



Security Council

Distr.: General
1 October 2021

Original: English

Situation concerning Western Sahara

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [2548 \(2020\)](#), by which the Council extended the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) until 31 October 2021 and requested me to submit a report on the situation in Western Sahara before the end of the mandate period. The report covers developments that have occurred between 1 September 2020 and 31 August 2021 since the issuance of my previous report of 23 September 2020 ([S/2020/938](#)) and describes the situation on the ground, the status of political negotiations on Western Sahara, the implementation of resolution [2548 \(2020\)](#) and the existing challenges to the Mission's operations and steps taken to address them.

II. Recent developments

2. The situation in Western Sahara has significantly deteriorated since my previous report. The resumption of hostilities between Morocco and the Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguía el-Hamra y de Río de Oro (Frente POLISARIO) and the ongoing coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic have considerably changed the operational environment of MINURSO, limiting the Mission's ability to implement its mandate.

3. Between 18 and 29 October 2020, MINURSO observed nine generally peaceful protests by groups of up to 80 Sahrawi civilians, including women and children, near the berm and at MINURSO team sites in Agwanit, Bir Lahlou, Mehaires, Mijek and Tifariti. The demonstrators conveyed to MINURSO a number of demands, including that "a referendum be held" and a solution be found to the status of the Territory; that the road in the buffer strip at Guerguerat be permanently closed; and that "Sahrawi political prisoners be released from Moroccan jails". In each instance, the protests dispersed peacefully on the same day without security incidents.

4. On 21 October 2020, MINURSO observed that a group of approximately 50 people, including women and at least 1 child, were present in the buffer strip at Guerguerat. Demonstrators set up a roadblock at the paved portion of the road inside the buffer strip, obstructing all traffic between the Territory and Mauritania. The same



day, MINURSO implemented enhanced monitoring measures to keep abreast of developments and liaised with the parties to call for calm.

5. On the same day, in a letter addressed to my Special Representative for Western Sahara, the Moroccan Coordinator with MINURSO expressed concern regarding the demonstration “sent by the Frente POLISARIO” and called on my Special Representative to “demand the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of polissario from the buffer strip”, while noting that Morocco “reserve[d] the right to take any necessary actions, including intervention on the ground, to ensure the free circulation of civilian and commercial traffic and to re-establish the status quo ante”. In a written communication to my Special Representative on the same day, the Frente POLISARIO representative in New York, then also in his capacity as Acting Coordinator with MINURSO, denied their involvement in the demonstration.

6. On 22 October, in addition to the daily presence of military observers and regular helicopter reconnaissance, MINURSO deployed a civilian-military team to the buffer strip at Guerguerat to help defuse tensions. MINURSO was obstructed by the protestors from moving beyond the roadblocks to conduct a full on-the-ground verification of the area. The protestors reiterated the demands that had been presented to MINURSO earlier in the month during the demonstrations east of the berm (see para. 3 above).

7. On 22 October, in a letter addressed to me, the Secretary-General of Frente POLISARIO, Brahim Ghali, stated that the “presence of Sahrawi civilians in the buffer strip at Guerguerat [was] not a violation of any military agreement”.

8. From 22 to 29 October, MINURSO helicopter reconnaissance over Guerguerat observed the presence in the buffer strip of up to 12 armed Frente POLISARIO personnel in military uniform and up to eight military-style light vehicles, two of which had mounted heavy weapons. The Frente POLISARIO representative in New York and then Acting Coordinator of Frente POLISARIO with MINURSO informed my Special Representative that these military elements were deployed exclusively to protect the civilian protestors. My Special Representative advised Frente POLISARIO that this would nonetheless be in violation of military agreement No. 1 and urged Frente POLISARIO to withdraw its military personnel and vehicles from the buffer strip. On 29 October, MINURSO aerial reconnaissance observed that some, but not all, of the vehicles had been withdrawn.

9. Starting on 26 October, MINURSO helicopter reconnaissance observed 16 Royal Moroccan Army vehicles west of the berm, carrying heavy-duty earth-moving machinery in the direction of Guerguerat. To reduce tensions, and as no construction or maintenance requests had been authorized in the Bir Gandouz sector at the time, the Mission, in accordance with its role under military agreement No. 1, requested that the Royal Moroccan Army withdraw the equipment. The Royal Moroccan Army assured MINURSO that it would comply, although no withdrawal was observed.

10. On 6 November, MINURSO helicopter reconnaissance observed the arrival of a Royal Moroccan Army military force comprising approximately 250 vehicles, many with heavy weapons, about 12 km north-east of Guerguerat in the area defined under military agreement No. 1 as the restricted area. MINURSO advised the Royal Moroccan Army that military agreement No. 1 stipulated that such concentrations of forces in that area would constitute a violation and therefore urged the Army to withdraw.

11. On 7 November, King Mohammed VI of Morocco delivered a speech on the occasion of the forty-fifth anniversary of the Green March rejecting the “unacceptable practices designed to disrupt the normal flow of traffic between Morocco and Mauritania” and asserting that Morocco would “respond, with the utmost firmness

and resolve, to any practices or attempts designed to undermine the security and stability of its southern provinces”.

12. In a letter dated 12 November, King Mohammed VI urged me to “redouble” my efforts to find a prompt and definitive end to the “acts of intolerable and destabilizing provocations” by Frente POLISARIO in the buffer strip at Guerguerat. The letter added that “the Kingdom of Morocco...by virtue of its responsibilities and in full compliance with international legality, reserve[d] the right to act, at the time and in the manner it deem[ed] necessary, in order to safeguard the status of the zone and restore free movement”.

