

When danger is all around your school



UNMAS provides risk education so that these children and their families can recognize and avoid landmines and Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) in Tifariti. Photo Credit: SafeLane Global Limited

In the remote corners of the vast Saharan desert, Tifariti is a locality situated east of the berm of the Territory of Western Sahara. One of the few oases in the area, Tifariti has a static population of approximately 4,000 inhabitants, which almost doubles every winter and spring due to seasonal migratory flows. Overall, Tifariti is a small and calm town where herding camels and livestock has remained a millennial tradition inherited from generation to generation and practiced to this date. Recently, the local population has witnessed a progressive increase in the number of nomads passing through the area in search of food and water. Those travel trails are composed of Sahrawi shepherds who travel from the refugee camps located in the surroundings of Tindouf (south west Algeria) to the Territory of Western Sahara to practice their ancestral nomadic customs of grazing and herding. Travelling nomads often stop in Tifariti to take a break from the blazing heat as well as restock their provisions before resuming their route onwards through the desert.

Despite the calmness that governs Tifariti, the peace is only apparent. The Territory of Western Sahara, east of the berm, remains heavily contaminated with landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) as a result of the armed conflict that took place from 1975 until 1991 between the Royal Moroccan Army (RMA) and the Frente POLISARIO Military Forces (FPMF). No direct armed confrontation has taken place in almost 30 years thanks to a ceasefire signed in 1991 under the auspices of the United Nations. However, the local population and nomads have been living in constant fear of these invisible deadly devices ever since. This is particularly the case in Tifariti, one of the areas that was heavily fought over during the war and, as a result, is densely contaminated with landmines and ERW, predominantly cluster munitions. Due to this continued presence of explosive devices, Tifariti is a place that seems to be stuck in time, where the brutal legacy of another era continues to determine peoples' lives.

It is March 2019. A local Sahrawi in Tifariti called Dawla informed us, the UNMAS team deployed in Tifariti, that he has found a strange item nearby. We accompany him and identify an explosive ordnance. It was located very close to a school, in an area inhabited by families. Cluster munitions can be as small as tennis balls, which renders them difficult to spot and therefore pose a serious threat. Sometimes kids are attracted by their form thinking they are toys; the consequences of this attraction are often fatal. Unfortunately, Dawla's discovery is not an isolated incident. A few weeks ago, an 11-year old boy called Mohamed Salem who was helping his father with herding duties in the surroundings of Tifariti also came to notify us of a strange object. It was an unexploded mortar. Mohamed had the instinct to do a cairn of stones around the ERW, so that other travellers and passers-by could spot the explosive ordnance from a distance and avoid a potential accident.

Both Dawla and Mohamed were lucky enough to encounter explosive devices and come out unharmed. However, not all Sahrawis have had the same fate. There are over 1,000 survivors of mine accidents in the eastern side of the Territory of Western Sahara alone. Most of them live under very challenging conditions in the refugee camps of Tindouf. The last bullets exchanged between the RMA and the FPMF may have been fired in the early 1990s, however landmine/ERW accidents continue to take place almost 30 years later. The last of these tragic accidents occurred in June 2019, when one Sahrawi lost his life and two others were injured due to the explosion of an anti-tank mine under the vehicle they were driving.



11-year old Mohamed Salem helped UNMAS locate an ERW. UNMAS provides risk education to the local population so that kids like Mohamed know how to behave safely if they encounter explosive ordnance. Photo Credit: SafeLane Global Limited

Based on the severe threat posed by landmines and cluster munitions in Tifariti, UNMAS targeted the area for clearance and Risk Education. UNMAS is clearing minefields and cluster strike areas so that the inhabitants of Tifariti and the wider region can live a normal and safe life. The impact of UNMAS actions so far are visible to everyone.

