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# Surplus SA/LW Destruction Project in Mauritania

Handicap International, in partnership with the NATO Partnership for Peace Trust Fund for Mauritania, implemented a multiphase ammunition and conventional weapons destruction project to help the Mauritanian government achieve its security objectives and reduce the risk of unplanned explosions.

by Philippe Houliat [ Handicap International ]

**H**andicap International (HI) was founded in 1982 to bring assistance to victims of anti-personnel (AP) landmines living in the refugee camps on the border between Cambodia and Thailand. In 1997, HI was chosen as co-laureate of the Nobel Peace Prize for its role in the international campaign to ban AP landmines, and HI is a key international player in the field of armed violence reduction. Among other projects, HI is lending its experience in ammunition and conventional weapons destruction (CWD) to a project in Mauritania aimed at increasing civilian security by improving the management of the country's weapons and ammunition stores.

Mauritania has experienced more than 30 years of political instability, including 13 successful or attempted coups and other internal armed conflicts.<sup>1</sup> During this time, poor security at weapons and ammunition depots and the illicit proliferation of small arms and light weapons (SA/LW) heightened instability in the country and surrounding region.

## International Cooperation and Assistance

Since joining the Mediterranean Dialogue in February 1995, Mauritania has secured international assistance for its CWD project through the NATO Partnership for Peace Trust Fund.<sup>2</sup> The NATO Maintenance and Supply Agency (NAMSA)—now the NATO Support Agency (NSPA)—launched the NATO Trust Fund for Mauritania in 2010. Governed by a framework agreement, the project has three main goals:

- Increase the security of Mauritania's civilian population by reducing the risk of ammunition and weapons theft from government depots
- Strengthen the skills of the personnel in charge of ammunition storage management
- Provide training on reintegration for Mauritanian army personnel returning to civilian life



Preparation of and grouping of MANPADS for destruction.

*All graphics courtesy of the author.*

Under Italy's leadership, the project is also financed by several other NATO countries—Luxembourg, Spain, Turkey, the U.K. and the U.S. Although not a part of the Trust Fund, Germany's financial support for HI is critical to the project's mission: safe destruction of ammunition and weapons identified as decommissioned or obsolete by the Mauritanian army. The project's total budget is €2.25 million (US\$3,111,302 as of 23 April 2014), and it will be completed before the end of 2014.

## Destruction Campaign: Preparatory Phase

HI seconded an expatriate technical adviser to work alongside the Mauritanian army's explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) technicians to foster capacity building through the systematic and continuous transfer of skills.

N°	Category	Origin	Quantity (units)	Weight (tons)
1	Cartridge ≤ 20 mm	various	11,167,649	820
2	Shell 23 to 75 mm	various	54,453	79
3	Shell 90 to 122 mm	various	14,076	758
4	Mortar	various	48,342	272
5	Rocket	various	589	7
6	Grenade	various	10,229	4.22
7	Mine	various	2,329	14
8	Explosive	various	42	0.01
9	Pyrotechnic items	various	2,545	2
10	Missile	various	444	7
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>133,049</b>	<b>1,963.23</b>

Figure 1. Summary of ammunition destroyed.

The preparatory phase of HI's destruction campaign involved setting up the NAMSA office, making initial contact with military authorities, finalizing procedures to access military depots and integrating the international expert into the Mauritanian destruction team. As no national regulations were in place, standard operating procedures (SOP) were drafted and included specific procedures for destroying man-portable air defense systems (MANPADS) and for cutting weapons. These documents were based on prevailing international standards (the International Ammunition Technical Guidelines and International Small Arms Control Standards), and the government of Mauritania approved them on 1 June 2011.

Because of the distances between the 20 separate ammunition depots that needed clearing, destruction operations were grouped to 12 sites. This reduced transport costs and optimized available logistical resources. Additionally, the four EOD technicians in charge of destruction organized two weeks of refresher training and focused on security measures to be applied during destruction and burning activities.

