



The largest prison in the world: landmines, walls, UXOs and the UN's role in the Western Sahara

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Colaboraciones n° 1641

April 17, 2007

In the winter of 1975, several thousand Saharawi refugees gathered in Um Dreiga, fleeing from advancing Moroccan and Mauritanian troops. Spain had hastily abandoned its Western Sahara colony without organizing the self-determination referendum that the UN had been demanding for years. Taking advantage of Spain's weakness, Morocco from the north and Mauritania from the south sent their armies to occupy a deserted territory inhabited by less than a hundred thousand Saharawis, but with immense natural resources. The Bu Craa phosphate mines are among the largest in the world and the Saharan fisheries extremely rich. The UN opposed the occupation but did nothing to prevent it and the Saharawi liberation movement Frente POLISARIO was unable to stop their much more powerful expansionist neighbours.

In a few months, thousands of Saharawis were killed or disappeared and approximately half of the total population was displaced, under the indifferent gaze of the international community.

Deep in the desert and far from the main towns and strategic points, Um Dreiga was one of the camps where the Saharawis sought refuge in the first weeks of the war. Glaiyiha was one of them. She was just a girl and her memories are blurred, but she will always remember the day when the Moroccan planes bombed with napalm, causing the death of dozens of refugees and injuring many of the terrified survivors. Glaiyiha was lucky, she and her brothers survived. But her parents died: "I remember how I cried and cried, I only knew I had lost my parents". The survivors of Um

Dreiga continued their desperate escape through the desert. Liman Boicha recalls how when they heard or saw planes approaching, “we froze immediately like statues, opening our arms wide to the sky, hoping the Moroccan pilots would mistake us for trees”. It worked. But the terrified Saharawis were soon to discover that there was more than the sky to fear. Weeks after the Um Dreiga massacre, Glaiyiha stepped on a landmine. She lost a leg. It happened at the beginning of 1976.

Thirty years later, in March 2006, an 18 year old Saharawi called Omar stepped on a landmine a few hundred kilometres north of Um Dreiga and lost part of one leg. The stories of Glaiyiha and Omar are separated by three decades of conflict, in which the Western Sahara became one of the top ten countries with the highest concentration of landmines in the world. By 1982, the POLISARIO had managed to win the war against Mauritania in the south and had the effective control of most of the territory initially occupied by Morocco. Morocco only had complete control over the so-called “useful triangle”, where the phosphate mines are located. It was then that Morocco designed a new strategy to extend its control over a larger part of the territory. Between 1982 and 1987, the Moroccan armed forces erected six military walls: more than 2700 kilometres of defensive structures, between three and four metres high. They are composed of sand and stones and a system of anti-tank trenches, and are defended by over 130,000 soldiers stationed all along the wall. A further defensive

element is the existence of minefields positioned in front of the walls for their entire length. The area comprised within the six walls currently remains under Moroccan control, while the land east of the walls is administered by the POLISARIO. The POLISARIO also runs the Tindouf refugee camps, in Algeria, where 165,000 Saharawis live. The Western Sahara wall is longer than the Palestinian and the Mexico-USA walls, which have recently attracted so much media attention. It is, in fact, the longest military wall currently active in the world, but also the least known.

Omar lost his leg trying to cross the wall. Like Glaiyiha he was escaping from Moroccan repression. He was born in 1988 in El Aaiún. At the age of 15 he was detained for the first time by the Moroccan police for taking part in a nationalist demonstration demanding the self-determination of the Western Sahara. “I suffered a lot...we were 75 detainees in a tiny cell, we had to take turns to sleep in the toilet because there wasn’t enough space”. With some friends he ran a clandestine workshop on the outskirts of El Aaiún where they made Saharawi flags. But the workshop was discovered and destroyed. Omar was detained once more and sentenced to two months in prison. As a warning, his family home was visited and looted by the Moroccan secret police. Once released, Omar decided to escape from the Occupied Territories: “what most affected me was the destruction of my house; I had to escape to save my parents”. A guide showed him a section of the

wall between two Moroccan garrisons, no more than 500 metres wide, which was possible to cross on a dark night. Omar had informed his family in the refugee camps, and his uncle Mohamed and some POLISARIO soldiers were waiting for him, hidden on the other side. Omar crossed the wall, but stepped on a landmine seconds later. "When I heard the explosion, I thought he would be dead", remembers Mohamed, "we ran in the dark until we found him, unconscious but still alive". Omar now lives in the Tindouf refugee camps. Thirty years after the arrival of Glaiyiha, the exodus continues. And the Saharawi *intifada* continues in El Aaiún as well, under the indifferent gaze of the international community.