It is May 2019. We visit the local hospital, where dozens of patients come every day not only from the town of Tifariti but also the wider region. The area surrounding the hospital had been contaminated by cluster munitions until very recently, posing a severe threat to the numerous people coming here daily in need of treatment. UNMAS took action and cleared the existing contamination in March 2019, allowing thus safe passage for patients to the hospital. We meet with

the Director of the hospital, who stresses to us the criticality of this medical infrastructure for the local population: *“This hospital constitutes the only health care centre in the region, and therefore we receive patients not only from the town of Tifariti but also from people coming from hundreds of kilometres away. Safe access to the hospital is a fundamental prerequisite for its effective functioning. UNMAS has made that happen.”*

We continue our visit through Tifariti. We stop by the home of Teslem, a local inhabitant. While providing water to her camels, she describes to us what it is like to live near an area contaminated by landmines and cluster munitions. *“Explosive ordnance does not only threaten your life physically. Their invisible and silent presence is something that sticks to your mind and never leaves you. The fear of these explosive devices drains your energy, disrupts basic daily activities and affects the psychological well-being and moral of the local community.”* In fact, it turns out Teslem had been living only 300 meters away from land contaminated with cluster munitions, threatening her life and that of other inhabitants for years. UNMAS intervened and cleared the area, making sure that Teslem lives in safe ground where she can herd her camels without fear.



Teslem is one of the inhabitants of Tifariti, she lived only 300 meters away from land contaminated with cluster munitions. Thanks to UNMAS, Teslem now lives in safe ground where she can herd her camels without fear. Photo Credit: UNMAS

Despite these successes, UNMAS actions in Tifariti are not only limited to mine clearance. In 2016, UNMAS started implementing risk education activities thanks to a generous contribution by the German Federal Foreign Office (GFFO). The objective was to increase the level of knowledge of nomadic, refugees and local populations on how to stay safe in environments where landmines and cluster munitions are known or suspected.

Five teams, composed of three female and male Sahrawis each, were deployed with the determination to produce long-standing behavioural change among beneficiaries. Many risk education sessions were delivered in the refugee camps of Tindouf, in order to raise awareness among Sahrawis on the threat posed by landmines, ERW and cluster munitions before they travel to localities east of the berm. However, the teams also conducted risk education in various localities east of the berm where populations live in the vicinity of hazardous areas, including Tifariti. Thanks to these crucial live-saving activities, children like Mohamed know exactly how to react when

encountering explosive ordnance. In that particular case, Mohamed's actions did not only save his life: perhaps they also saved the life of other people passing by. By May 2018, UNMAS had provided risk education to over 25,000 beneficiaries, thereby reducing the threat posed by landmines and cluster munitions to the local and nomadic population.

Dawla, Mohamed, Teslem. Three hand-picked inhabitants of Tifariti whose lives have been shaped by the continued presence of explosive ordnance in the area. Despite the fact they have so far stayed unharmed, their lives remain at risk by these indiscriminate weapons. They are paying the brutal price of an old war, threatened every day by explosive devices that were laid before they were even born. Dawla, Mohamed and Teslem are part of the population of Tifariti: a peaceful and calm town at first sight, yet when dug up one can clearly see how its morbid past does not let it turn the page on war. That is why, as long as suspected and confirmed hazardous areas prevent the inhabitants of Tifariti to live a decent life, UNMAS will continue to work relentlessly so that they can



finally meet peace at last.

On the right, UNMAS finished clearing the area around the hospital of Tifariti in March 2019. As a result, dozens of people are now able to access the hospital every day safely. On the left, one patient leaves the hospital of Tifariti. Photo Credit: UNMAS

UNMAS operates as a component of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). Since 2008 to date, UNMAS has played a critical role in facilitating the Mission's mandate. By clearing minefields and cluster munition strike areas as well as conducting route verifications, UNMAS has enabled safe patrols for United Nations Military Observers, humanitarian aid workers and vulnerable local nomadic populations. Thanks to generous contributions such as the one by the GFFO through the Voluntary Trust Fund for Mine Action (VTF), UNMAS has reduced the threat posed by landmines/ERW by coordinating mine action activities with mine action local and international partners, conducting humanitarian mine clearance, physical security and stockpile management (in the case of the Territory of Western Sahara; anti-personnel mine stockpile destructions), risk education, capacity enhancement and victim assistance.

So far, UNMAS in the Territory of Western Sahara has released over 147 square kilometres of hazardous areas and has destroyed almost 40,000 landmines, cluster munitions and ERW. To complete the work done to date, UNMAS is now seeking USD 3.5 million and encouraging relevant



mine action partners to join in clearing all known landmine/ERW contamination in the Territory of Western Sahara, east of the berm (excluding the buffer zone).