Making Life Safer for the People of Western Sahara

Action on Armed Violence (AOAV) carries out research, advocacy and field work towards a single goal – reduction in the incidence and impact of armed violence.
Action on Armed Violence (formerly Landmine Action) carries out expert research, advocacy and field programmes towards a single goal – reducing the incidence and impact of armed violence.

Experience has shown us that reducing the availability, use and impact of weapons is only part of the solution to armed violence.

It is important to address the weapons themselves, but also to support the people and communities affected by armed violence (whether as victims and survivors, or as perpetrators), and to promote armed violence reduction as a core objective of international humanitarian policy-making, national development planning, and local community security.

Action on Armed Violence’s work in Western Sahara is supported by the UN and the Norwegian Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs and carried out in cooperation with the Polisario.

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Western Sahara

More than 100,000 people are living in refugee camps in Algeria and have been there for more than 35 years. They are living in a state of limbo, unable to plan for the future and unable to return to their homes.

Following Spain’s withdrawal as a colonial power in 1975, Morocco and Mauritania partitioned Western Sahara between themselves. This was met with an armed resistance by the Polisario Front, recognised by the UN since 1979 as the representative of the people of Western Sahara.

Mauritania withdrew in 1979 and Morocco and the Polisario Front continued fighting until a UN-brokered cease fire was agreed in 1991. Sixteen years of conflict have left Western Sahara strewn with landmines, cluster bombs and other explosive remnants of war.

During the conflict, Morocco built a thousand mile defensive wall, known as the “Berm”. This wall, which is the longest defensive structure in the world, divides the whole of the Western Sahara territory in two with Morocco controlling the area to the west and Polisario controlling the area to the east. The areas surrounding the Berm are believed to be some of the most heavily mined in the world.

In October 1975, Spain agreed to organise a referendum after the International Court of Justice recognised the Saharawi’s right to self-determination, but this did not take place. In April 1991, Minurso (the United Nations Mission for a Referendum in Western Sahara) drew up a peace plan, which provided for a referendum the following year, giving Saharawis the choice between independence and integration with Morocco. To date, this referendum has not taken place.

Even without the difficult political situation, Western Sahara is a challenging place to live. With scorching hot summers and bitterly cold winters; water is scarce, especially in the dry season; transport and logistics are challenging and opportunities to earn a living are few.

Despite all of this, the Saharawi people are calm and welcoming. But all are yearning for a solution to this longstanding conflict and they want the world to know about it.
AOAV STARTED WORK IN WESTERN SAHARA IN 2006 AND WAS THE FIRST ORGANISATION TO CONDUCT A SURVEY INTO THE EXTENT OF LANDMINES, CLUSTER BOMBS AND OTHER EXPLOSIVE REMNANTS OF WAR IN THE AREA EAST OF THE BERM.

During the survey, staff identified 158 cluster strikes, 37 minefields and one ammunition dump. They removed items posing immediate danger and prioritised the rest in terms of proximity to where people live, the water points and main transport routes. Dangerous areas were marked off to prevent any casualties.

AOAV is the only organisation clearing explosive remnants of war east of the Berm. To date, AOAV has cleared over 17 million square metres of land, 2,000 unexploded bombs and 10,000 cluster munitions.

Carrying out this work are 69 employees, 67 of whom are Saharawi, including the country manager. The clearance operators are trained to International Mine Action standards and other employees have received professional training in First Aid and administration and management procedures.

Since signing Geneva Call’s Deed of Commitment for adherence to a total ban on anti-personnel mines and for cooperation in mine action, AOAV has supported the Polisario to carry out four stockpile destructions. This has led to the destruction of 10,148 anti-personnel mines so far.

The team is also ready to respond to any emergencies, such as a landmine accident or the sighting of a dangerous item, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

So far, AOAV has cleared Tifariti and Mehares, two of the most affected regions, of all known cluster bombs and unexploded ordnance. Clearance of Bir Lahlou, another badly affected region, began in March 2011. Now that some of the most dangerous and well-used areas have been cleared, AOAV is looking into how to best support Saharawi people to use the cleared land to make a living.

AOAV is also calling for more donor support for people affected by landmines and cluster munitions and, as an active founder member of the Cluster Munition Coalition, for all countries to sign and ratify the Convention on Cluster Munitions.

"AOAV’s work is making a big difference to people’s lives in Western Sahara as it helps them to be able to travel freely and graze their animals without fearing for their lives or that of their animals."

Mohamed Lamin Buhali, Defence Minister, Polisario
“I found her in a crouched position with blood all over her legs, arms and head. She was screaming and trembling.”