According to Saharawi Comandante Habuha Braica, landmine coordinator of the POLISARIO, "there are approximately 7 million landmines, although some studies raise the figure up to 10 million". Taking into account that the Saharawi population does not surpass 300,000, "there are 20 landmines for each Saharawi", clarifies Boybat Cheikh, president of the Saharawi Campaign to Ban Landmines, an NGO based in the Saharawi refugee camps. An added problem is the explosive remnants of war (ERW, also called UXOs), such as unexploded cluster bombs. MINURSO, the UN peace mission that has monitored the ceasefire between Morocco and the POLISARIO since 1991, estimates on its website that 100,000 square kilometres out of 266,000, that is, almost 40% of the Western Sahara is affected by landmines and UXOs.

Most of the minefields lie in the areas surrounding the six Moroccan walls, but, as Daha Bulahi, representative of the Saharawi Association of Landmine Victims, explains: "all the strategic points are heavily mined, the big valleys where troops can hide, the water wells, the crossroads...". The Association has its office in the Chedid Chreif Centre, a self-managed rehabilitation centre for war and landmine victims in the refugee camps where Glaiyiha and another 152 mutilated Saharawis live. Omar has chosen to live with his family, but visits the Centre regularly. Although there are no official figures, the Saharawis mutilated by landmines on both sides of the wall are in the hundreds.

"The real problem is for the civilians, for the Saharawi population", explains Comandante Braica, "I'm not going to deny that the landmines are also an important problem from a strictly military point of view. But, at the end of the day, we are professionals, it is part of our job, we assume the risks and we have excellent specialists. The nomads, the civilians, don't: they are defenceless. Our job is to create a liberated country in which our people can move freely...and that's not possible with the millions of landmines and the six military walls constructed by Morocco...The Western Sahara is now a huge prison. The eastern and western parts of the wall are unconnected. And in the area occupied by Morocco the military walls make the free mobility of the Saharawis very difficult, they can only cross the walls through certain points, easy to

control. The Western Sahara is the largest prison in the world”.

In 1998, the Polisario and Morocco signed the Houston Agreements sponsored by James Baker, then UN Secretary General Personal Envoy to the Western Sahara. After years of stagnation, these agreements reactivated the peace process with the objective of identifying the voters eligible to participate in the self-determination referendum. Furthermore, they re-ignited hope amongst the exiled Saharawi population of returning to their homeland. In this new context of hope, Norwegian People's Aid - the humanitarian organisation of the Norwegian trade union movement - developed a mine awareness program within the camps in preparation for the eventual return of the refugees to the mine-infested area in 2001. This mine awareness program reached 90,000 refugees and lasted for 2 years. But the refugees did not return as planned. Morocco rejected the UN census and the resolution of the conflict was postponed once again.

As Boybat Cheik explains; “When the Norwegian project came to an end we felt the need to continue raising awareness about the issue and so we created the Saharawi Campaign to Ban Landmines (SCBL) in 2001”. The objectives of this Saharawi NGO are to continue raising awareness about the dangers of mines, to support victims and promote their integration into society, to create a prosthetic workshop (which will open in 2007 with Red Cross funding), and to lobby the

Saharawi Republic and Polisario authorities to ban the use of landmines.

In this context, the Saharawi authorities decided to ban the use of antipersonnel landmines. As Commandante Braica explains “the Saharawi Republic cannot sign the Ottawa Treaty [to ban landmines] due to not being universally recognised as a state. Our political representatives have, on several occasions, expressed the will to sign the treaty if they were to be permitted to do so. For the moment, the only option we have is to sign the Geneva Call for non-state actors as Frente POLISARIO.” In November 2005, Mohammed Lamine Bouhali, Saharawi Minister of Defence, signed the Geneva Call's Deed of Commitment in the name of the POLISARIO. This requires a total ban on antipersonnel mines, including the destruction of all existing stockpiles. Three months after signing the deed, coinciding with the celebrations of the 30th anniversary of the creation of the Saharawi Republic, the POLISARIO completed the first phase in the destruction of its stockpile. 3321 mines were destroyed in Tifariti.

This was welcomed by the UN Secretary General in his report on the situation concerning the Western Sahara to the Security Council (S/2006/249, April 2006). Indeed, he went as far as to claim that “Minurso monitored the operation”, which can only be described as a very far stretch of the imagination. The POLISARIO was quick to refute this statement. As POLISARIO

landmine coordinator Comandante Braica affirmed, the operation was entirely “monitored, managed and carried out by Saharawi engineers and it was not, in any way, supervised by MINURSO.” The latter participated in the event “as witnesses”, alongside other international organizations such as “UNMAS, Landmine Action, Geneva Call, [...] and members of the SCBL and the victims centre.”