### Ammunition Destruction Phase

The destruction phase lasted from June 2011 to March 2012 and eliminated 1,963 tons of ammunition of all calibers. In the course of these activities, the EOD team covered 19,534 km (12,138 mi) while traveling to the 12 destruction sites located throughout Mauritania. A mechanical digger created 335 demolition pits, and with supervision of an HI expert, the Mauritanian military hand-dug the pits when the destruction zone was too isolated to allow transport of the mechanical digger.

Detonation destroyed ammunition calibers greater than or equal to 20 mm, including MANPADS, because other techniques were unavailable in the country. To optimize priming of explosions, the EOD team used obsolete anti-tank land-

mines. The concurrent- and post-recording processes used during MANPADS destruction corresponded with NATO operating procedures.

As no available incinerator could destroy the 820 tons of ammunition of 14.5 mm caliber or more within a reasonable timeframe, an open burning technique was employed. SOP was to dig 1 m x 2.5 m x 1.5 m (1 yd x 2.7 yd x 1.6 yd) burn pits in which large quantities of cartridges could be destroyed at once. The metallic waste after combustion was recycled.

### SA/LW Elimination Phase

SA/LW elimination activities began with identifying suitable premises for destruction operations, which were then rehabilitated to align with international standards. The specific destruction equipment, including an oxyacetylene cutting system, a metal-cutting chainsaw and personal protective equipment, was then purchased and installed.

Cutting operators were trained in

- Identifying and recording SA/LW for destruction
- Using cutting tools
- Drafting destruction reports consistent with SOPs
- Recycling metallic waste

Lastly, with the assistance of HI's expert, a dismantling plan was drawn up for the 2,300 SA/LW; the Mauritanian army then implemented it.

### Overview of the NATO Project

**Constructing NATO-standard ammunition depots.** In western Mauritania, two new depots were built in Aleg and Akjoujt to international standards in order to replace the 20 storage sites spread across the country, one of which used to be located in the capital, Nouakchott. These can store approximately 750 tons of ammunition.

**Training in ammunition depot management.** This training's purpose was to provide 20 storekeepers and six managers of ammunition depots with the technical knowledge needed to manage ammunition safely and efficiently. The training was delivered in Arabic and French over a period of three weeks and focused on storage procedures, management and accounting, as well as the safe handling, maintenance and elimination of ammunition.

**Reintegrating military personnel.** Intended to help former military and internal security personnel return to civilian life, this component is an important step in strengthening relations between the army and civil society. HI helped set up training courses in five trades: carpentry, electricity, masonry, plumbing and welding. By the end of 2013, 145 former soldiers, aged 23 to 62 years old had participated in training sessions.



A pit filled with small arms ammunition, ready to be incinerated.



Philippe Houliat, a former French army officer, is senior technical advisor for HI. Houliat has 30 years of relevant experience in military and civilian conventional weapons management and destruction in more than 20 countries. He has worked with HI for five years and also worked with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining and the Ammunition Department of NAMSA.

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### Conclusion

The technical support HI provided to Mauritania enabled this project to reach its objective of improving the security of the country's civilian population. Destroying decommissioned ammunition stored in army depots and training specialists in storage management optimized security and considerably reduced the risk of uncontrolled explosions. The Mauritanian army must now ensure that managers can maintain their recently acquired skills and that the rules governing the management of

ammunition and SA/LW conform with international standards and are consistently implemented.

Because the need for better stockpile security and management remains in Africa, HI continues to provide its expertise to other Sub-Saharan countries. For instance, in Niger, HI recently began a regional program to support the Nigerien government in armed violence reduction. Funded by the U.S. Government and implemented in partnership with MAG (Mines Advisory Group), this project aims to improve the main

components of physical security and stockpile management: elimination of unserviceable ammunition and obsolete weapons, rehabilitation and construction of storage areas, training of managers and warehousemen, and setting up centralized management of weapons and ammunition. ©

*See endnotes page 50*