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Survey and Ordnance Disposal in the Polisario-controlled Areas of the Western Sahara

Western Sahara is a territory located in northwest Africa, bordered by Morocco to the north, Algeria in the northeast, Mauritania to the east and south and the Atlantic Ocean on the west. It is one of the most sparsely populated territories in the world, mainly consisting of desert fl ands.1

After Spain left Western Sahara in 1975 as a part of a decolonisation plan, the territory became disputed between the Frente Popular de Liberacion de Saguia el Hamra y Rio de Oro, also known as the Polisario, a nationalist movement for independence, and the Kingdom of Morocco. The conflict ended with the United Nations-sponsored cease-fire agreement in 1991. Since then, most of the territory has been controlled by Morocco, with the remainder under the control of the government of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic.2

Project Background

The 16-year-long military conflict left Western Sahara littered with mines and explosive remnants of war. The densest concentration of mines and ERW is found to the east of the berm, the 2,400-kilometre (1,491-mile) earthwork fortification that runs the length of Western Sahara and divides the Moroccan and the Polisario-controlled zones. The berm is part of a series of walls, ditches and minefields constructed by Moroccan forces between 1981 and 1987. Mines and ERW are found near settlements throughout areas now under Polisario control that were previously captured and temporarily occupied by Moroccan forces. Mines and ERW are also found in ambush sites in the vicinity of former Moroccan military supply routes as well as recent routes and water holes used by the Polisario.

ERW identified during the course of the preliminary survey conducted in October 2005 and February/March 2006 by Landmine Action included mostly United States- and French-manufactured ammunition, due to their strong military support of Morocco. Countries such as China, the former Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia supplied some ammunition for the conflict—if not directly, then through third-party countries.2

Mines Advisory Group, Hopper worked in Afghanistan for a medical organization after graduating from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London with a master’s degree in development studies.

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Unexploded Child's head at main road
An unimpressed child on a vulnerable road

The strategy and structure of the survey are in accordance with the recommendations of a United Nations Mission for the Referendum in the Western Sahara (MINURSO) and the Polisario Ministry of Defence. Its strategy is to reduce the

Katharine Hopper is a Regional Desk Officer with the Mines Advisory Group and oversees a number of country programmes in Africa, including until early 2007, Chad. Prior to joining MAG, Hopper worked in Pakistan for the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in the Western Sahara (MINURSO) and the Polisario Ministry of Defence. Its strategy is to reduce the
Summary of the Programme’s Field Results
From the time a fully operational programme was established (October 2006) until July 2007, the following results were achieved:
- 644 dangerous areas surveyed
- 120 danger areas found, of which 99 from cluster strikes and 21 are mines
- 353 spot tasks found—a single or a few items awaiting demolition in site (ranging from 20 mm cannon ammunition to a 500-pound aircraft bomb)
- 96 areas cancelled (previously reported as suspected hazardous areas)
- Four route assessments completed
- 223 mines and pieces of UXO destroyed through EOD activities
- Two BAC tasks completed with 146,462 square metres (1,582,366 square feet) cleared using both visual and large-loop detector methods search

Training and Capacity Building
In August 2006, Landmine Action established an operations base in Tifariti. It began training 10 demobilised military engineers in general survey, first aid and trauma management, and battle-area clearance, with emphasis on visual search methods. The sub-surface training was conducted in April 2007 after the large loop detectors were received. This metal-detection technology, produced by the German firm Ehinger, searches under ground for large metal objects such as cluster bombs and anti-tank mines.

An IED IMAS level-three training course was presented in March and April 2007. Both of Landmine Action’s BAC/EOD teams experienced theoretical and practical training under the supervision of an internation EOD instructor and Technical Advisor. At the end of the EOD training, Landmine Action held a graduation ceremony with Sahrawi president Mohamed Abdelaziz, the MINURSO Force Commander Kurt Mosgaard, representatives from national and international NGOs, and civil society, as well as journalists from various countries in attendance.

Planning Activities for 2007 and 2008
Landmine Action’s objectives for the upcoming year include the following:
- Complete survey of the areas of the Polisario-controlled zone of Western Sahara
- Perform EOD of prioritised ERW to reduce casualty rates, and to ensure safe access for civilians to water holes and pastures, and safe movement for civilians, peacekeepers and NGO vehicles along traversed routes

Fundraising and Donors
Landmine Action started preliminary survey work in the northern sector in October 2005 with a grant from the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund.

In November 2005, the Polisario signed the Deed of Commitment to the 1997 Ottawa Treaty to Ban Landmines, obliging it to ban the use of anti-personnel mines and destroy its current stockpiles. Landmine Action provided technical assistance to the Polisario in its destruction of an initial stockpile of APILs in February 2006 in a significant first step toward meeting those obligations.

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The events occurred in Albania and Ukraine (Europe), Angola and Democratic Republic of Congo (African, Afghanistan, Asia), and Honduras (Latin America). The celebration marked the destruction, through State Department programs in more than 25 countries, of one million small arms and light weapons, more than 90 million pieces of ammunition and more than 25,000 man-portable air defense systems.

Abandoned artillery rounds in a burnt house.