13. On the morning of 13 November, MINURSO observed the protestors in the buffer strip at Guerguerat and the armed Frente POLISARIO elements abruptly departing the site of the demonstration. Shortly thereafter, an exchange of fire was heard, including two gunshots from the direction of Frente POLISARIO positions and heavy weapons fire from the direction of the berm adjacent to where the Royal Moroccan Army had deployed (see paras. 9 and 10 above). Royal Moroccan Army elements were then observed arriving at the site the protestors had held in the buffer strip. No casualties were reported to MINURSO from the day’s events. That evening, MINURSO helicopter reconnaissance, which could not fly earlier due to the live-fire conditions, observed three new breaches across the berm south-east of Guerguerat. Approximately 6 km east of the paved road, MINURSO helicopter reconnaissance observed that Royal Moroccan Army bulldozers had begun constructing a new sand wall through the buffer strip.

14. In a letter addressed to me the same day, Mr. Ghali condemned “the brutal attack on unarmed Sahrawi civilians” noting that “the military operation by Moroccan forces [was] an act of aggression and a flagrant violation of the ceasefire”, which “the United Nations and the Security Council should condemn in the strongest terms”. In a statement issued the same day, the Moroccan Minister for Foreign Affairs noted that Moroccan actions at Guerguerat took place in a “peaceful manner, without clashes or threat to the safety of civilians”.

15. On 14 November, Mr. Ghali issued a “decree” declaring “an end of [the Frente POLISARIO] commitment to the ceasefire”, and “the consequent resumption of armed struggle in defence of the legitimate rights of [the Sahrawi] people”.

16. Since then, low-intensity hostilities have continued, with regular reports by the Royal Moroccan Army and Frente POLISARIO of shots fired across the berm. According to MINURSO calculations based on reporting by the parties, the incidence of reported firing has decreased since January and has primarily been concentrated in the north of the Territory near Mahbas. While MINURSO did not identify major discrepancies in the number and the location of the firing incidents reported by the parties, their impact is the subject of contradicting claims. Frente POLISARIO has regularly claimed in their communiqués to be inflicting significant damage to the Moroccan side. Morocco has publicly refuted such claims and the Royal Moroccan Army has conveyed to MINURSO that they only return fire “in cases of direct threat against [Royal Moroccan Army] troops” and “always in proportion to actions” of Frente POLISARIO. On 1 February, the Frente POLISARIO Coordinator stated in a written communication to MINURSO that “since 13 November 2020, the entire Territory of Western Sahara has become a zone of open war”. In a letter addressed to me on 23 February, the Permanent Representative of Morocco to the United Nations asserted that there was a “total absence of any armed conflict”.

17. During the reporting period, Bahrain, Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea, Eswatini, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Jordan, Libya, Malawi, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Suriname, the United Arab Emirates and Zambia inaugurated or announced their intention to inaugurate “Consulates General” in Laayoune or Dakhla. In letters

addressed to me on 23 October 2020, 28 October 2020, 4 November 2020, 15 December 2020, 17 December 2020, 19 December 2020, 5 March 2021, 6 April 2021 and 30 August 2021, Mr. Ghali called these diplomatic representations a “violation of international law and...breach of the international legal status of Western Sahara as a Non-Self-Governing Territory”.

18. On 10 December 2020, in a presidential proclamation, the United States of America recognized “Moroccan sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara territory” and reaffirmed its “support for Morocco’s serious, credible and realistic autonomy proposal as the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the dispute”. In a letter sent on 17 December, the Acting Coordinator of Frente POLISARIO underscored that the proclamation was “a regrettable and unilateral position that violate[d] the [United Nations] Charter and resolutions”. On 24 December, the United States announced that it would inaugurate a “virtual presence post for Western Sahara”.

19. West of the berm, Morocco continued investing in infrastructure development during the reporting period. On 30 April 2021, Moroccan authorities announced the winner of a bid to construct the Dakhla Atlantic Port and construction is now under way. Furthermore, work on building an expressway linking Tiznit in Morocco to Dakhla continued. On 24 and 26 June, diplomatic delegations from Jordan, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Yemen visited Dakhla and Laayoune to explore investment opportunities. Frente POLISARIO considers such investments an attempt “to consolidate and normalize [the] military occupation and the illegal annexation of parts of Western Sahara” (S/2020/938, para. 8).

20. On 24 August, Algeria announced it was severing diplomatic relations with Morocco, citing, inter alia, “Morocco’s abandonment of the commitment made by King Hassan II in a joint communiqué”¹ to support “a just and final solution to the Western Sahara conflict through holding a free and fair referendum that allows the Sahrawi people to decide their future in full credibility and without any restraints”. The same day, the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement taking note of “the unilateral decision of Algeria to sever diplomatic relations with Morocco”, which it “regret[ted] as completely unjustified”.

21. On 27 August, I announced the appointment of Alexander Ivanko (Russian Federation) as my new Special Representative for Western Sahara and Head of MINURSO, to succeed Colin Stewart (Canada), who completed his assignment on 26 August.

III. Political activities

22. On 30 October 2020, the same day as the adoption by the Security Council of resolution 2548 (2020), Frente POLISARIO issued a press release reaffirming its decision of 30 October 2019 to “reconsider its engagement” in the political process on Western Sahara and stating that it would “intensify the national liberation struggle in face of inaction of the United Nations to ensure MINURSO implementation of its mandate”.

