminated area east of the Berm (at end 2023)⁴

Region	CHAs	Area (km ²)
North	24	0.80
South	21	1.28
Totals	45	2.08

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 Tifariti.⁵ UNMAS reported that submunitions have also been found in Agwanit.⁶

In 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.⁷ To date, the renewed conflict between the Polisario Front and

Morocco has been of low intensity, without any recorded use of cluster munitions.⁸ In 2022, however, the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) identified a renewed threat of landmines and explosive remnants of war (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.⁹ At the time of writing, neither the Royal Moroccan Army nor the Polisario Front had shared the locations of hazardous areas or types of munitions they had used. Nevertheless, in 2023, MINURSO, in collaboration with UNMAS, identified additional CHAs through survey.¹⁰

While CMR clearance had been projected to be completed by the end of 2012,¹¹ discovery of previously unrecorded contamination meant this target date was not met. According to UNMAS, new strike areas have continued to be identified since 2013 as mine action activities continued and additional information was received from local populations.¹² In 2023, more new areas of CMR contamination were identified and 61,716m² was added to the database. More than half of these newly identified areas had, though, already been cleared.¹³

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.¹⁴ Clearance of mines and ERW in the buffer strip and along the Berm itself is not foreseen in the MINURSO mission agreements.¹⁵ After the resumption of hostilities, the Polisario Front also issued instructions that clearance of mines and ERW could not take place in restricted areas.¹⁶

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 30 October 2023, under UN Security Council Resolution 2703, MINURSO's mandate was extended for an additional 12 months until 31 October 2024.

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, 16 May 2024.

³ Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 25 April 2023.

⁴ Ibid.

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

⁶ Email from Artyom Harutyunyan, Head of Project Unit, UNMAS – MINURSO, 11 June 2024.

⁷ 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>.

⁸ Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 24 May 2022.

⁹ Report of the Secretary-General, Situation concerning Western Sahara, UN doc. S/2022/733, 3 October 2022.

¹⁰ Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024.

¹¹ Email from Karl Greenwood, Chief of Operations, Action on Armed Violence/Mechem Western Sahara Programme, 18 June 2012.

¹² Emails from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 29 April 2019; Dandan Xu, UNMAS, 28 June 2019; and Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018.

¹³ Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024.

¹⁴ Ibid. The buffer strip is an area 5km wide, east of the Berm.

¹⁵ "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara", UN doc. S/2017/307, 10 April 2017, p. 8.

¹⁶ Email from Artyom Harutyunyan, UNMAS – MINURSO, 11 June 2024.

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.¹⁷

In 2023, \$27,499 was provided to SMACO and UNMAS received \$2,010,171 for survey and clearance operations.¹⁸

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.¹⁹ UNMAS has a gender strategy as part of its overall country strategy.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²²

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 2023, there was one woman employed by SMACO and eleven (14%) by SafeLane Global (UNMAS's contractor), including eight in operational roles (14%) (see Table 2).²³

Table 2: Gender composition of SMACO and SafeLane Global²⁴

Entity	Total staff	Total women staff	Total managerial or supervisory staff	Women in managerial or supervisory positions	Total operational staff	Women in operational positions
SMACO	5	1 (20%)	2	0 (0%)	0	0
SafeLane Global	77	11 (14%)	17	2 (12%)	57	8 (14%)
Totals	82	12 (15%)	19	2 (11%)	57	8 (14%)

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 ethnic Sahrawi.²⁵

ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES AND ACTION

There is no national standard on environmental management in mine action, but SMACO have a policy on environmental management with a requirement that all implementation plans consider environmental impacts.²⁶ 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸

Risks from extreme weather such as high temperatures and sandstorms are factored into the planning and prioritisation of survey and clearance tasks. Operations are halted during sandstorms; during periods of extreme heat, teams start earlier and work shorter hours.²⁹

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

18 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024.

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

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

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

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

23 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024.

24 Ibid.

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

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

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

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

29 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024.