Mother of Mona Hafed (4)

THERE ARE REPORTEDLY 2,500 CASUALTIES AS A RESULT OF LANDMINES AND CLUSTER MUNITIONS IN WESTERN SAHARA, BUT OFFICIAL STATISTICS ARE NOT AVAILABLE AND THE NUMBER IS THOUGHT TO BE MUCH HIGHER.

Not only do they kill and maim people for life, these dangerous items also prevent people from earning a living, in what is already one of the most challenging physical environments on earth.

MONA HAFED, a four-year-old girl was badly injured by a cluster munition in February 2011. While herding goats with her cousins in Bir Lahlou, she started playing with what she thought was a ball and it exploded. Her mother ran outside when she heard the explosions and her daughter crying out. “I found her in a crouched position with blood all over her legs, arms and head. She was screaming and trembling,” she explained.

Metal fragments had sliced into her big toe on her left foot and two smaller toes on her right foot and into her right hand. “In fact, she was lucky,” Mohammed Salem, AOAV’s Operations Manager explained: “The molten metal fired away from her, but if it had fired in her direction she would have been killed.”

Mona and her family were visiting Bir Lahlou from the camps in Rabouni to graze their animals but Mona never wants to return until she knows that it is safe. AOAV started clearing Bir Lahlou in March 2011.

Said, (13) and his younger brother Hassan (5) were herding goats in Mehaires in 2007. He threw a stone at a BLU 63 and it exploded immediately. Metal fragments embedded themselves into his neck and chest and Said died of his injuries three days later in hospital. Hassan (now nine) is still deeply traumatised by his brother’s death.

“We knew about the sub-munitions,” said Salka, his older sister, also deeply traumatised by her brother’s death, “but herding is our life and we had to continue. We didn’t have any other options. Everybody is a herder in this area.”

Salka now has peace of mind about Hassan, who minds the family’s goats and her two other brothers who herd other people’s. “It’s much safer now,” she says, “and I feel so much better about the safety of my brothers since the land was cleared.” AOAV cleared all known dangerous items in Mehaires between 2007-2010.

ARMED VIOLENCE IS HIGHLY GENDERED. MOST PERPETRATORS AND IMMEDIATE VICTIMS ARE MALE; BUT WOMEN AND CHILDREN CAN SUFFER THE LONG-TERM IMPACT.
MAKING LIFE SAFER FOR NOMADIC HERDERS

MEHAIRES, EAST OF THE BERM AND CLOSE TO THE MAURITANIAN BORDER, IS PARTICULARLY POPULAR WITH NOMADIC HERDERS BECAUSE IT HAS A PLEASANT CLIMATE AND RELATIVELY GOOD ACCESS TO WATER.

The region was heavily affected by cluster strikes in 1985. Polisario made an effort to clear them, but there were simply too many to cope with. AOAV surveyed the region in 2007 and cleared four suspected dangerous areas by the end of the year, six in 2008 and 69 in 2009/10. To date, we have cleared 8.5 million square metres of land and over 6,300 unexploded bombs and cluster munitions.

Beiba has 30 goats and takes them to a water point every morning with her friend, Safia. As she pours the water into her bucket, she explains: “We didn’t use to come to this watering point, because we knew it was surrounded by cluster bombs, and we really struggled to get water for the goats, especially during the dry periods. But it’s so much easier now we know that everywhere is safe.”

Sitting in her carpeted tent, with colourful wall hangings and pretty flower arrangements, she is happy to be making tea for her grand-daughter visiting from the camps. “It wasn’t safe for her to come in the past, but now she visits quite often,” she smiles.

When Action on Armed Violence came to clear the land she worked very closely with the team. Mata Mulana, a team leader with AOAV said: “She pointed out many of the munitions to us and she gave us goats’ milk everyday.”

But Beiba is tired of the constant effect of the conflict: “We were bombed in Smara in 1975,” she explains, “so we moved to Mehaires. Then we were bombed in Mehaires so we moved to Tifariti and we were bombed there. We finally escaped to the east and went to live in a camp near Algeria. We didn’t take many belongings with us when we left our home as we didn’t think the troubles would last for long.”

She moved back to Mehaires in 2007 when she heard the land would be cleared. She now leads a calm life, herding her goats, churning the milk for butter, grinding corn with a traditional stone grinder and preparing and drinking tea. But she explains: “I may have physically left my home and my body is here in Mehaires, but my spirit is still in Smara.”

Main: Beiba, a traditional nomadic herder grazes her goats on land that is now clear of dangerous items.
Looking around Mehares, it’s hard to believe that anything other than the local shrubs and trees will thrive in the harsh landscape.