23. In the days leading up to the events of 13 November 2020, the United Nations was involved in multiple initiatives and contacts with the parties, neighbours and other stakeholders to avoid an escalation of the situation and to warn against violations of the ceasefire and the serious consequences of any changes to the status quo. On 19 November, I wrote to King Mohammed VI urging Morocco to exercise maximal restraint to avoid further escalation and to return to the status quo ante. On

¹ For the text of the joint communiqué issued by Algeria and Morocco on 16 May 1988, see [A/43/366](#), annex.

the same day, in a letter to Mr. Ghali, I urged Frente POLISARIO to avoid any further escalation and allow space for the political process to resume. Responding to my letter, on 21 November, King Mohammed VI asserted that the actions of Morocco at Guerguerat were “irreversible” while noting that Morocco remained “committed to the ceasefire”. Separately, in a letter to me on 2 December 2020, Mr. Ghali stated that Frente POLISARIO “ha[d] been left with no other option but to exercise its sacred right to self-defence”.

IV. Activities of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara

A. Operational activities

24. The overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on MINURSO operational activities remained moderate. At its headquarters in Laayoune, MINURSO implemented telecommuting wherever feasible. On 1 July 2021, the Mission started implementing a return-to-work plan, allowing up to 75 per cent of its staff to resume work in the MINURSO headquarters offices. Owing to an upsurge in COVID-19 cases in the Territory in August, return-to-work arrangements have been suspended until further notice. On 30 August 2021, MINURSO recorded the first death of a staff member from the virus. Rotations, repatriations and deployments of uniformed personnel resumed in August 2020, in close cooperation with the Secretariat and in collaboration with Morocco, Frente POLISARIO and Member States. Despite persisting difficulties in international travel and other pandemic-related restrictions, the rotation of 174 military observers was completed during the reporting period.

25. The Government of Morocco, Frente POLISARIO and the Government of Algeria cooperated fully with MINURSO during the pandemic. The Governments of Morocco and Algeria supported MINURSO civilian and military staff travelling to and from their duty stations in the Territory and in Tindouf, Algeria, by granting access to special international commercial flights. Since February 2021, MINURSO military and civilian staff have begun receiving vaccinations provided in the Territory west of the berm by the Royal Moroccan Army and the Ministry of Health of Morocco, and in Tindouf by the Algerian health authorities. As at 31 August, 76 per cent of all international civilian and 80 per cent of military staff had received both doses of the vaccine.

26. As at 31 August, the military component of MINURSO consisted of 196 personnel, 43 of them women. MINURSO has continually strengthened its efforts to improve its gender balance. As a result, the percentage of women observers has increased from less than 5 per cent in 2016 ([S/2016/355](#), para. 31) to 24 per cent, although recruitment slowed considerably during the COVID-19 pandemic. From 1 September 2020 to 31 August 2021, MINURSO conducted approximately 393,411 km of ground patrols and 975 hours of air patrols. MINURSO team sites visited on average 970 headquarters, units, subunits, strong points and observation posts east and west of the berm on a monthly basis for a total of 9,516 visits west of the berm and 2,125 visits east of the berm by ground or air patrols, including 14 investigations.

27. West of the berm, the Royal Moroccan Army regularly reiterated to MINURSO its commitment, in principle, to the ceasefire, while exercising the right to respond to actions by Frente POLISARIO. MINURSO continued to exercise its freedom of movement west of the berm, although, owing to security and safety concerns, ground patrols and helicopter reconnaissance flights were only able to operate at a safe distance of initially 30 km and 15 km away from the berm, respectively, until 19 July,

when limited ground patrols resumed to up to 2 km from the berm in areas where no exchanges of fire were reported. Cooperation and communications at the strategic level between the MINURSO Force Commander and the Commander of the Royal Moroccan Army in the southern sector in Agadir, Morocco, remained unaltered.

28. East of the berm, MINURSO has encountered significant limitations to its freedom of movement. In his letter of 1 February (see para. 16 above), the Frente POLISARIO Coordinator informed MINURSO that, to “ensure the security and safety of MINURSO personnel”, there was “reasonable ground for believing that conducting ground convoys remain[ed] highly risky and therefore inadvisable”. The same was reiterated in a letter from the Staff Coordinator of the Frente POLISARIO military forces to the MINURSO Force Commander on 1 June.

29. As a result, MINURSO has been unable to conduct ground patrols beyond a 20 km radius from each team site east of the berm, or any helicopter reconnaissance. Ground patrols have also not been possible inside the units of Frente POLISARIO and have been required to remain at least 200 m from them. Helicopter resupply flights to team sites have been allowed at relatively regular intervals, approximately twice a month, subject to prior approval by Frente POLISARIO before each flight. No logistical and maintenance ground convoys have been permitted since 13 November 2020. MINURSO has reduced the number of military observers in its team sites east of the berm by 30 per cent. As at 31 August 2021, the MINURSO Force Commander has been unable to establish direct contact with the leadership of the Frente POLISARIO armed forces, and all communications have been conducted in writing only.

30. My Special Representative for Western Sahara and the MINURSO Force Commander repeatedly protested these restrictions. In numerous written communications, Frente POLISARIO justified these measures as necessary to ensure the safety and security of MINURSO personnel while the “state of war” persisted.

31. As a result of these limitations, MINURSO was unable to directly observe the exchange of fire across the berm or verify the specific details of individual incidents. Instead, the Mission relied on information provided daily by the parties, which it could not independently verify.

32. MINURSO continued complementing its observation activity with the use of geospatial imagery and analysis obtained through bilateral support from the European Union and the United States, in line with Action for Peacekeeping commitments on performance.

33. Between 1 September 2020 and 12 November 2020, the violations working group of MINURSO did not declare any violations of military agreement No. 1. The mechanism was suspended following the events of November 2020, and possible violations by the parties since that date have not been formally addressed. On 15 September 2020, Frente POLISARIO reported two reconnaissance flights by the Royal Moroccan Army in Bir Lahlou. On 17 November, Frente POLISARIO reported firing by the Royal Moroccan Army against one of its observation posts in Mijek. MINURSO was unable to independently verify these reports.

