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Country Profile: Morocco and Western Sahara

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Country Profile: Morocco and Western Sahara

The Western Sahara is a non-self-governing territory bordered by Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania. Morocco claims sovereignty over the Western Sahara, a position not accepted by the international community. Although Morocco is not recognized by the United Nations as the administering power for the Western Sahara, it exercises *de facto* administrative control there. The Western Sahara is also claimed by the Polisario Front (*Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro*), the national liberation movement for the indigenous Sahrawi people.

In 1991, the U.N. Security Council established the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) to offer a choice to the people of the Western Sahara between independence (favored by the Polisario Front) and integration into Morocco (favored by Morocco). A referendum never took place due primarily to a lack of agreement on voter eligibility. While MINURSO was initially focused on organizing a referendum, its current mandate emphasizes monitoring the 1991 ceasefire.¹

Landmine/Unexploded Ordnance Overview

Morocco is not considered mine-affected, except in the Western Sahara territory it administers.² Morocco used landmines from 1982 to 1987 in construction of the Moroccan Wall, an approximately 2,500 km (1,550 mi) berm to secure the northwest border with unoccupied Western Sahara. Morocco claims it has since stopped using and stockpiling landmines, though it has not signed the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction* (Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention or APMB), citing the standing situation with Western Sahara. Nonetheless, the Moroccan government states that it “fully and unconditionally aligns itself with [APMB] principles and objectives.” Whether Morocco has a



Figure 1. Western Sahara..
Figure courtesy of the CIA World Factbook.

formal policy against landmine use, or if it simply has not used them after 1987, is unclear.³

Since 1997, MINURSO has overseen the marking of 1,123 landmines and pieces of UXO along the berm but with no data revealing the contamination's extent.² An APMBC Article 7 report, voluntarily submitted by Morocco in April 2011, claims the Polisario Front also mined the areas of Bir Anzarane, Douiek, Gerret Auchfaght, Gor Lbard, Gor Zalagat, Imlili, Itgui, Jdiriya, Lagounia and Tarf Mhkinza in Western Sahara.⁴

Victim Assistance

Moroccan authorities provided the last report on landmine casualties in Western Sahara for the years 2009 and 2008. In 2008, Western Sahara suffered 19 casualties (10 injured/8 killed/1 unknown). The following year resulted in 29 casualties—all injured. The *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor* reports that Morocco suffered 5 casualties in 2008 and none in 2009.⁵


The total number of landmine victims from Morocco and Western Sahara is unconfirmed; however, in July 2008, Morocco reported 2,187 victims (1,643 injured/544 killed) since 1975. Additionally in 2010, the Moroccan Royal Advisory Council estimated 900 civilian casualties (600 injured/300 killed) in the Western Sahara since 1975. Overall, estimates indicate that 1,643 landmine survivors live in Morocco, while the data for Western Sahara remains

unclear.⁵ Mine survivors in Morocco are given the same status and rights as any other person with a disability.³ In support of this, the Department for Prevention and Social Integration of People with Disabilities, in the Ministry of Social Development, Family and Solidarity, drafted a 10-year action plan for the reintegration of persons with disabilities into society (the plan has not been finalized). In addition, in 2009, the Moroccan government stated that taking steps to improve medical facilities in mine-affected areas and providing physical rehabilitation for mine victims were "among [its] priorities."⁵

Mine Risk Education

No single organization implements mine risk education in Morocco, but in 2008, the Moroccan Army, local authorities, provincial health authorities, the Moroccan Red Crescent Society, the Disabled Persons Support Association and the Moroccan Association of Mine Victims began conducting MRE. A risk education campaign conducted by the Moroccan Army and the Royal Moroccan *Gendarmerie* (state police under the military) used public conferences, the media, pamphlets and school visits to spread MRE throughout Western Sahara. Local volunteers are also regularly trained to disseminate risk education⁶ These organizations provide information to the public about the marking of dangerous areas, upcoming large-scale demining operations and which land areas are clear.

Clearance

The Moroccan armed forces currently conduct demining efforts in the country, as Morocco does not have a national mine action authority or mine action center.⁴ Under a bilateral military agreement in 1999, Morocco and the Polisario Front agreed to cooperate fully with MINURSO and exchange information about the location of minefields and the clearance of landmines and UXO.² Yet, the Western Sahara remains, according to the *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor*, "one of the most heavily mined territories in the world."⁶ Due to the standstill political situation, the majority of mine action efforts in the area involve identifying and marking hazardous areas rather than removing the threat entirely. 

~ Paige Ober, CISR Staff

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Figure 1. Morocco.
Figure courtesy of the CIA World Factbook.

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Endnotes

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