One of the organisations invited by the POLISARIO to witness the destruction was Landmine Action UK (LMA), which was at the time evaluating the possibility of starting to work in the Western Sahara. Landmine Action is the UK arm of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL), a founding member of the Cluster Munition Coalition, and one of the main independent organizations working for the elimination of landmines and other explosive remnants of war worldwide. LMA’s interest in the Western Sahara situation had started to take shape just a few months before, following a meeting in London with Danielle Smith (the director of the charity Sandblast) and a POLISARIO diplomat. After this initial contact, LMA’s Director Simon Conway was invited to visit the refugee camps and the areas east of the wall by the Saharawi authorities.

As Conway has stressed, since the beginning of LMA’s involvement in the territory, they have had “very good assistance from POLISARIO” and full political support: “when I first went out there I met the Prime

Minister and the Minister of Defence, and in my most recent [visit] I met the President”, “we have had full and frank collaboration and cooperation with POLISARIO” and “we’ve not been restricted in anywhere that we can go”. LMA began working in the region in the summer of 2006 carrying out technical surveys to delineate the boundaries of mined areas and to secure the patrol routes of MINURSO. Approximately 80% of the funding for this first stage of the project was provided by UN Mine Action Service (UNMAS), which LMA approached during the 6th Meeting of the State Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty celebrated in Zagreb at the end of November 2005, after their first contacts with the POLISARIO. The rest of the funding was provided by the Lady Diana Foundation. This work was possible thanks to the cooperation and assistance of both the POLISARIO, the *de facto* administrative power of the Western Sahara territory east of the wall, and MINURSO. LMA has signed memorandums of understanding (MOU) with both actors, delineating the terms of its work and the political and logistical support offered by them. For example, the members of LMA’s teams are Saharawi military engineers that the Saharawi authorities have agreed to temporarily demobilise to allow them to work in this project. On the other hand, MINURSO has provided these teams with fuel, water and other supplies, on a reimbursement basis.

In the first report to the Security Council following the initiation of the project, the Secretary General

was keen to praise the activities of MINURSO with regard to the landmine problem in the territory (S/2006/817, October 2006). Once again, his interpretation seems like a far stretch of the imagination. For example, he starts by claiming that MINURSO has “organized activities to raise mine awareness among the population in the Territory in the form of mine-risk education in the refugee camps of Tindouf”, which no one in the camps seems to have heard of. The report goes on to say that “[i]n cooperation with the Mine Action Service, MINURSO has embarked on a comprehensive mine and unexploded ordnance survey as well as clearance of areas, initially east of the berm, but with the potential to continue to other areas. An agreement was signed between the United Nations and Land Mine Action (...) in April 2006. Landmine Action personnel arrived in Tifariti in August and began training a local non-governmental organization.”

The agreement mentioned refers to the MOU between LMA and MINURSO, setting out the crucial logistic and political support given by MINURSO to the British independent organisation. The MOU signed between the POLISARIO and LMA allowing the latter to work in the territory is not even referred to, providing therefore a distorted representation that covers over a fundamental part of the whole picture. The temporal sequence also seems to imply that it was as part of MINURSO’s clearance project that LMA was contacted and contracted to carry out certain works. However, the talks concerning UNMAS fund-

ing for the first stage of LMA’s project only began after the first contacts between POLISARIO and LMA had already taken place and a preliminary assessment of the situation had already been produced. UNMAS funding was essential to the first stage of the project, but has not continued into the recently initiated second phase, which has moved from surveying to mine-clearance. The current phase is principally funded by the Norwegian government (with in-kind support from the German government as well). Furthermore, the members of the “local non-governmental organization” can only refer to the engineers of the Saharawi Liberation Army, temporarily demobilized by the Saharawi government to work, as independent Saharawis, with the British organization.

There can be no doubt that MINURSO’s cooperation and support of LMA has been absolutely essential for the development and implementation of the project. In fact, a significant part of LMA’s work up until now has been to secure MINURSO’s patrol routes in the areas east of the wall, that is, in the area under POLISARIO control. As LMA Director stresses, “we are working in direct support of MINURSO and I don’t think we would really be able to work without MINURSO (...) We are working very closely together, we rely on them, [and] we do have the UN’s political support”. It is evident that MINURSO, after more than 15 years of presence in one of the most mine and UXO contaminated territories in the world, marked by a persistent lack of inter-

est, seems to be now taking a more proactive approach to the problem which should be welcomed and encouraged.

However, it is entirely fair to stress that LMA is not at present a “contractor” as such of MINURSO (nor any other UN agency). Furthermore, the current activities do not have their origin in any UN initiative, but on the initial contacts between two British NGOs, LMA and Sandblast, with the POLISARIO and the positive attitude of the latter. But POLISARIO’s crucial cooperation and support has been always entirely elapsing from the previous Secretary General’s narratives. On the ground, however, the dedicated UN officials have a clearer image of what is and is not possible to do with the current mandate, military agreements, funding and political support, and recognise that, in broad terms, they are handcuffed to liaise and seek agreements with the parties to develop any extensive and systematic activity. The initiative, or at least the green light, corresponds ultimately to the two *de facto* administrative forces of the territory: Morocco, west of the wall, and the POLISARIO, east of the wall, without whose approval no far reaching activities can be carried out in the areas under their respective control. In fact, what the Military Agreement No.3, signed on the 12th of March 1999 between MINURSO and the two parties, establishes is precisely the need and will of such cooperation between MINURSO and the parties.