34. During the reporting period, MINURSO received 46 requests for approval for maintenance and construction works (10 for maintenance of the berm, 4 for renovations, 12 for construction and 20 for time extensions) from the Royal Moroccan Army and none from Frente POLISARIO. Of the requests, 24 were approved, 15 were not approved and 7 remain pending. The Royal Moroccan Army also sent MINURSO 192 notifications of activities during the reporting period, referencing military agreement No. 1, while Frente POLISARIO sent 1 prior to 13 November 2020.

35. The Mission continued to observe and record reports of any changes in the military presence and installations by the parties despite the suspension of the violations working group. With the construction of an approximately 20 km long new sand wall at Guerguerat, the Royal Moroccan Army has consolidated its presence over some 40 km² of land in the buffer strip. The portion of the road that was left unpaved in 2016 has since been upgraded, but not paved. MINURSO has been unable to confirm reports by Frente POLISARIO that new mines were laid in the area.

36. On 15 November 2020, MINURSO received reports of the relocation of a number of artillery pieces from Tifariti by Frente POLISARIO military forces, while on 23 November, MINURSO observed that three motorized infantry battalions of the Royal Moroccan Army were relocated from Smara to Mahbas. As at 10 July 2021, two of the three Royal Moroccan Army battalions were observed to have returned to Smara, while one was reported by the Royal Moroccan Army to have reinforced Royal Moroccan Army positions along the berm (southeast of Mahbas).

37. Between 13 November 2020 and 31 August 2021, the Royal Moroccan Army reported to MINURSO 1,099 incidents involving firing from a distance against its units at or near the berm, 83 per cent of which were concentrated in Mahbas. The Royal Moroccan Army also reported 22 “infiltration attempts” at the berm and 724 reconnaissance flights by unmanned aerial vehicles operated by Frente POLISARIO, 88 per cent of which were reported in the Mahbas and Awsard areas. Through the analysis of satellite imagery, MINURSO identified sites that appeared to be impact craters caused by artillery fire on both sides of the berm. On-the-ground verification by MINURSO could not be conducted owing to the security situation.

38. During the same period, Frente POLISARIO issued regular communications regarding the alleged targeting of and attacks on Royal Moroccan Army positions along the berm. On 23 January 2021, MINURSO received reports of shelling by Frente POLISARIO in the Guerguerat area, which was confirmed by both parties. No casualties were reported. There were also reports in the Sahrawi media of attacks conducted by Royal Moroccan Army unmanned aerial vehicles: one on 6 April, which allegedly led to the death of the head of the “Gendarmerie” of Frente POLISARIO, Dah Al-Bendir, and another on 19 April, both near the Erni River in Tifariti. The Royal Moroccan Army denied the use of combat or surveillance drones east of the berm. MINURSO was unable to verify these reports.

39. On 8 February, Frente POLISARIO publicly claimed an attack on Royal Moroccan Army soldiers guarding the 2nd Battalion of the 9th Armoured Corps HQ, in Agha Sector, Morocco. On 11 February, the Prime Minister of Morocco, Saad-Eddine El Othmani, was reported in the media as having denied the alleged attack. On 21 August, the Frente POLISARIO representative in New York sent a letter to me stating that on 18 August, Morocco had fired upon a convoy of Sahrawi civilians east of the berm, destroying a truck.

B. Mine action

40. Events in the Territory significantly affected MINURSO mine action operations during the reporting period. On 3 October 2020, mine action activities resumed east of the berm, after they had been previously suspended at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic owing to the closure of the border between Algeria and Western Sahara on 20 March 2020 ([S/2020/938](#), para. 37). After only five weeks, regular mine action activities were once again suspended east of the berm as a result of the resumption of hostilities in November 2020.

41. During the reporting period, mine action activities were limited to an emergency explosive ordnance disposal response team conducting emergency disposal of

explosive ordnance, route verification and combined explosive ordnance risk education and COVID-19 prevention messaging for civilians. Owing to the suspension of operations, no land release activities could be conducted.

42. Despite significant challenges to its operations, mine action activities continued in order to mitigate the threats posed by landmines and explosive remnants of war, and route surveys were conducted to ensure the safety of United Nations personnel, logistical convoys and property. Vehicle-assisted surveys and enhanced community liaison activities covering an area of 13,680 km² were conducted, and eight new hazardous areas were identified. As at 31 August 2021, 42 of the 527 known cluster strike areas and 24 of the 61 known minefields remained to be addressed east of the berm. Also as at 31 August, the Mine Action Service had assessed 887.2 km of routes and facilitated the safe movement of military observers moving between MINURSO team sites.

43. The MINURSO mine action service, through its cooperation east of the berm with the Sahrawi Mine Action Coordination Office, remained in contact with Frente POLISARIO on matters related to mine action while continuing to provide the Office with technical assistance and programme and data management.

44. The MINURSO mine action service delivered 33 explosive ordnance risk education sessions for 176 MINURSO civilian and military personnel (137 men and 39 women) at Mission headquarters and at the team sites. Similar sessions were also conducted for 4,781 men, women, boys and girls east of the berm in Sahrawi refugee camps and at border crossings between the Territory and Algeria.

45. Despite these efforts, between 1 September 2020 and 31 July 2021 the Royal Moroccan Army reported 20 landmine and explosive remnants of war incidents that injured 4 civilians and 20 military personnel. East of the berm, one explosive remnant of war incident was recorded, resulting in the injury of one boy. These incidents were recorded in the Information Management System for Mine Action.

46. The Royal Moroccan Army reported the release of over 145 million m² of land west of the berm and the destruction of 1,014 items of explosive remnants of war and 31 anti-personnel and anti-tank mines. The Mission continued to promote enhanced cooperation between the Royal Moroccan Army and MINURSO mine action.

