

Mine Action in Mauritania

Conflict with neighbouring Western Sahara has left Mauritania with a significant landmine problem. The country has taken steps to reduce the impact of mines and with international help, hopes to be rid of this scourge in time to meet its Ottawa-mandated deadline.

by Major Alioune ould Mohamed El Hacen [National Demining Office]

The mine and unexploded ordnance problem in Mauritania results from its involvement in the conflict in Western Sahara. After Spanish withdrawal, Mauritania occupied the southern third of this country from 1975 to 1978. Along with Moroccan forces, Mauritania fought the *Polisario Front* independence movement for the region.

The exact scope and limits of the mine problem in Mauritania are currently undefined because no Landmine Impact Survey has been conducted, no records exist and only limited information-gathering has taken place. Mauritania, Morocco and the *Polisario* all engaged in heavy mining, primarily around urban centres and key economic targets.¹

Mines and explosive remnants of war are found in the northern part of the country in the regions of Dakhlet Nouadhibou, Adrar and Tiris Zemmour, mostly around the urban centres of Nouadhibou, Zoueratt and Bir Moghreïn. Mines can also be found close to the towns of Choum, F'derick, Boulenoir and at more remote locations all along the northern and western borders.

A variety of mine types are present in Mauritania, although the most common are the French APID 51 (anti-personnel)² and ACID 51 (anti-tank).³ The mine situation has a direct impact on the lives of nomads, people known for their freedom of mobility, moving daily, following their camels in the desert.

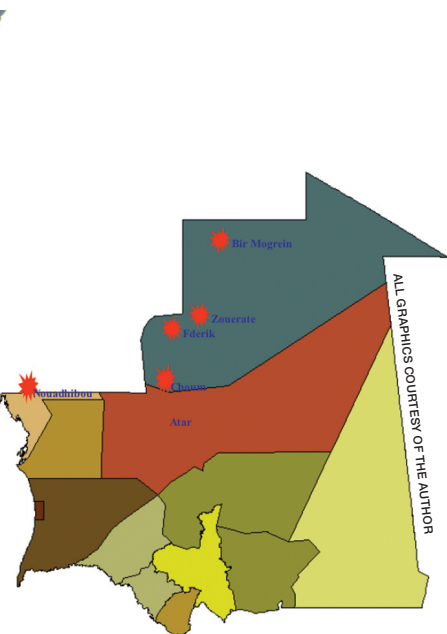
Impact of Mines and UXO

Seventy percent of the previously nomadic population has become urbanised, a consequence of which is urban expansion into the areas of defensive mine belts. Many of these nomads still follow pastoral practices, which has resulted in mine accidents involving people and valuable livestock, particularly camels. Northern Mauritania is known as the best place to raise camels, so it attracts all the nomadic populations in the region. Finding landmines does not make people in these areas want to move, because they have heard stories that other regions are likely to bring sickness to their camels, resulting in poverty. The key economic activities of metal ore extraction and fishing are also affected by the presence of mines.

Mauritania is developing as a tourist destination and has seen a revitalisation in the last few years; however, mines present a significant threat in the desert areas popular with visitors. According to the Zoueratt Regional Hospital, a national network of NGOs and the military in charge of evacuation, the last mine accident in northern Mauritania killed one Mauritanian and injured two Qatari tourists, and it illustrates the potential impact mines have on tourism.

Mine Action

The Mauritanian government signed and ratified the Ottawa Convention in 2000, becoming the 100th State Party.⁴



Mine-affected zones in Mauritania.

To implement a real programme for humanitarian demining, the Mauritania government created two mine-action entities in 2000 following the implementation of the Ottawa Convention: the *Bureau National de Déminage Humanitaire* and the National Committee in charge of implementing the Ottawa Convention.

The BNDH, a dedicated entity within the Mauritanian military engineers, is responsible for all mine-action-related activities in the country. This national agency is the only demining capacity in the country, conducting both mine/UXO clearance and mine-awareness activities with partners.

The National Committee includes ministries involved in the mine-action issue—Defence, Foreign Affairs, Interior and Justice, Parliament and nongovernmental organizations. This committee is responsible for establishing the work plan for the National Demining Office, including national priorities, and giving an annual report on the implemented tasks to the BNDH and national government.