But Salek Sheikh Embarek and two other men started a market garden in 2010. It hasn’t been an easy process. The first attempts failed. The lack of water is obviously a problem, but there is also a lack of equipment and knowledge and experience of market gardening.

It took Salek and the two other men a month to dig a hole for the water point, as when the rains came the water point flooded and they had to start again. They don’t have any concrete to seal the hole.

They finally managed to get the water point up and running and installed a pump and a water pipe system in the summer of 2010. They started the farm in September and Salek is now proud to be able to show off the cabbage, beetroot and potatoes that are thriving on the plot.

His crop of beans and tomatoes is not doing so well. “But with the right kind of advice and equipment, I think this project can really take off,” Salek explains. He is also an electrician and he mainly fixes radios and TVs to make a living, and like most Saharawi people, he also herds goats. “It’s important to have different options,” he said.

With the profits from the gardening, Salek sends money to his family in the camps and invests the rest in his electrical repairs business. He explains: “Time is changing between war and peace. No-one could do anything before. But people are starting to move back now. We react to the changing situation.”

Salek doesn’t live in the camps himself, as he says that there is no work there and he doesn’t want to live on handouts. He works hard on the garden but sustained physical work is difficult for him, as he was shot in the chest and both arms in 1979 during the fighting.

His wife and nine children live in the camps. “Now that the land has been cleared, they are eager to move back,” Salek says, “but at the moment there is no school for the children and not enough food. Hopefully this will change in the future when my farm takes off and more people start moving back.”
BUER TIGISIT IS A POPULAR REST STOP FOR PEOPLE WHO NEED FOOD, WATER AND FUEL WHEN TRAVELLING BETWEEN TINDOUF AND THE KEY TOWNS OF BIR LAHLU, TIFARITI AND ALSO MAURITANIA.

It was badly affected during the conflict, littered with anti-tank bombs (MK118s) targeted at Polisario soldiers travelling south.

Action on Armed Violence cleared five dangerous areas in 2009. To date, we have cleared 352,000 square metres of land and 16 MK118s. Since the clearance, people have started to move back and there is now a school, a new borehole and well and a health centre. People are also starting to build permanent houses.

SID AHMED is a community leader in Buer Tigisit and a shopkeeper and tailor. He has lived in the town for many years and has seen lots of changes. “People used to stop off here to get water from the well and come and buy things, but since it was mined, no one would go beyond the roads. The clearance has made a big difference to this town. People are moving back and more people are stopping here again,” he explains. The family of his brother, Mulay, who works for AOAV in logistics, for example, has just moved back to the area from the camps.

Most people make a living in the area through herding and trading, as they are the only activities possible. “Farming is so difficult,” Sid explains, “because in the summer there is only enough water for drinking and for the animals.” Sid sells everything from groceries to spare car parts to clothes and shoes. He also makes and repairs clothes on an old Singer sewing machine. “I have more and more customers since the land was cleared,” he exclaims, “and other people are opening shops too.”

Sid is also happy that there is a new school. “There is no way we would have a school if this land hadn’t been cleared. It was not safe enough for children to walk to school. Now they come from over 10km away.”

Sid played an important part in the clearance. As community leader, he asked every community member to report to him if they had seen any dangerous items and he then reported this to AOAV. “Making the land safe makes a big difference to our lives so we wanted to play our part” he concludes.

Armed violence undermines public services such as health and education. These services are vital to development and their loss can have an impact that lasts generations.

“There is no way we would have a school if this land hadn’t been cleared.”

Sid Ahmed, community leader

Male: Sid Ahmed, a shopkeeper and tailor in his shop in Buer Tigisit town which was contaminated by cluster munitions until recently.
AZIZ HAIDER

AZIZ HAIDER IS A WELL-KNOWN AND RESPECTED CAMPAIGNER FOR THE VICTIMS OF LANDMINES AND PRESIDENT OF THE WESTERN SAHARA MINE VICTIM ASSOCIATION.

He himself was the victim of a landmine explosion at the age of 24. “It was the afternoon of the 16th of January 1979,” he explains. “There were four of us in the car and the bomb went off. The force of the explosion killed my friend Ali immediately. It split him in two. I became unconscious and only regained my consciousness when Polisario soldiers arrived.”

“They told me not to move, but I looked down and saw that my foot had gone. There was just the bone left. I gradually remembered what had happened and asked the soldiers if my other friends were still alive. One had a chest injury and the other just minor injuries.”