C. Security

47. The security environment in the four security areas of MINURSO (Laayoune, Tindouf, west of the berm and east of the berm) remained unpredictable. From 1 September 2020 to 15 July 2021, 406 security-related incidents were reported, of which only 11 affected United Nations personnel, premises and assets. These incidents included five cases of harassment of United Nations personnel, three of which were against women in Laayoune. The 11 incidents affecting United Nations personnel represent an 81 per cent decrease compared with the previous year, owing primarily to limited movements during the lockdown period.

48. The security situation in the Mission's area of operations near the berm changed significantly after November 2020. In this area, the principal threat to the United Nations was assessed as stemming from possible non-targeted incidents, such as crossfire or collateral damage. Nevertheless, both sides have reaffirmed their commitment to the safety and security of MINURSO personnel and premises.

49. To address the new security concerns, the Mission introduced a number of preventative measures. Ground patrols and helicopter reconnaissance west of the berm maintained a safe distance from the live-fire areas. East of the berm, existing restrictions to ground patrols and helicopter reconnaissance flights also contributed

to a lower security risk. Flights that did occur were carefully coordinated with both sides. Based on the assessed residual risk to United Nations security management system personnel, operations and installations, the general threat assessment levels of the four security areas (Laayoune, Tindouf, west of the berm and east of the berm) remained unchanged at low to moderate.

50. The presence of drug smugglers and other criminal elements in the Territory, as well as the risk of possible terrorist attacks, remained of concern (S/2020/938, paras. 44 and 45).

51. Morocco and Frente POLISARIO retained primary responsibility for the safety and security of United Nations personnel, assets and resources west and east of the berm, respectively, and MINURSO continued to have confidence in the commitment and capability of both parties. The sharing of security-related information by interlocutors remained limited, which continued to affect the ability of MINURSO to maintain its own situational awareness.

D. Substantive civilian activities

52. In accordance with its mandate, MINURSO continued to monitor, analyse and report on developments in and affecting Western Sahara. The Mission's liaison office in Tindouf followed developments in and around the Sahrawi refugee camps as part of this analysis.

53. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, representatives of Member States could not visit MINURSO offices in Laayoune and in Tindouf as regularly as before. My Special Representative continued to regularly brief Member States in Rabat and in New York by videoconference and in person when feasible.

54. In the refugee camps near Tindouf, MINURSO and United Nations humanitarian staff maintained unimpeded access to the refugees and other local and international interlocutors. However, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, field visits to the camps by MINURSO and United Nations humanitarian personnel were reduced to the provision of essential needs. MINURSO continued its efforts to maintain its analysis and early warning capabilities by monitoring information from local, humanitarian and social media sources.

55. During the reporting period, in line with the Action for Peacekeeping initiative, MINURSO continued implementation of the Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System. Following the events of November 2020, MINURSO used the System to assess the changed context and revised its integrated mission plan, collected and analysed data to monitor progress towards that plan and assessed its performance in delivering mandated tasks and its impact in its area of responsibility.

E. Challenges to the operations of the Mission

56. The Mission continued to experience limitations in its operational activities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Worldwide travel restrictions posed challenges to rotations and the repatriation and deployment of military personnel and the travel of international civilian staff in and out of the Mission area. Movements of MINURSO personnel between Laayoune and Tindouf remained limited, and regular MINURSO flights have been suspended since March 2020 between the two locations. Operational activities continued at a reduced rate while logistics and maintenance services continued on the basis of amended arrangements (S/2020/938, para. 17).

57. As assessed through the Comprehensive Planning and Performance Assessment System in June, overall mandate implementation was significantly affected by the events of November 2020, which are considered likely to have led to an increase in explosive remnants of war across the Territory, including in areas previously deemed safe, posing a threat to MINURSO personnel and logistical convoys as well as to the general public.

58. Constraints to the MINURSO logistical supply and maintenance chain to team sites east of the berm became increasingly challenging. Since November 2020, no logistical and maintenance ground convoys have been permitted east of the berm by Frente POLISARIO, which cites security concerns. This has affected the delivery of fuel, the repair and maintenance of equipment and accommodations, the rotation of vehicles and the transportation of heavy equipment that cannot be airlifted. The limitations to resupply flights to MINURSO team sites east of the berm (see para. 28 above) have also affected food resupply and the provision of technical support, including in the areas of preventative maintenance of vehicles, generators and infrastructure. MINURSO continued to actively engage with Frente POLISARIO to gain the necessary logistical access to the team sites east of the berm.

59. Lack of access to the areas near the berm where hostilities were ongoing continued to pose significant challenges to MINURSO observation activities, which could only be partially compensated for with the use of satellite imagery.

60. All flights between Laayoune and Tindouf have been discontinued since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting the transportation of equipment and supplies to the MINURSO liaison office in Tindouf as well as the movement of international personnel between Tindouf and Laayoune.

61. The Mission's lack of access to local interlocutors west of the berm continued to severely limit its ability to independently collect reliable situational awareness information and to assess and report on developments across its area of responsibility.

62. MINURSO personnel, operations and assets remained vulnerable to threats related to terrorism and organized crime, especially in the vast uninhabited desert area east of the berm.

63. The general perception by the population of the Mission's impartiality also continued to be affected by the requirement of Morocco that MINURSO use Moroccan vehicle number plates west of the berm, in contravention of the status-of-mission agreement. In March 2014, my Special Representative reached a verbal agreement with the Government of Morocco to gradually replace Moroccan licence plates with United Nations licence plates (S/2014/258, para. 50). The agreement has yet to be implemented. This pending issue, together with the stamping of MINURSO passports by Morocco, continues to be the subject of frequent objections from Frente POLISARIO.

