Morocco and Western Sahara

Country Profile

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Morocco and Western Sahara

by Chad McCool

Profile Morocco and Western Sahara

By the time Spain abandoned its Western Sahara claims in 1975, two warring factions had emerged, taking up arms over custody of the territory: Morocco seeking southern annexation, Mauritania seeking northern annexation, and Saharan natives seeking to establish their own nation, the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic. Despite escalating control over their Saharan homeland with a guerrilla army, these natives united as the Popular Liberation Front under the leadership of Polisario, best known as the Polisario. The Polisario rebuffed attempts to mediate the UN’s resolutions by 1979, at which point Morocco was able to seize control of Western Sahara’s southern region. In order to prevail during the deadlock standoff with the Polisario, Morocco pursued a military strategy involving the construction of six berms, or three-foot tall (one-meter) earthen walls, supplemented with landmines. The berms divide the middle of the territory, extending 1,690 miles (2,700 kilometers) from the southwest to northeastern border of the country, marking the boundary of the United Nations imposed an end to hostilities in 1991, and Morocco and the Polisario dropped their weapons, but they have yet to arrive at a peaceful reconciliation.

Mine Problem

Over a period of three years after the on signing of the 1991 ceasefire, Morocco allocated US$5 million worth of VS-50 anti-personnel and VS-16 anti-tank mines. Though Morocco never manufactured or exported mines, both Morocco and the Polisario used unexploded ordnance during the 15-year conflict. Within the formal boundaries of their country, mines do not threaten the safety of civilians living in Polisario-controlled areas. However, that just under 39,000 square miles (100,000 square kilometers) of the conflict area has been decontaminated, nearly 200,000 mines were laid during the standoff. Although the Pakistani military allowed the clearing of 80 percent of the land, mines continue to affect the region. In June 2007, forest fires and rising temperatures triggered the explosion of over 200 mines along the Line of Control, injuring livestock and causing damage to nearby villages. Residents in Kashmir also claim that there are some mined areas along the LOC that have not been properly marked or fenced.

Miners were used against Pakistan during the 1980s in the Afghanistan-Pakistan war, where they were dropped by helicopter or laid directly by soldiers. In addition to mines used against Pakistan, India is also plagued by internal violence. Militants, terrorists, and other armed groups have employed mines and explosives, resulting in civilian casualties. Insurgents have used mines to inhibit the safety and operations of the United Nations Mine Action. In 2006, the Indian government announced an ordinance to promote the safety of personnel involved in such activities. The country also has problems with mines, UXO, and terrorism since the Soviet invasion. The IEDs have failed to be properly worked.6

Dispute Settlement

Morocco and the Polisario have met on multiple occasions to resolve their issues. The second attempt at such an agreement in 2010 failed to satisfy Morocco. In August 2007, the United Nations provided a two-day retreat with researched presentations for the two sides to negotiate a resolution, but parties were unable to arrive at an agreeable peace plan.7 The prospect of peace is an important step toward full mine clearance and elimination in Western Sahara. Morocco, the Polisario, and Algeria-based rebels all depend on mine-action groups to cleanse Western Sahara so that they can one day safely inhabit the region again.

A History of Violence

In 2002, in an attack on the Indian parliament, led the forces of both India and Pakistan to lay mines along the Line of Control, the de facto border in the Kashmir territory.8 The two countries have disputed the territory since 1947. Pakistan and India have since signed a ceasefire, but some reports estimate that nearly 200,000 mines were laid during the standoff. Although the Pakistani military claims to have cleared 80 percent of the land, mines continue to affect the region. In June 2007, forest fires and rising temperatures triggered the explosion of over 200 mines along the Line of Control, injuring livestock and causing damage to nearby villages. Residents in Kashmir also claim that there are some mined areas along the LOC that have not been properly marked or fenced.9

MINURSO improved the marking of mine-action efforts of all parties involved in the ceasefire. The United Nations has authorized the deployment of 15,000 personnel to monitor the ceasefire and eliminate in Western Sahara. This is an important step toward full mine clearance and elimination in Western Sahara. Morocco, the Polisario, and Algeria-based rebels all depend on mine-action groups to cleanse Western Sahara so that they can one day safely inhabit the region again.

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GlobeScan

Survey, Marking and Clearance

At present, there is no central mine-action authority or center in Pakistan. All mine/UXO clearance and marking activities are conducted by the military. In May 2005, Response International conducted a mine impact survey in Pakistan. The results of the survey showed that there are about 1,200,000 UXO victims living in Pakistan and a mine/UXO accident rate of up to 15 per month.11 Response International is currently working on compiling a data base of mine/UXO survivor information in Pakistan.12

Mine-risk Education

Nongovernmental organizations have been heavily involved in mine-risk education in Pakistan. In 2001, Pakistan joined the Mine Action Committee to Run Landmines, the Community Motivation and Development Organization, Response, and the Community Relief and Mines Advisory Group. The organization works closely with local organizations to reduce the impact of landmines in Pakistan. In July 2007, the Pakistan Campaign to Ban Landmines, the Community Motivation and Development Organization, Response, and the Community Relief and Mines Advisory Group. The organization works closely with local organizations to reduce the impact of landmines in Pakistan. In July 2007, the Pakistan Campaign to Ban Landmines, the Community Motivation and Development Organization, Response, and the Community Relief and Mines Advisory Group. The organization works closely with local organizations to reduce the impact of landmines in Pakistan. In July 2007, the Pakistan Campaign to Ban Landmines, the Community Motivation and Development Organization, Response, and the Community Relief and Mines Advisory Group. The organization works closely with local organizations to reduce the impact of landmines in Pakistan. In July 2007, the Pakistan Campaign to Ban Landmines, the Community Motivation and Development Organization, Response, and the Community Relief and Mines Advisory Group. The organization works closely with local organizations to reduce the impact of landmines in Pakistan. In July 2007, the Pakistan Campaign to Ban Landmines, the Community Motivation and Development Organization, Response, and the Community Relief and Mines Adviso...