The Polisario soldiers gave them immediate medical treatment at the base and then took them by military ambulance to Tindouf in southwestern Algeria. They arrived at dawn the next day after travelling through the night. “I was unconscious for the whole journey,” Aziz explained.

Aziz was then transferred to Algiers where a doctor explained that he would have to have both legs and his right arm amputated. Only the lower part of his foot was gangrenous but the doctor amputated just under the knee so he could be fitted with prosthetic legs.

“When I first found out I thought that I would never be the same person again, but I decided I would have to accept it,” Aziz explained. He spent almost a year in Algiers; eight months in the hospital and the rest getting used to his new prosthetic legs. “I was able to walk with them after 15 days and the doctors told me it was a miracle,” he explains. “They had never known anyone get used to new legs so quickly.”

At the time of the accident Aziz was training to be an electrician. He couldn’t continue in this profession, so he went back to Dakhla camp in Rabouni and took an adult training course in administration. He set up the Western Sahara Mine Victim Association on 22 October 2005. He has a precision memory for dates, inherited from his father who is an historian. “The main goal of the Association,” explained Aziz, “is to attract support for people affected by landmines. So far, they have been neglected. Another key aim is for all landmines to be cleared, so we greatly appreciate AOAV’s work. Ultimately, this work reduces the number of people who need our assistance.”

When Aziz walks about it is impossible to know that he’s a triple amputee. He walks at a fast pace, with a sense of purpose and, as many people remark, usually a smile on his face.

There is a global shortage of reliable data on armed violence; it is likely that hundreds of thousands of deaths and injuries go unrecorded each year.
MEET THE AOAV STAFF

CLEARANCE OPERATOR,
MARIEM ZAID (25)

MARIEM IS ONE OF TWO
FEMALE CLEARANCE
OPERATORS WORKING
FOR ACTION ON ARMED
VIOLENCE.

She first heard about the job on the radio. “I heard they were encouraging women to become clearance operators and I was very interested,” she says. “After I found out more information about the job at the interview, I was even more motivated, so I was very pleased when I found out I had got the job.”

Mariem was born in a refugee camp in Algeria, where she has lived for most of her life with her family, originally from Dakhla on the Western Sahara coast. She explains: “Before I got this job, I had never left the camps. Now I am seeing different parts of the country that I had never seen before. But most importantly, I am helping to make the land safer for my people.”

When Mariem first started her job in 2008 she had to admit she was afraid, “but we are always afraid of what we don’t know,” she explained. “Once I got used to it, I started to enjoy it. And we take great care to follow all the correct procedures so we don’t make mistakes,” she added.

Mariem is a popular employee. Her team leader, Abba Mustafa, describes her as “very active and sociable”. He adds: “She creates a good atmosphere in the team and she does her work properly”. Asked where she sees herself in the future, Mariem explains: “It’s very hard to plan a career when you don’t know what’s happening. If we get independence and have an economy then I can start to plan for my future. But one thing I do know is that I always want to be in a job where I am helping people, either continuing with this or becoming a medic or a nurse.”

Main: AOAV’s Clearance Operator Mariem Zaid smiles after a hard day’s work.

ARMED VIOLENCE – EVEN EXCLUDING CONFLICTS – COSTS THE GLOBAL ECONOMY UP TO $183 BILLION ANNUALLY, A COST THAT IS GREATER THAN ALL GLOBAL AID.
Mata Mulana, AOAV Team Leader.

MATA MULANA CAME TO WORK AS A TRANSLATOR WHEN THE AOAV PROGRAMME FIRST BEGAN IN WESTERN SAHARA IN 2006. HE SPEAKS HASSANIYA (SAHARAWI LANGUAGE), ARABIC, SPANISH AND ENGLISH.

The project manager at the time quickly recognised that he had more to offer the organisation and sent him on an Explosive Ordinance Disposal course. Shortly afterwards he became a clearance operator and was then promoted to team leader in 2008.

A well-respected and well-liked team leader, who is excellent at his job and calm and quiet, with a great sense of humour, he is a lynchpin of the organisation.

Mata was born in Smara and remembers fleeing the town at the age of 11 with his family, three days before fighting started in 1975. “We didn’t really know what was happening but there were small Polisario units just telling us to drive, drive.” His father went back to get some food for the family but the Moroccans surrounded the town and he wasn’t able to leave. No-one in the family ever saw him again.

Many years later, Mata found out that his father had died of old age. But he has vivid memories of his father: “He worked as a cook at my primary school,” Mata explained, “and he was constantly looking out for me, checking that I wasn’t getting into trouble and that I was working hard.”