Therefore, and without underestimating the crucial and essential role played by MINURSO, the key element to take into account is the completely different attitude that the two parties have had regarding the landmine problem. While Morocco has not yet signed the Ottawa Treaty to Ban Mines, the POLISARIO has signed the Geneva Call and has already carried out the two first phases of the destruction of its anti-personal landmine stockpiles (in February 2006 and 2007, destroying in total 6642 mines). While, up until now, no independent international organisation has been allowed to work in the surveying, marking and demining of the areas under Moroccan control, LMA is working in the areas under POLISARIO control, receives full political and logistical support from the Saharawi authorities and is permitted to work and move independently.

Rabat’s souk policy of bargaining and blackmailing regarding the landmine problem was expressed very plainly in November 2005 at the 6th Meeting of State Parties to the Mine Ban Treaty, by Zohour Alaoui, the Director of the UN and International Organizations Department of the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In his statement to explain the Moroccan rejection to sign the Mine Ban Treaty, he said openly that “[f]ormal adherence to the Ottawa Convention is a strategic objective. The achievement of this objective is intimately linked to the preservation of its territorial integrity and to the protection of its national security. This provisional impediment will disappear as soon as a

final and mutually acceptable political solution is achieved". In other words, as long as the Moroccan occupation of the Western Sahara was not legitimised by the international community Rabat will not formally adhere to the international treaties to ban the use of landmines. Nonetheless, the activities initiated in the area under POLISARIO control are creating a mounting pressure in Rabat, especially now that they are putting all their diplomatic weight into promoting internationally a "political solution" for the conflict in the form of an autonomy plan that excludes the option of independence. In this context of diplomatic crusade, Rabat has claimed that the Royal Moroccan Army (RMA) has recently initiated some large scale demining operations in the areas under its control.

This well-timed initiative, however, seems very suspicious in the light of Moroccan renewed military effort in the area, increasing building and fortification works and recent movements of the RMA along the wall. Some Saharawi military and intelligence sources go as far as to suggest that the Moroccan Army might have been recently laying new mines along the exterior wall. One high-ranking Saharawi military officer gives an example: "we have recently found three landmines manufactured in 2001 outside the wall...and I can guarantee that we did not put them there...We are looking in to it, but if it is confirmed that they have been planted by Morocco - and I stress that we have not planted them - this would be a very serious violation of the ceasefire".

These three landmines are of a type never previously used in the Western Sahara.

This month, the UN Security Council will meet again to discuss, and predictably to renew for 6 months, its involvement in the Western Sahara, and the new UN Secretary General will deliver his first report on the issue. MINURSO's increasing role regarding the landmine problem should be positively acknowledged and hopefully, the success of the current activities carried out by LMA, in close collaboration with MINURSO and the POLISARIO, will encourage both the Security Council and donor countries and organisations to support politically and economically the continuation and extension of activities. There is much that can and should be delivered in the future to make the Western Sahara a safer place to live. But this is also the time to acknowledge the proactive, constructive and crucial role that the POLISARIO has played in this field, as opposed to the hesitant attitude, if not a policy of active blackmailing of the international community, developed by Rabat. This is the time to denounce that Rabat has not yet signed the Ottawa Treaty. This is also the time for the extension of activities to the areas controlled by Morocco. And by the extension of activities we do not mean the claims by one of the parties of activities allegedly carried out unilaterally and not verified independently, but the presence in the areas west of the wall of international organisations that could work independently in the same conditions and with the same freedom of

movement that they enjoyed east of the wall.

When looking at the Western Sahara conflict since 1991, one gets the distinct impression that only one of the contending parties gives, while only the other is rewarded by the UN. This is the time for such a dynamic to change if the international community does not want to witness a dangerous deterioration of the situation in the region very soon. This is the time for the UN to stop looking with an indifferent gaze to the Western Sahara. The international community should also understand that the status quo is not a solution.

The main objective of the UN's presence in the territory is not to monitor indefinitely a ceasefire that leads nowhere, to develop mine clearance activities or to manage a humanitarian program of family visits. Although important, these activities alone do not justify in themselves MINURSO's presence in the territory if they are not subordinated to a renewed determination to guarantee the definitive decolonisation of the territory, according to the existing plans and the UN Charter. This is the time for the UN to organise a self-determination referendum or to acknowledge one more failure and to go.