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Capacity Building in Western Sahara

Action on Armed Violence (formerly Landmine Action) is the only nonprofit organization that has carried out humanitarian mine-action activities (including survey, marking, battle-area clearance and explosive-ordnance disposal) in *Frente POLISARIO*-controlled Western Sahara since 2006. This article provides an overview of AOA's capacity-building efforts through its Mine Action Programme, which focus heavily on training national staff to efficiently identify and remove dangerous items threatening the safety of the Saharawi population, United Nations personnel and international visitors.

by Penelope Caswell [Action on Armed Violence]

Landmine Action's (now Action on Armed Violence) initial work in Western Sahara from 2006–08 focused on conducting the first and only comprehensive Dangerous Areas Survey of minefields, cluster-munition strikes, and other abandoned or unexploded ordnance east of the defensive berm.¹ In 2008, AOA's deployed a small team to conduct battle-area clearance in areas of urgent humanitarian concern and local population use. The survey, completed in December 2008, identified 196 dangerous areas (158 cluster-strike areas, 37 minefields and one ammunition dump²), which were marked with dangerous area markers and mapped electronically using geographic information systems software. As of October 2010, 95 cluster strikes were cleared in the northern sector, of which 49 areas were officially handed over to the local population.

EOD and BAC Training

AOA's field program in Western Sahara has 68 staff members; 66 are Saharawi nationals and two are international staff. The national staff is recruited from the Saharawi refugee camps in neighboring Algeria. Currently, AOA has four Saharawi

teams, three consisting of a team leader, deputy team leader, eight clearance operators, a team driver and a team medic to clear priority areas identified during the survey of Western Sahara, east of the berm. Each of the three teams was cross-trained to conduct battle-area clearance, explosive-ordnance disposal and survey work. The fourth team is a dedicated EOD team, which is also trained as an Emergency Response Team, consisting of a team leader, a deputy team leader, two operators and a medic.

Two Saharawi teams were trained in March 2007 in International Mine Action Standards Level 3 EOD³ by the international operations officer and the international technical advisor, while the third team was trained in IMAS Level 2 EOD.⁴ The training included theoretical and practical training with a final exam. All clearance operators receive refresher training regularly and are supervised in accordance with IMAS. BAC training delivered to the teams has equipped them with the necessary technical skills and knowledge to perform subsurface and visual clearance. The country manager, of Saharawi origin, provides all managerial support.



An EOD team receives advanced medical training in Western Sahara. All photos courtesy of Landmine Action.

Medical Training

Each of the three survey/EOD/BAC teams is trained to respond to a mine or explosive remnants of war emergency and serve as an emergency response team on a rotational basis. The ERTs are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. An international paramedic trainer trains all operators in specialist trauma first aid. To ensure the safety of all procedures, refresher trainings are carried out after a clearance operator, who is also trained as an ERT member, returns from a work absence of more than 10 days. Frequent casualty evacuation simulations are practiced so the operators have experience responding to accidents. Due to Western Sahara's lack



Female clearance operators in Western Sahara.

emergency response infrastructure, this ERT is vital during a mine/ERW emergency. Moreover, the skill range is crucial to the establishment of a high-quality, sustainable mine-action capacity.

The Emergency Response Team has successfully responded to a few accidents thus far, including an accident that took place 10 April 2009, during a demonstration organized by *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguía el Hamra y Río de Oro (Frente POLISARIO)* and nongovernmental organizations. During the demonstration, a 19-year-old Saharawi stepped on an anti-personnel landmine. AOA's ERT provided specialist trauma first aid and evacuated him to the Rabuni hospital. The mine victim survived, although unfortunately, he lost his foot. Apart from the operators, each staff member in Western Sahara is also trained in basic first aid.

Gender Balance

AOA is committed to including individuals from all backgrounds in its work, and maintaining a gender perspective is one of the ways that the organization strives to achieve equality in its operations. AOA makes efforts during recruitment

to focus on promoting applications from local Saharawi women, which it hopes will contribute to a sustainable national capacity.

In the field program, female support staff include the finance officer, radio operator and administrator. They have received significant training to meet these role requirements. Furthermore, AOA has four female BAC operators trained in Dangerous Area Survey. Two of the female operators are survey and clearance operators with Level 3 EOD and BAC training including the use of large loop and ground-compensation detectors, while two of the female operators have advanced medical training and serve as team medics. AOA works closely with the National Union of Saharawi Women in Algeria's refugee camps in order to advertise vacancies. The NUSW then encourages women in the refugee camps to apply for the positions and motivates them as they go through the interviewing process.

IMSMA/GIS Training

The Information Management System for Mine Action database was installed in AOA's Mine Action Programme in Western Sahara in October 2008 with the help of the United Nations Mine Action Coordination Centre's support and training. AOA's national GIS officer inputs all survey data and manages, maintains and updates the database with ongoing survey, clearance and accident data. The MACC IMSMA officer visits the program regularly, carrying out quality checks on the data. The IMSMA database ensures dangerous area data is complete, well-organized and available to the appropriate stakeholders.

AOA also has a professional capacity to electronically map dangerous areas and clearance sites using GIS technology. This capacity ensures ongoing activities are accurately recorded and regularly updated. Western Sahara's national GIS officer receives ongoing training, guidance and support from AOA to build his capacity to produce useful and accurate maps and data.

Keeping in mind Western Sahara's harsh climate conditions, isolated environment and absence of hospital and road infrastructure, a national mine-action capacity with technical expertise is critical to minimize the threats posed by ERW and mine contamination. This national capacity is also a step toward supporting re-establishing sustainable livelihoods for the Saharawi people and to encourage them to resettle in safe areas. ♦

see endnotes page 81



Penelope Caswell joined Action on Armed Violence (formerly Landmine Action) as the Field Programme and GIS Manager for Western Sahara's program in February 2008. She holds a Master of Science from the University of Nottingham (U.K.) in geographical information systems and a bachelor's degree in environmental science and GIS.

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