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND REPORTING

The Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) database for Western Sahara, east of the Berm, was upgraded to IMSMA Core in 2022.³⁰ All data have been successfully migrated to the new database. Review and verification of the data, which began at the end of 2023, was ongoing at the time of writing.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 newly published global UN Mine Action Strategy 2019–2023.³² No specific objectives relate to CMR in the strategy for mine action in Western Sahara, east of the Berm, but SMACO has established a set of goals towards a Western Sahara free of the impact of mines and ERW. These included establishing an effective mechanism for data collection on accidents and victims; ensuring sustainable and constant funding of SMACO by 2020; and ensuring human resources were in place to comprehensively manage mine action by 2020.³³

These goals were not achieved and UNMAS has reported that no new strategy was under development. There is,

however, a plan for UNMAS to establish a standing capacity to support SMACO in developing a new strategy as soon as possible.³⁴ A mine action work plan was in place for UNMAS in 2023, developed by UNMAS Western Sahara, 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 2023.³⁸ An external quality management system was in place from 2018 and implemented by UNMAS and SMACO to the east of the Berm.³⁹

OPERATORS AND OPERATIONAL TOOLS

Table 3: Operational clearance capacities deployed in 2023⁴⁰

Operator	Manual teams	Total deminers	Dog teams	Mechanical assets	Comments
SafeLane Global (for UNMAS Western Sahara)	2	24	0	0	Increase from 2022
Totals	2	24	0	0	

SafeLane Global (formerly Dynasafe MineTech Limited) was the sole implementing operator for UNMAS Western Sahara in 2023.⁴¹

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

³¹ Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024.

³² Emails from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 21 March 2022.

³³ SMACO, "Strategic Plan 2019–2023", at: <http://bit.ly/38jaGm2>; and email from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 31 July 2019.

³⁴ Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024.

³⁵ Ibid.

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, 16 May 2024.

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

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

⁴¹ Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024.

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS COMPLETION

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS IN 2023

No CMR-contaminated area was released through survey in 2023 or the previous year.⁴²

In 2023, five CMR contaminated areas totalling 270,100m² were cleared with the destruction of 33 submunitions.⁴³ In 2022, no clearance took place.⁴⁴ Clearance operations were halted from 2020 until the end of 2022 during which time mine action activities were limited to emergency disposal of explosive ordnance, route verification, and risk education, as well as assistance to investigation patrols at sites of alleged aerial strikes and support to ground convoy movements east of the berm.⁴⁵

Table 4: Clearance in 2023⁴⁶

District	Town	Operator	Area cleared (m ²)	Submunitions destroyed
Smara	Tifariti	SafeLane Global	270,100	33
Totals			270,100	33

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".⁴⁷ The SADR has obligations under international human rights law to clear CMR as soon as possible.

Western Sahara's draft mine action strategic plan aimed to release all recorded cluster munition strike areas to the east of the Berm, outside the buffer strip, by 2019.⁴⁸ UNMAS had expected to clear all CMR in the Northern Sector (Bir Lahlou, Mehaires, and Tifariti districts) east of the Berm by the end of 2018.⁴⁹ This did not happen, however, and in SMACO's mine action strategy 2019–23, the vision was for Western Sahara to be free of the impact of mines and ERW by 2023.⁵⁰ Western Sahara did not meet this date. A new completion should now be elaborated along with a new strategic plan. However, UNMAS

has stated that due to the current political and security situation, it is challenging to estimate a completion date for clearing mines and explosive ordnance in Western Sahara.⁵¹

UNMAS Western Sahara advocated for the resumption of demining east of the Berm, receiving approval from the Royal Moroccan Army in August 2022 with the Polisario Front following suit in January 2023. In April 2023, demining teams were remobilised and retrained with teams deployed for battle area clearance the following month for the first time since 2020.⁵² In 2023, UNMAS personnel east of the Berm faced movement restrictions imposed by the Polisario Front/SMACO on four occasions.⁵³

Alongside demining activities, UNMAS teams are investigating all explosive ordnance incidents related to drone strikes east of the Berm and high-calibre shootings west of the Berm. The results are documented and shared with MINURSO. These investigations are conducted jointly by the implementing partner and UN Military Observers and are recorded in the UNMAS database.⁵⁴

42 Emails from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 25 April 2023 and 16 May 2024.

43 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024.

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

45 Situation concerning Western Sahara, Report of the Secretary-General, UN doc. S/2023/729, 3 October 2023.

46 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024.

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

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

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

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

51 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024.

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

53 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024.

54 Ibid.