V. Humanitarian activities and human rights

A. Persons unaccounted for in the conflict

64. The question of individuals who are still unaccounted for, in relation to past hostilities, remained a major humanitarian concern. The International Committee of the Red Cross remained ready to act as a neutral intermediary between the parties and play an advisory role on the issue.

B. Assistance to the protection of Western Saharan refugees

65. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) continued to provide international protection and, together with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Food Programme (WFP), delivered humanitarian assistance to the Sahrawi refugees living in the five camps near Tindouf, Algeria.

66. The already fragile socioeconomic situation in the camps further deteriorated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2021, the camps were affected by a second wave, and in mid-July a third wave, the worst to date, resulting in more than 1,040 cases, including 48 fatalities. Camp-based Sahrawi refugees continued to report widespread losses of income, jobs and shortages of cash, resulting in reduced purchasing power and thus increased difficulties in addressing their basic needs. Access to health, sanitation, energy and food were of pressing concern among the refugee population. The overall nutritional situation of the Sahrawi refugees remained precarious as the related indicators have steadily declined over the years. The results of a WFP-led post-distribution monitoring exercise of over 500 refugee households in October 2020 showed an increase in the rate of families that had borderline and poor food consumption scores, with 31.5 per cent of households being borderline and 5.2 per cent being poor, compared with 1.2 per cent the previous year.

67. Throughout the COVID-19 waves, humanitarian actors maintained the delivery of essential, life-saving assistance to Sahrawi refugees. To strengthen the testing capacities in the camps and prevent the further spread of COVID-19, UNHCR provided 10,000 rapid antigen tests as well as personal protective equipment. Humanitarian actors operating in the camps have also ensured the regular disinfection of public spaces and households and the provision of soap, bleach and hydroalcoholic gel as well as isolation structures since the onset of the pandemic. To adapt health facilities to the new COVID-19 context, UNHCR rehabilitated and equipped the central hospital of Rabouni, including a central oxygen system to service key wards, and finished the construction of a new hospital in Boujdour camp. In addition, to curb the spread of COVID-19 and increase the active participation of refugee women in educational, professional and social activities, UNHCR and partners distributed hygiene kits to women and girls of reproductive age.

68. UNHCR and WFP continued to work together to mitigate and prevent rising malnutrition among the vulnerable population, especially pregnant and lactating women, and children. WFP provided a monthly food basket of commodities and fresh food vouchers as well as school meals for almost 40,000 refugee children. These efforts were complemented by the distribution by UNHCR of fresh food during the month of Ramadan, along with the monthly distribution of yeast and core relief items such as cooking gas refills and new, safe and efficient cooking stoves. This joint response helped diversify the diets of the refugee population, though they continued to be almost entirely dependent on humanitarian assistance. New procedures for the distribution of food and vouchers in compliance with social distancing guidelines have been implemented.

69. UNICEF provided support for maternal and child health programmes in the Sahrawi refugee camps, including capacity-building for teachers, the construction of three lower secondary schools and a primary school in the camps of Laayoune, Smara and Dakhla, and the provision of school kits. UNICEF also supported the setting up of distance learning courses through local television and conducted an analysis on out-of-school children and the education management information system, which will serve as the foundation for a five-year strategy for the Sahrawi education sector. To

support social distancing measures at schools, UNHCR procured additional textbooks, with the aim of achieving the ratio of one book per child.

70. Innovative livelihood activities such as a fish farm and other agriculture projects continued to be implemented by WFP. To improve refugees' access to water and reduce the need for water trucking, UNHCR developed a sustainable water distribution network in Awsard camp. As a result, water is being adequately stored and health conditions in the camp have improved significantly.

71. In 2020, there was a notable increase in humanitarian contributions following the launch of the COVID-19 joint appeal for approximately \$15 million issued by UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF and five non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in April 2020. The three agencies received approximately 60 per cent of their overall needs in response to the COVID-19 situation. Nevertheless, the programme for the camps in Tindouf remains extremely vulnerable.

C. Confidence-building measures

72. The confidence-building measures, pursuant to Security Council resolution [1282 \(1999\)](#) and subsequent resolutions, to allow family links between Sahrawi refugees in the Tindouf camps and their communities of origin in the Territory of Western Sahara, remained on hold.

D. Human rights

73. In its resolution [2548 \(2020\)](#), the Security Council strongly encouraged enhancing cooperation with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), including through facilitating visits to the region. OHCHR was unable to conduct any visits to the region for the sixth consecutive year. Lack of access by OHCHR to Western Sahara continued to result in substantial gaps in human rights monitoring in the Territory.

74. OHCHR remained concerned by reports of undue restrictions imposed by Morocco on the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association in Western Sahara, especially following the developments in November 2020,² as well as reports of unnecessary and disproportionate use of force by Moroccan security forces to disperse protests and the conduct of house raids without warrants, arbitrary arrests and detention, unlawful and arbitrary surveillance, harassment, intimidation and destruction of property. Special procedure mandate holders of the Human Rights Council sent three communications in relation to allegations of torture and ill-treatment of protestors, journalists, bloggers, lawyers and human rights defenders during the reporting period.³ On 1 July 2021, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders issued a press release calling on Morocco to stop targeting human rights defenders and journalists in Western Sahara, and allow them to work without reprisals.⁴ The press release further referred to the case of a human rights defender who was allegedly kept under house arrest for months in Laayoune, physically and sexually assaulted, and subjected to unlawful and arbitrary surveillance by Moroccan security forces.

² See also [A/HRC/48/28](#), annex II.

