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Norwegian People's Aid in Western Sahara: Mine Awareness in a Refugee Setting

By Justin Brady

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In September 1997, Norwegian People's Aid began efforts to assist Saharawi refugees living in southwest Algeria to return safely to their country. While the mid-Seventies are best known for the exit of Portuguese colonization from the continent of Africa and the subsequent problems that arose, the exit of Spanish forces from the area of Western Sahara brought its own legacy of war, landmines and UXO. The war saw Morocco, Frente POLISARIO, the Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro, and in the beginning Mauritania as well, battle for control of the former Spanish holding. The war, which lasted from 1976 to 1991 when the United Nations brokered a cease-fire, resulted in a territory divided between Morocco and Frente POLISARIO by defensive walls, known as berms, constructed by the Moroccans fortified with mines and substantial contamination from mines and UXO throughout the rest of the territory.

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The question of who will govern Western Sahara remains unresolved. Recent efforts by the United Nations and the Secretary General himself have yielded mixed results in advancing the referendum agreed to in principal by the two parties to determine independence for Western Sahara or integration into Morocco. The on-going impasse puts in jeopardy the standing cease-fire that has lasted for the past eight years. While the future of Western Sahara remains unclear, preparations continue for the hopeful repatriation of the more than 100,000 refugees, most of whom reside just over the border in refugee camps in Algeria.

The refugee camps are located twenty-five kilometers south of the Algerian outpost of Tindouf. NPA's project, located near the administrative center Rabuni, and in the four main camps of Smara, Awserd, El Aauin and

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Dahkla and the 27 February school and adjoining camp provides mine awareness to the over 100,000 Saharawi. The situation of the refugees is unique in that they have lived in exile in Algeria for over 20 years. During the more than two decades of existence as refugees, the Saharawis have built considerable structures and POLISARIO claims literacy in the camps is almost universal.

However, over two decades in southwest Algeria also means that a significant majority of the population has no understanding of the country they will repatriate to nor the considerable danger that awaits them as a legacy of years of war.



27 February School team leader Nasra Ahmed Elghaid attracts a crowd of Inquisitive Saharawi children during a practice session in the Smara refugee camp. Effectively working with children has been a major concern for the project.

Project Start-Up

After several visits to the camps and inside the POLISARIO held territory to determine the needs and structure of the project, expatriate staff arrived in the camps in June 1998 to begin the actual project. A three-week training of Saharawi mine awareness team leaders was held in June 1998. Thirteen candidates, of more than forty people interviewed, were selected for the course, which centered on an introduction to the danger and impact of mines and UXO, organization and instruction skills, and practical presentation experience. During the course, Saharawis along with the expatriate staff designed the starting point of the program. The aim was to place information and messages on the danger of mines and UXO in a contextual framework for the first phase "Return," as envisioned in preliminary repatriation plans, with consideration of the future steps of "Provisional Living and Stable Living".

Of the 13 candidates that began the team leaders' course, six were chosen to be leaders based on their leadership skills, knowledge of the subject, and dedication. Four of the team leaders represent each of the four main camps with the lone female team leader managing the team at the camp that adjoins the 27 February School. The remaining leader serves as the deputy local project manager. In his role as deputy local manager, he has the responsibility of traveling to each of the camps to monitor the implementation of the program and the development of new materials and methods. He joins a local project manager as the Saharawi counterparts to the NPA expatriate staff.



US Congressman Joseph R. Pitts, R-Pennsylvania (far right), Polinario's US representative Moulud Said (second from left) and members of a US delegation join NPA project manager Michael Hands (foreground) in examining a mock-up of the defensive walls inside Western Sahara. The mock up is part of the Saharawi War Museum, which includes a wide variety of A/P and A/T mines.

During the month of August 1998, the new team leaders prepared the foundation for their work in the camps and for the team members' course held in September. Part of the course preparation was the identification of possible candidates. Several team leaders also worked with three groups of refugees to test out the various information, materials and teaching methods contained in the tentative mine awareness curriculum.

