

MACC DEMINERS PROTECT UN MILITARY OBSERVERS FROM LANDMINES AND ERW IN WESTERN SAHARA



AOAV/Mechem Technical Advisor briefs MINURSO UNMOs in Mijek, Western Sahara

“During my military career in the Honduran Army, I heard about peacekeeping operations within the UN. I joined the UN because this kind of job gives me the chance to contribute to the peace process in different parts of the world,” says Major Jose Amador, a United Nations Military Observer (UNMO) working in Mijek, Western Sahara. Major Amador is just one of over 200 UNMOS from 29 countries striving to ensure that MINURSO continues to meet its mandate in Western Sahara.

As UNMOs must travel thousands of kilometres per month in the course of their duties, the MINURSO Mine Action Coordination Centre (MACC) and its implementing partner, Action on Armed Violence (AOAV)/Mechem works to protect UN military personnel along with civilians from the dangers of landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW) throughout the territory.

According to the Landmine and Cluster Munitions Monitor, Western Sahara is one of the most heavily mined territories in the world. Since 1975, landmines and ERW have reportedly killed and injured over 2,500 people. These figures are likely to be much higher due to under reporting. The most recent landmine-related accident involving UN personnel occurred in 2009 in Oum Dreyga. Fortunately, no one was injured or killed in that accident. Much of the contamination is on the east side of the berm where 5 out of 9 MINURSO Team Sites are currently located. On average, UNMOs conduct 750 ground patrols and 50 helicopter reccees covering 100,000 km of routes per month on both sides of the berm. Therefore, the efforts of the MACC are integral to the safety of UN patrols that are carried out on a daily basis.

As UNMOs are able to work without fear of the threat of such devices, the Mission is able to fulfil its obligations to the people of Western Sahara. In addition to clearing tracks for UNMO patrols which serve to facilitate the compliance of Military Agreements, the MACC also provides landmine safety training to an estimated 250 UN military and civilian staff members per year. Refresher trainings are also provided at Team Sites throughout the territory. Such trainings serve to ensure that all MINURSO staff are fully aware of



Demonstration of MineWolf 330 demining machine in Mijek, Western Sahara

landmine/ERW threats throughout the territory so that they can conduct their duties safely and securely.

Following his first visit to an AOAV/Mechem demining site in Mijek this past June, Major Amador said, “the MACC continuously shares information, helping UNMOs to avoid suspected mined areas and conduct operations in a safe manner. AOAV is also an excellent support for demining activities as they are clearing minefields and dangerous areas with the purpose to help the civilian people of Western Sahara.” During this particular visit, AOAV/Mechem personnel briefed Major Amador, along with 3 of his colleagues from Russia, Argentina and Egypt on landmine and ERW threats in their area of operation and provided a hands-on demonstration of mechanical demining operations. The MACC and AOAV/Mechem plans to host future visits which ultimately strengthen coordination and communication between demining teams and MINURSO personnel.

Major Amador will leave MINURSO in January 2013 and resume his career in the Honduran Army. As he reflects on the many challenges and successes he has experienced while serving as an UNMO, he says “the job is not easy, but the final, the most important task is for UNMOs to help the people.” The MACC in partnership with AOAV/Mechem, and with support from MINURSO will continue to further the important work of UNMOs like Major Amador.

The MINURSO MACC, established in 2008, works to reduce the threat and impact of mines and explosive remnants of war throughout Western Sahara. Thanks to financial support from the MINURSO Assessed Budget, along with the Governments of Spain and the Netherlands, and the City of Barcelona, the MACC and its implementing partner, AOAV/Mechem have cleared over 23.6 million sqm of land, increasing livelihoods opportunities for the local population and making UN patrols safer.