Achievements to Date

Since the end of the war in 1978, the military engineers have been mainly responsible for clearing mines in Mauritania. Between 1978 and 1999 these efforts resulted in the destruction of approximately 7,000 mines and 5,000 pieces of UXO. This clearance was conducted with limited technical resources and utilising military techniques.

In 1999, the military adopted standard operating procedures for humanitarian mine clearance. These standards have improved the safety and quality of the clearance itself, but rigid adherence to foreign standards has drastically reduced the clearance results.

After ratifying the Ottawa Convention, the BNDH approached many donors in order to raise funds for implementing all the



Near a minefield, objects like these are used in mine-risk education by BNDH and NGOs to alert the population that an area is mined.

Ottawa pillars.⁵ Mauritania received its first support from the U.S. government, enabling the national office to be built, have equipment and train Mauritanian deminers on SOPs for quality assurance and control. The BNDH also contacted other potential partners—Mines Advisory Group, *Halte aux Mines Antipersonnel*, States Parties and other mine-action stakeholders—to begin developing good relationships and to obtain their support. From 2004 to 2005, Mauritania enacted a mine-risk-education project made possible through funds from Canada and the support of UNICEF.

9,000 students and Nouadhibou: 43 schools; 12,387 students). This field and school campaign used 33,000 posters and 35,000 schoolbooks to deliver the message.

Stockpile Destruction

Mauritania completed its stockpile destruction in December 2004. It took two years for the country to destroy the 5,728 anti-personnel mines, and it did so with funding from Canada and support from the United Nations Development Programme. The country has retained 728 AP mines for training purposes.¹

Routes cleared and reopened	202 kilometres (126 miles)
Areas cleared	6,750,000 square metres (2,606,190 square miles) (with quality control)
UXO	Over 2,300 items
Mines	Over 4,200 items

Table 1: Mauritanian mine/UXO clearance.⁶

That project is the most important activity carried out in the last two years by the mine-action programmes.

The results that have been achieved since the introduction of the 1998 International Mine Action Standards are listed in Table 1.

Mine-risk Education

UNICEF conducted the country's main mine-risk education activities in northern Mauritania from 2004–2005 with funding from Canada. The program focussed on nomads and children. UNICEF and the BNDH trained 160 national NGO members to deliver the MRE messages in this region. The trained national NGO members addressed 10,650 nomads (5,000 male, 2,500 children and 3,150 female) with this extensive field campaign. In addition to the nomads, 73 schools were included in the campaign, covering 21,387 students (Zoueratt: 30 schools;

Challenges

Shifting dunes. Many landmines are known to be covered by dunes in the desert and sometimes close to urban areas like Zoueratt. As a result, it is very difficult to have an accurate database. The dunes are constantly moving; one day the mines are visible and the following day the dunes cover them to a point deeper than normal for buried mines. This presents a challenge in clearance because mine detectors may not work to these depths. Mauritania is approaching other programmes and specialised institutes, for example the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, to learn how to best handle this situation.

Fundraising. To date, the main funding source for Mauritanian mine action is the Mauritanian government. The Mauritanian programme for mine action has had difficulty getting financial support from

the international community because it lacks the resources to effectively sell the programme's needs and the progress that is being made. To combat this problem, Mauritania has obtained the assistance of a Senior Technical Advisor from the United Nations Development Programme and has developed a clear strategy and transparency in mine action.

Conclusion

Mauritania can be free of landmines⁷ in a short time with a little support from the UNDP and the international community. With this much-needed support, it should be possible for Mauritania to meet its completion initiative by January 2011. ♦

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Mauritania's National Capacity

- 120 deminers (150 by mid-2006)
- 12 demining instructors
- 6 mine-awareness instructors
- Specific equipment for clearance (detectors, vehicles, etc.)
- With support of the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining, the BNDH has installed the Information Management System for Mine Action database.



Major Alioune ould Mohamed El Hacen has worked in mine action for 18 years, with six years of experience in humanitarian demining. He obtained his Bachelor of Science from *Lycée Nationale* in Nouakchott, Mauritania, and has attended numerous training courses in areas such as mine-action management and engineering. He was appointed Project Manager for the UNICEF mine-risk education programme (2004–2005).

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