



Security Council

Distr.: General
23 September 2020

Original: English

Situation concerning Western Sahara

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution [2494 \(2019\)](#), by which the Council extended the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) until 31 October 2020 and requested me to submit a report on the situation in Western Sahara before the end of the mandate period. The report covers developments until 31 August 2020 that have occurred since the issuance of my previous report of 2 October 2019 ([S/2019/787](#)) and describes the situation on the ground, the status of political negotiations on Western Sahara, the implementation of resolution [2494 \(2019\)](#) and the existing challenges to the Mission's operations and steps taken to address them.

II. Recent developments

2. Overall calm prevailed in Western Sahara on both sides of the berm. While respect for the ceasefire agreement by both parties generally continued, there was a notable decline in compliance with the terms of military agreement No. 1, particularly east of the berm.

3. The impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on Western Sahara was moderate west of the berm. Following early and thorough preventive and containment measures by Morocco, this part of the Territory witnessed only a handful of cases until 30 May. At that point, a significant outbreak was detected in the area of Laayoune. As at 31 August, the number of active cases in Laayoune was 41. The Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguía el-Hamra y Río de Oro (Frente POLISARIO) reported taking strict measures to prevent the spread of the virus east of the berm, where no cases were officially reported. In the Sahrawi refugee camps near Tindouf, Algeria, three active cases had officially been identified as at 31 August. In the town of Tindouf, where a number of United Nations and international humanitarian operators have offices, cases were detected in August and, as at 31 August, 43 cases remained active.

4. From the third week of March, when the number of cases in Western Sahara and the rest of United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) area of operation was still very limited, the Mission drastically reduced its footprint at headquarters in Laayoune, adopting telecommuting for all staff and



implementing a thorough set of preventative measures and protocols. As a result of these and measures adopted by the Moroccan authorities in Morocco and in the Territory west of the berm, no cases were reported among MINURSO personnel. MINURSO was able to ensure mandate implementation by continuing its ceasefire observation activities at reduced but adequate levels. This was facilitated by the fact that both parties reduced their military activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. On 5 November 2019, during his annual address on the anniversary of the Green March, King Mohammed VI of Morocco stated that Morocco “will continue to work honestly and in good faith to achieve a political, realistic, practical and consensual solution based exclusively on the political approach adopted by the United Nations Organization and the relevant Security Council resolutions”. He further said that the 2007 autonomy proposal of Morocco was “the only way forward towards a settlement guaranteeing full respect for the Kingdom’s national unity and territorial integrity”. In a statement on 7 November 2019, Frente POLISARIO stated that “the Sahrawi people will continue their struggle for freedom and independence”.

6. Between 18 December 2019 and 12 March 2020, Burundi, the Central African Republic, Comoros, Côte d’Ivoire, Djibouti, Gabon, the Gambia, Guinea, Liberia and São Tomé and Príncipe inaugurated “Consulates General” in Laayoune or Dakhla. In letters addressed to me on 3 July 2019, 20 November 2019, 7 January 2020, 17 January 2020 and 18 February 2020, Brahim Ghali, Secretary-General of Frente POLISARIO, defined these diplomatic representations as a “violation of international law and [...] breach of the international legal status of Western Sahara as a Non-Self-Governing Territory”.

7. On 22 January, the House of Representatives of Morocco adopted two laws updating the limits of its territorial waters and of its exclusive economic zone, which included the waters off the coast of Western Sahara. On 22 January, Mr. Ghali wrote to me that Frente POLISARIO considered that the two laws represented “breaches of the international legal status of Western Sahara as a Non-Self-Governing Territory”.

8. Morocco continued its infrastructure investment west of the berm. It announced, for example, the construction of a new port approximately 70 kilometres north of Dakhla. In a letter dated 19 September 2019 to my Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations and my Special Representative for Western Sahara, the Representative of Frente POLISARIO in New York stated that this initiative intended “to consolidate and normalize [the] military occupation and the illegal annexation of parts of Western Sahara”.

9. From 19 to 25 December 2019, Frente POLISARIO held its fifteenth Congress in Tifariti, east of the berm, with more than 2,000 Sahrawi delegates and approximately 300 foreign guests reportedly participating. According to the final statement, the decision to hold the Congress in Tifariti was taken to consecrate “exercise of its sovereignty over its national territory”. The incumbent, Brahim Ghali, was the sole candidate for the position of Secretary-General of Frente POLISARIO and was re-elected for another term. Mr. Ghali wrote to me on 28 December 2019 to inform me that the Congress had expressed “firm and strong support for the decision taken by Frente POLISARIO regarding [reconsidering] its engagement in the United Nations peace process” and concern at the “failure to fulfil the mandate of MINURSO”.

10. Before the start of the Congress, on 9 December 2019, the Permanent Representative of Morocco to the United Nations wrote to me to condemn the holding of the event in the Territory, calling it a “destabilizing act”, “a blatant violation of military agreement No. 1” and an “act of defiance” against Security Council resolutions [2414 \(2018\)](#), [2440 \(2018\)](#), [2468 \(2019\)](#) and [2494 \(2019\)](#).