In addition to these tasks, the team leaders also interviewed mine survivors in their respective camps to develop resources for the mine awareness campaign, practice their research skills and deepen their own knowledge on the subject. One-week prior to the team members' course, the team leaders came together to share their knowledge and ideas and prepare the course curriculum.

Three of the Team Leaders were chosen as chief instructors for the some forty candidates on the Team Members' course. The two-week course was handled almost exclusively by the Team leaders and the local project managers both in terms of course work and administration. The course was structured much like the team leaders' course with extra attention paid to practical presentation experience. Selected candidates from each of the camps also took part in a specialization course on either working with children or evaluation methods. Based on performance during the course, five team members, two having participated in the specialized training, were selected to join each of the five teams.

Mine Awareness in the Camps

With the teams fully staffed by the end of September, the work of mine awareness fully began in mid-October 1998. Each team leader has been responsible for coordinating the work of his or her team with local camp authorities. Each of the camps is broken down into districts, areas and neighborhoods, which must be systematically covered to insure that everyone has the opportunity to receive training. By and large, the majority of the attendees to the mine awareness sessions are women, reflecting the predominance of women in the camps as a whole. Training in the El Aauin

camp was initially delayed in order to conduct a full baseline evaluation from which to guide the curriculum and measure future success. To date the teams have provided at least one-hour of training to approximately 30,000 refugees. In-service training for the teams continues to be an on-going feature of the program.

Opportunities and Obstacles

Since its start last year, the NPA project has evolved to meet the realities of life and work in the camps. The project was the first to hire local staff on a large scale and conduct operations in the camps. This has presented a steep learning curve both for NPA and the POLISARIO authorities on issues ranging from compensation to staff selection. The project has been fortunate to have a wide base of candidates to choose from, including former soldiers some of whom are themselves landmine survivors. However, few people have practical experience working on a project and competency building for team members and particularly pedagogical management is a constant need.

The development of materials and methods is a crucial factor. The project, like others working with refugees outside of the mined environment, must connect the information to a distant reality. The challenge of not only informing, but more importantly, changing behavior is exacerbated by the long tenure of the refugees outside the danger area. An exploratory mission into the POLISARIO held territory was made by



NPA expatriate and local staff in January and February 1999. The goal was to compare the information contained in the mine awareness curriculum with the realities experienced by the few people living in the region. A major finding was the various methods of marking danger areas, some of which were also used at times to mark safe routes. The project immediately made efforts to rectify the marking system with the UN and POLISARIO authorities to avoid confusion and standardize a system that can be taught to refugees in the camps. The local staff also interviewed local nomads to understand better dangerous behavior in the Western Sahara context.

The outskirts of the Smara camp give a picture of typical construction within the camps. The tent and mud brick homes must withstand temperatures over 50° Celsius and ferocious sandstorms in what is commonly referred to as the "inhospitable Algerian desert."

Another challenge has been the children's training. Saharawi children are known for their inquisitiveness and sense of independence, traits that must be channeled to avoid danger in a mined environment. While some efforts were made in the beginning to structure methods and materials appropriate for the many children born in the camps, it soon became apparent that new measures had to be taken. The result was a four week course specifically for working with children with members from the various teams conducted in November 1998. Subsequently, a theater group was formed to inform children of the dangers of mines in an interactive way.

Other problems such as importing materials and obtaining visas for expatriate staff, common to many projects, have also hindered the implementation of the project. Even the extreme heat of the desert can also limit operations. As the first year comes to an end, sufficient funding is left over to provide for three more months of project operations. Funding for the first year was provided entirely by the Norwegian government. Efforts are now underway to obtain funding to extend the project in the camps and possibly expand to reach people in the territory and Mauritania.

Additional Information

For more information about NPA:

[Norwegian People's Aid](#)

[NPA - "Landmines - The Silent Killers"](#)

For more information about Western Sahara:

[CIA Factbook for Western Sahara](#)

[Western Sahara Update \(Western Sahara Campaign \(UK\)\)](#)

[Western Sahara Guide \(OneWorld\)](#)

[Western Sahara Page \(Columbia University\)](#)