Along with thousands of other children, Mata went to school in Libya. “There were so many of us, so we didn’t really think about it,” he explains, “but it was hard as we had no contact with our families for a very long time.”

He came back to live in Western Sahara when he was 14, continued his studies and then joined the Polisario, where he worked as an army instructor. His experience put him in excellent stead for the job at AOAV, but Mata is also happy to be learning new things. “It’s been really interesting to learn about all aspects of mine and cluster munition clearance,” he explains, “and I am happy to be helping my country by making the land safe.”

When he is not working, Mata goes to the camp in Rabouni to visit his wife and daughter and his mother. His mother is seriously ill and he has considered resigning to go and look after her but she insisted that he kept his job so he could support his family. He only relented when he knew his younger brother was coming back from Spain to look after her.

When asked what he wants for the future, he replied: “Like all of my people I want independence for my country and I want to be able to go home to Smara. But this country is as you see it now, not at war, not at peace. It’s difficult when you ask a Saharawi about the future. Nothing is clear. We think from day to day. Get a job, be quiet. We are a peaceful people, but people are angry. Many young people see that peace has bought nothing, so they are thinking of war. They need a future. There’s more than one generation now who have no hope.”
Action on Armed Violence provided technical support to Polisario on 28 February 2011 to destroy 1,506 anti-personnel mines. AOAV staff prepared the pits, filled them with the landmines and oversaw the explosions, along with the UN MINURSO Mine Action Coordination Centre (MACC).

This stockpile destruction, which took place in Tifariti, east of the Berm, is the fourth undertaken under the Deed of Commitment Under Geneva Call for adherence to a total ban on anti-personnel mines and for cooperation in mine action. Since signing the agreement in 2005, Polisario has destroyed 10,148 mines, which includes 3,321 mines in 2006, followed by 3,321 in 2007 and 2,000 in May 2008.

A ceremony, close to the destruction site in Tifariti, preceded the explosions and was attended by Polisario representatives, other authorities and international and local organisations and media. At the ceremony, Mohamed Lamin Bujali, the Polisario Defence Minister thanked Action on Armed Violence for its “great efforts to clear Western Sahara from cluster munitions and unexploded ordnance and for the quality of its work”.

In turn, Mr Karl Greenwood AOAV’s Chief of Operations, thanked the Polisario authorities for their constant support and cooperation.

**SUPPORTING STOCKPILE DESTRUCTION**

**THE CONVENTION ON CLUSTER MUNITIONS**

The Deed of Commitment under Geneva Call is in line with the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions, which prohibits the use, production, stockpiling and transfer of cluster munitions, requires destruction of stockpiled cluster munitions within eight years, and clearance of contaminated land within 10 years. As of 3rd February 2011, 108 countries have signed the treaty and 51 (in bold) have ratified it.

Afghanistan, Albania, Angola, Antigua & Barbuda, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Benin, Bolivia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Botswana, Bulgaria, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Canada, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Chile, Colombia, Comoros, Congo (Republic of), Cook Islands, Costa Rica, Côte d’Ivoire, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Djibouti, Dominican Republic, DR Congo, Denmark, Ecuador, El Salvador, Fiji, France, Gambia, Germany, Ghana, Guatemala, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Holy See, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, Indonesia, Iraq, Ireland, Italy, Jamaica, Japan, Kenya, Lao PDR, Lebanon, Lesotho, Liberia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Macedonia FYR, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Malta, Mauritania, Mexico, Moldova, Monaco, Montenegro, Mozambique, Namibia, Nauru, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, Norway, Palau, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Philippines, Portugal, Rwanda, Samoa, San Marino, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Slovenia, Somalia, South Africa, Spain, St Vincent and the Grenadines, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Togo, Tunisia, Uganda, United Kingdom, Uruguay, Zambia

For more information on the Convention visit www.stopclustermunitions.org

Action on Armed Violence works to save lives and livelihoods by reducing and preventing armed violence.

“The United Nations system, regional and sub-regional organisations, national and local governments, and civil society organisations have mobilized to prevent and reduce armed violence through evidence-based interventions, but responses need to be scaled up.”

Jonas Gahr Støre, Norwegian Foreign Minister & Helen Clark, Administrator of the UNDP, 2009

“For more information visit www.aoav.org.uk

Sidi Mohamed 1968-2011

“Sidi Mohamed (Hazem) was a valued and experienced member of our team and his commitment to making Western Sahara a safer place much respected by all.”

AOAV Staff

For more information visit www.aoav.org.uk
Stockpile destruction event conducted on 28 February 2011 which destroyed 1506 anti-personnel mines.

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