Capacity Building in Western Sahara

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Action on Armed Violence
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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 AOAV’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 |

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andmine Action’s (now Ac-
ton on Armed Violence) ini-
tial work in Western Sahara from 2006–08 focused on conduct-
ing the first and only comprehensive Dangerous Areas Survey of mine-
fields, cluster-munition strikes, and other abandoned or unexploded ord-
nances east of the defensive berm.1 In 2008, AOAV deployed a small team to conduct battle-area clearance in areas of urgent humanitarian con-
cern and local population use. The survey, completed in December 2008, identified 196 dangerous areas (158 cluster-strike areas, 37 mine-
fields, and 11 areas of unexploded ordnance east of the defensive berm). Each of the three teams was cross-
trained to conduct battle-area clear-
cence, 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 EOD by the international operations officer and the international technical advis-
or, while the third team was trained in IMAS Level 2 EOD.2 The train-
ing included theoretical and prac-
tical training with a final exam. All clearance operators receive refresh-
er training regularly and are su-
pervised in accordance with IMAS BAC training delivered to the teams has equipped them with the neces-
sary technical skills and knowledge to perform subsurface and visual clear-
cance. The country manager, of Saharawi origin, provides all mana-
gerial support.

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 ro-
tational basis. The ERTs are on call 24 hours a day, seven days a week. An international paramedic train-
er trains all operators in specialist trauma first aid. To ensure the safety of all procedures, refreshers train-
ings 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. Fre-
quent casualty evacuation simula-
tions are practiced so the operators have experience responding to acci-
dents. Due to Western Sahara’s lack of 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 ac-
cident that took place 10 April 2009, during a demonstration organized by Frente Popular de Liberación de Sa-
ga el Hamra y Rio de Oro (Frente POLISARIO) and nongovern-
mental organizations. During the dem-
onstration, a 19-year-old Saharawi stepped on an anti-personnel land-
mine. AOAV’s ERT provided spe-
cialist trauma first aid and evacuated him to the Rabuni hospital. The mine victim survived, although unfortu-
nately, he lost his foot. Apart from the operators, each staff member in Western Sahara is also trained in ba-
cis first aid.

Gender Balance

AOAV 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. AOAV makes efforts during recruitment to focus on promoting applications from local Saharawi women, which it hopes will contribute to a sus-
tainable national capacity.

In the field program, female sup-
port staff include the finance officer, radio operator and administra-
tor. They have received significant training to meet these role require-
ments. Furthermore, AOAV 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. AOAV 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.

The Information Management System for Mine Action database was installed in AOAV’s Mine Ac-
tion Programme in Western Saha-
ra in October 2008 with the help of the United Nations Mine Ac-
tion Programme in Western Saha-
ra’s harsh climate conditions, iso-
lated environment and absence of hospital and road infrastructure, a national mine-action capacity with technical expertise is critical to min-
imize the threats posed by ERW and mine contamination. This national capacity is also a step toward sup-
porting re-establishing sustainable livelihoods for the Saharawi people and to encourage them to resettle in safe areas.

see endnote page 81

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