

## **From mine clearance to marriage: the story of Ambarka and Hamada**



*“There is nothing like fighting for a peaceful world, especially if you can do it next to the person you love.”*  
Ambarka and Hamada have contributed to the destruction of almost 40,000 landmines, cluster munitions and explosive remnants of war in the Territory of Western Sahara, east of the berm. Photo Credit: UNMAS

Some couples meet under extraordinary circumstances that other people would consider unthinkable. The following story is a perfect reflection of this. Hamada Abdel Rahma is a Sahrawi man born in 1985 in the refugee camp of Smara, located in the surroundings of the Algerian city of Tindouf. Tindouf is situated 2,000 km into the depths of the Sahara, in a harsh isolated desert environment with temperatures surpassing 55 degrees Celsius in the summer. Ambarka Alina Sidi is a Sahrawi woman born in 1989 in Laayoune, another of the five refugee camps of Tindouf.

Both Hamada and Ambarka’s families moved to these refugee camps in an attempt to escape from the armed conflict that took place in the Territory of Western Sahara from 1975 until 1991 between the Royal Moroccan Army and the Polisario Front. Although a ceasefire was signed in 1991 under the auspices of the UN, the Territory of Western Sahara remains heavily contaminated with landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW). No direct armed confrontation has taken place in almost 30 years, however the local population has been living in constant fear of these invisible deadly devices ever since.

Not all hope is gone though. The refugee condition of Sahrawis like Ambarka and Hamada does not prevent them from having the same ambitions as other people. Hamada went to university in Cuba, where he graduated in medicine. The experience of studying and living in Cuba makes him one of what the Sahrawis call “Cubarawis” (a term mixing the words “Cuba” and “Sahrawi” to denominate Sahrawis who studied in Cuba). Hamada then came back to Tindouf, where he worked in the hospitals of the refugee camps of Dakhla and Smara. In 2015, he joined the UNMAS mine clearance contractor, SafeLane Global Limited, where he has worked ever since.

As for Ambarka, she was lucky enough to study in Algiers; the capital city of Algeria. After graduation, she returned to Tindouf, where she then joined UNMAS in 2016. Ambarka smiles while remembering when they first saw each other: *“We met in 2016 in Mehaires (locality situated in the Territory of Western Sahara, east of the berm). I had just become a deminer and therefore was receiving the introductory Health and Safety training by our team medic, Hamada. We married five months later.”* Hamada laughs and admits to us: *“Until 2015 I did not want to marry. Who would have thought that I would actually meet my wife surrounded by minefields!”*

With an accent influenced both by Arabic and Cuban Spanish, Hamada tells us what made him become a medic in mine action. *“I admire the heroic efforts of these deminers, who are risking their lives every day so that their compatriots can enjoy a safe and peaceful life. Healing people is my passion, and therefore I want to be next to these deminers to provide them medical support in case something goes wrong. After 4 years working in mine action, this conviction remains unchanged.”* Ambarka reflects on the humanitarian dimension of her work. *“This is a truly meaningful job. In this difficult environment of continuous daily struggles, we are able to make a difference in people’s lives by rendering land safe again.”* Furthermore, she also stresses the strong team spirit and the essential human values they practice on a daily basis such as solidarity, respect and trust. *“Colleagues respect and support you. No matter what the adversities are, I know we will always be there to protect each other. Cleared land is safe land, and that is all that matters.”* The economic dimension of their work can also not be ignored. Livelihood opportunities in the five refugee camps of Tindouf are very limited due to the extreme geographical conditions as well as widespread unemployment. Although these refugee camps were established over 40 years ago, Sahrawi refugees continue to lack some of the most basic services and goods. Within this context, working in mine action constitutes an opportunity for decent and dignified employment.



*“It is important that more women join this humanitarian work. Women need to be part of the change.”* In the picture, Ambarka poses during a break of her mine clearance work in Tifariti, east of the berm. Photo Credit: Safelane Global Limited.

We ask Hamada what are the main challenges of his job, to which he responds with a smile: *“You may think that the greatest challenge is operational, but it is not. The only real challenge is that I do not get to see my wife more often.”* In fact, Hamada and Ambarka work 500 km away from each other. At the time of this interview, Ambarka was working in a mine clearance team in Tifariti (locality east of the berm), while Hamada was working in another demining team down south in the area of Mijek (locality east of the berm). They try to meet every weekend, although this is not always possible. Despite his inherent optimism, Hamada’s work must not be underestimated: these deadly devices, invisible to our eyes most of the time, can go off at any moment. And if that happens, Hamada’s subsequent actions will determine the survival or death of a colleague, sometimes a friend. The dangers do not end here. In this harsh isolated desert, the presence of venomous snakes and scorpions is also a constant threat to deminers. *“I must always be alert. Anything can happen at any moment. However, I assume my responsibilities with serenity and maturity and acknowledge that, as long as security and medical procedures are followed, everyone is going to be fine.”* Ambarka tells us that her work as a deminer is often seen with skepticism by male members of society; who criticize her for doing what is still considered a “man’s job.” Luckily, her family is very proud of her. *“My family’s support is very reassuring. Some of my relatives even want to become deminers!”* Despite these social challenges, Ambarka’s conviction remains unalterable. *“It is important that more women join this humanitarian work. Women need to be part of the change”,* she tells us.

Some people may think that peacekeeping is about complex high-level decision-making taking place behind closed-doors meetings. However, this belief does not accurately grasp the full picture. Peacekeeping is about those unknown people on the ground dedicating their lives unconditionally for a better world. Ambarka and Hamada are a perfect reflection of this. *“There is nothing like fighting for a peaceful world, especially if you can do it next to the person you love,”* says Ambarka. They intend to form a family a soon, and therefore they continue fighting relentlessly for a world in which their kids can live in peace. When asked if they would encourage their children to become deminers, their answer is clear: *“Absolutely, they would have our full support. Not only this, but we will certainly also encourage them to become active players in other crucial mine action pillars such as victim assistance and risk education.”* Who knows, maybe soon we will see a family of peacekeepers contributing to a Territory of Western Sahara free from landmines. We conclude the interview by congratulating both on their honorable job and by asking them one last question: *“If you could send a message to a deminer somewhere else in the world, what would it be?”* Ambarka and Hamada hesitate for one second, look at each other in the eyes, and then reply to us: *“Thank you, from the bottom of our hearts. Thank you for the important and sometimes forgotten work you do. We admire you, we admire your courage and we applaud your determination to risk your life so that innocent brothers and sisters do not fall.”*



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UNMAS continues to encourage female participation; like the case of Ambarka, in mine clearance operations. 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.

With funds made available to UNMAS through the Voluntary Trust Fund for Mine Action (VTF), UNMAS has also 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 146 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) by 2023.

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