³ See special procedure mandate holders' allegation letters JAL MAR 5/2020 and the response of the Government of Morocco, JAL MAR 4/2021 and urgent appeal letter JUA MAR 5/2021.

⁴ See "Morocco: UN human rights expert decries "clampdown" on human rights defenders", 1 July 2021. Available at www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=27244.

75. On 25 November 2020, the Moroccan Court of Cassation upheld the 2017 Rabat Court of Appeal's decision, which found the Gdeim Izik group of prisoners guilty of the deaths of 11 security force members in clashes that occurred during the dismantling of the Gdeim Izik camp. Members of this group reportedly went on hunger strikes on several occasions to protest their ill-treatment, including solitary confinement and the lack of medical care provided to them and to other prisoners. Reportedly, these prisoners were kept incommunicado and prevented from communicating with relatives, legal representatives and others.

76. On 28 July 2021, I received a letter from Frente POLISARIO on "the increasingly alarming situation in Western Sahara" and alleged human rights violations in Western Sahara in the aftermath of 13 November 2020. I received letters from Morocco on 9 August, 13 August and 31 August 2021 that provided information concerning efforts "to promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms" in the Territory. These included information on the specific incidents outlined in my regular reports to the Security Council, as well as information regarding "manoeuvres of political instrumentalization of the events of Gdeim Izik" and information regarding alleged human rights violations in the Tindouf camps.

77. On 28 July and 4 August 2021, Morocco provided information to OHCHR on the human rights situation and economic development in the Territory, including measures taken in response to COVID-19. Morocco also drew attention in these letters to alleged human rights violations perpetrated against civilians in the Tindouf camps.

78. The COVID-19 crisis continued to have an adverse impact on the human rights of Sahrawi civilians in the camps in Tindouf, which was reportedly compounded by limited access to humanitarian aid. While the effects of the pandemic further decreased the commercial and economic activities of the camps, OHCHR received allegations from Morocco and NGOs that Frente POLISARIO had misappropriated funds and aid in the camps. Special procedure mandate holders transmitted a communication in relation to the alleged extrajudicial executions of two Sahrawi refugees by the Algerian security forces at a mining site near the Dakhla camp in October 2020.⁵

VI. African Union

79. On 6 December 2020, the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union held its fourteenth extraordinary session on Silencing the Guns in Africa. In paragraph 15 of its decision 1 (XIV), the Assembly "expresse[d] deep concern over the escalating military tensions between Morocco and the Sahrawi Republic" in Guerguerat. The declaration, inter alia, "calls on the United Nations Secretary-General to appoint a Special Envoy for Western Sahara". On 9 March 2021, the African Union Peace and Security Council held its 984th meeting on the follow-up on the implementation of paragraph 15 of the decision on Silencing the Guns of the fourteenth extraordinary session.

VII. Financial aspects

80. By its resolution [2548 \(2020\)](#), the Security Council extended the mandate of MINURSO until 31 October 2021.

⁵ See, for example, special procedure mandate holders' allegation letter JAL DZA 7/2020 and the response of the Government of Algeria.

81. The General Assembly, in its resolution [75/305](#), appropriated the amount of \$56.5 million for the maintenance of the Mission for the period from 1 July 2021 to 30 June 2022. Should the Security Council decide to extend the mandate of MINURSO beyond 31 October 2021, the cost of maintaining the Mission would be limited to the amounts approved by the Assembly.

82. As at 27 August 2021, unpaid assessed contributions to the Special Account for MINURSO amounted to \$63.1 million. The total outstanding assessed contributions for all peacekeeping operations as at that date amounted to \$4,031.1 million.

83. Reimbursement of troop costs and the costs of contingent-owned major equipment and self-sustainment has been made for the period up to 31 March 2021 in accordance with the quarterly payment schedule.

VIII. Observations and recommendations

84. I am deeply concerned by the developments in Western Sahara during the reporting period. The status of the buffer strip as a demilitarized zone remains a cornerstone of a peaceful solution to the situation of Western Sahara. The resumption of hostilities between Morocco and Frente POLISARIO is a major setback to the achievement of a political solution to this longstanding dispute. Since then, daily incursions into this zone and hostilities between the parties have significantly undermined the arrangements that have been the basis for a ceasefire for the past 30 years. There remains a clear risk of escalation while hostilities persist. I therefore call on the parties to de-escalate the situation and immediately cease hostilities. In this context, the resumption of the political process could not be more urgent. It remains absolutely essential for the parties to agree on the appointment of a Personal Envoy to relaunch the political dialogue on Western Sahara.

85. I remain confident that a solution is possible despite the recent significant setback. Now more than ever, finding a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution that will provide for the self-determination of the people of Western Sahara in accordance with resolutions [2440 \(2018\)](#), [2468 \(2019\)](#), [2494 \(2019\)](#) and [2548 \(2020\)](#) requires strong political will from the parties, as well as from the international community. I reiterate my call on Security Council members, friends of Western Sahara and other relevant actors to encourage Morocco and Frente POLISARIO to engage in good faith and without preconditions in the political process as soon as my new Personal Envoy is appointed.

86. In addition, the lack of trust between the parties has continued to be exacerbated by unilateral assertive actions and symbolic gestures in the Territory which have had a negative impact on the situation. Such gestures and actions are a source of increased tension and run contrary to the spirit of a negotiated solution. I urge the parties to refrain from rhetoric and actions that are harmful, and for Western Sahara's international partners to continue to reiterate their support for the achievement of a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution to the question of Western Sahara through negotiation.

87. Neighbouring states have a vital role in the achievement of a solution to the question of Western Sahara. In this connection, the deterioration in relations between Morocco and Algeria is of concern. I encourage the two neighbouring countries to find a way forward to mend relations, including in support of regional cooperation and peace and security.

88. MINURSO military observers have not been able to safely access areas at or near the berm or the buffer strip. Combined with additional movement restrictions east of the berm, the ability of MINURSO to observe the situation in the entire

Territory and to provide important maintenance to its team sites is significantly hampered. If these constraints are not removed, MINURSO team sites east of the berm risk becoming unsustainable. It is essential that Frente POLISARIO immediately remove all limitations to the free movement of MINURSO ground convoys, air assets and personnel east of the berm, and allow a free flow of logistics and maintenance services.

89. Unfortunately, both parties have continued to limit their engagement with the leadership of MINURSO. It has now been more than two years since either party has met with my Special Representative, and in the case of Frente POLISARIO, more than three years since it has met with the Force Commander. In the interests of all, I reiterate my call on the parties to remain committed and to maintain regular contacts with MINURSO leadership, both civilian and military.

90. It is of concern that the developments in the Territory have led to a suspension of regular mine action operations east of the berm with the exception of emergency services. I encourage a resumption of the work, and for both parties to engage more closely with the Mine Action Service on the removal of landmines and explosive remnants of war throughout the Territory, and to ensure adherence to international humanitarian mine action standards to increase the effectiveness of removal activities.

91. I am convinced that the increased participation of women in peacekeeping improves the performance of United Nations peace operations and strengthens their effectiveness. In line with the objectives of the Action for Peacekeeping initiative, I extend my appreciation to the Mission's troop-contributing countries for their support in helping MINURSO be a model in this regard, and I encourage them to continue.

92. I reiterate my call to the parties to respect, protect and promote the human rights of all people in Western Sahara, including by addressing outstanding human rights issues and enhancing cooperation with OHCHR and the United Nations human rights mechanisms, and to facilitate their monitoring missions. Independent, impartial, comprehensive and sustained monitoring of the human rights situation is necessary to ensure the protection of all people in Western Sahara.

93. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Morocco, Frente POLISARIO and Algeria for their cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic and my appreciation for the generosity of Morocco and Algeria in providing vaccines to the civilian and military staff of MINURSO. I further applaud Algeria for including refugees in its vaccination programme, and I encourage the continuation of these efforts. Recovery from the pandemic requires that vaccines be available to everyone.

94. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, humanitarian actors have maintained the delivery of essential, life-saving assistance to Sahrawi refugees. I commend the staff of UNHCR, WFP and UNICEF, as well as NGO partners, for their dedication. I thank the international community for its support to the COVID-19 response through the joint appeal to assist the Sahrawi refugees living in the Tindouf camps, and I encourage the international community to continue to contribute to the humanitarian operations in the Tindouf camps, which have been chronically underfunded, to protect the vulnerable population, including women and children.

95. Despite the significant challenges described in the present report, MINURSO remains the main and often sole source of impartial information and advice to me, the Security Council, the Member States and the Secretariat concerning developments in the Territory. In this regard, it continues to provide visible and enduring testimony to the commitment of the United Nations and the international community towards achieving a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution to the conflict in Western Sahara in accordance with resolutions [2440 \(2018\)](#), [2468 \(2019\)](#), [2494](#)

(2019) and 2548 (2020). I therefore recommend that the Council extend the mandate of MINURSO for another year, until 31 October 2022.

96. I extend my deepest gratitude to the women and men of MINURSO for their relentless commitment to the Mission and the goals and purposes of the United Nations, including in the face of challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and the resumption of hostilities. I welcome my new Special Representative for Western Sahara and Head of MINURSO, Alexander Ivanko, and wish to express my sincere appreciation to his predecessor, Colin Stewart, as well as to the Force Commander, Major General Zia Ur Rehman, for their exemplary leadership under particularly challenging circumstances.

Annex I

United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara

Contributions as at 30 September 2021

<i>Country</i>	<i>Military observers^a</i>	<i>Troops^a</i>	<i>Civilian police^b</i>	<i>Total</i>
Argentina	3	–	–	3
Austria	6	–	–	6
Bangladesh	7	20	–	27
Bhutan	2	–	–	2
Brazil	11	–	–	11
Chad	2	–	–	2
China	11	–	–	11
Colombia	2	–	–	2
Côte d'Ivoire	2	–	–	2
Croatia	9	–	–	9
Ecuador	2	–	–	2
Egypt	25	–	–	25
El Salvador	1	–	–	1
France	2	–	–	2
Germany	3	–	–	3
Ghana	10	7	–	17
Guinea	4	–	–	4
Honduras	10	–	–	10
Hungary	6	–	–	6
India	4	–	–	4
Indonesia	3	–	–	3
Italy	4	–	–	4
Jordan	2	–	–	2
Kazakhstan	7	–	–	7
Malawi	4	–	–	4
Malaysia	9	–	–	9
Mexico	6	–	–	6
Mongolia	3	–	–	3
Montenegro	1	–	–	1
Nepal	4	–	–	4
Nigeria	5	–	–	5
Pakistan	13	–	–	13
Poland	1	–	–	1
Republic of Korea	6	–	–	6
Russian Federation	10	–	–	10
Sri Lanka	2	–	–	2
Sweden	2	–	–	2

<i>Country</i>	<i>Military observers^a</i>	<i>Troops^a</i>	<i>Civilian police^b</i>	<i>Total</i>
Switzerland	2	–	–	2
Togo	2	–	–	2
Total	208	27	–	235^c

^a Authorized strength is 245, including the Force Commander.

^b Authorized strength is 12.

^c Actual strength on the ground, for military and civilian police, including the Force Commander.

Annex II

Map



Map No. 3691 Rev. 93 UNITED NATIONS
August 2021 (Colour)

Office of Information and Communications Technology
Geospatial Information Section