11. On 2 February, Mr. Ghali assured the Frente POLISARIO military in a speech that Frente POLISARIO would be strict in applying the laws of “exercising its sovereignty over the liberated territories”. On 9 May, the representative of Frente POLISARIO to Algiers, Abdel Qader Al Talib Omar, indicated that it would continue relocating its institutions east of the berm.

12. The situation in Guerguerat remained calm overall, with only sporadic demonstrations between October 2019 and March 2020 that did not affect the flow of commercial and civilian traffic. On 15 May, during the COVID-19 lockdown period, civilian truck drivers and workers stranded in the buffer strip demonstrated to demand entry into Western Sahara. As in previous years, however, tensions rose considerably in early January around the passage of the annual Africa Eco Race auto rally competition through Western Sahara and Guerguerat from 11 to 13 January. Frente POLISARIO indicated its intention to block the race, and Morocco indicated its intention to intervene across the ceasefire line to keep the race path clear. MINURSO deployed a civil-military conflict prevention team to monitor the situation and prevent escalation, and on 13 January the team successfully mediated between a group of approximately 30 pro-Frente POLISARIO men and women who had set up a camp in the buffer strip and were threatening to block the race’s passage and a group of pro-Moroccan individuals who had entered the buffer strip to confront them. As a result, the race convoy was able to pass through the buffer strip without significant incident. On 15 January, Mr. Ghali wrote to me condemning the “unlawful passing” of the race through the “illegal breach” which, he stated, “represents a persistent violation of Military Agreement No. 1 and the spirit of the peace plan”. On 31 August and 1 September, approximately 20 Sahrawi protesters again gathered inside the buffer strip, briefly putting up roadblocks. MINURSO deployed a civil-military team to the area and successfully negotiated the removal of the roadblocks and the protesters’ departure from the area. Frente POLISARIO issued a statement on 1 September expressing solidarity with the protests. Morocco expressed concern to my Special Representative about this “deliberate and unlawful provocation”.

13. On 1 April, Mhamed Khadad, Frente POLISARIO Coordinator with MINURSO since 1997 and a member of the national secretariat of Frente POLISARIO, passed away. He was a key MINURSO interlocutor for most of the existence of the Mission. His passing has left a void in the relations between Frente POLISARIO and MINURSO on the ground. Sidi Omar, the Frente POLISARIO representative in New York, is temporarily acting as Coordinator with MINURSO.

III. Political activities

14. On 27 September 2019, I met with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Morocco, Nasser Bourita, on the margins of the seventy-fourth session of the General Assembly, and on 10 February 2020 I met with Frente POLISARIO Secretary-General Ghali on the margins of the thirty-third ordinary session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union. I assured both of my commitment to appoint a new Personal Envoy for Western Sahara.

15. On 30 October 2019, the Security Council adopted resolution [2494 \(2019\)](#). In that resolution, the Council paid tribute to former Personal Envoy Horst Köhler for his efforts in holding the round-table process, which had created new momentum in the political process. The Council emphasized the need to achieve a realistic, practicable and enduring political solution to the question of Western Sahara, and encouraged the resumption of consultations. It reaffirmed its commitment to assist the parties to achieve a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution, based on compromise, which would provide for the self-determination of the people of

Western Sahara. Following the adoption of the resolution, on 30 October Frente POLISARIO issued a press release regretting the “return to business as usual” and stating that it was “left with no option but to reconsider its engagement in the peace process”. In a letter to me dated 28 December 2019, Frente POLISARIO Secretary-General Ghali reiterated his continued commitment to a peaceful solution to the conflict, but indicated that it would “never be a partner in any process that does not fully respect and provide for the exercise by the people of Western Sahara of their inalienable right to self-determination and independence”.

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

A. Operational activities

16. As at 31 August, the military component of MINURSO consisted of 195 personnel, 43 of whom were female, against an authorized strength of 245. 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 (see [S/2016/355](#), para. 31) to 22 per cent. From 1 September 2019 to 31 August 2020, MINURSO conducted approximately 641,235 km of ground patrols and 1,926 hours of air patrols. Some 1,076 headquarters, units, sub-units, strongpoints and observation posts east and west of the berm were monitored monthly, for a total of 4,127 (west of the berm) and 13,314 (east of the berm) visits by ground or air patrols, including 141 investigations.

17. The overall impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on MINURSO operational activities was moderate. Logistical and maintenance activities had to be replanned and reorganized to accommodate the necessary reduction in movements. MINURSO was able to maintain its ceasefire monitoring activities at adequate levels, despite a reduction by 30 per cent in ground patrols and 10 per cent in air patrols. This was facilitated by significant reductions in military operational and training activities by both parties and by an increased use of satellite imagery by MINURSO. In agreement with the parties, special preventative measures and protocols were implemented to ensure the safe movement of military and civilian staff between MINURSO locations and to ensure that ground patrols were conducted in such a way as to minimize exposure to the virus for both MINURSO military observers and their local interlocutors.

18. The Government of Morocco, Frente POLISARIO and the Government of Algeria cooperated fully with MINURSO during the pandemic. The Government of Morocco, in particular, supported MINURSO in a number of aspects, providing assistance with rapid COVID-19 test results for MINURSO aircrews and assisting civilian and military staff travelling to and from the Mission area of operation by granting them access to special international commercial flights.

19. Internally, the COVID-19 pandemic brought significant challenges to the Mission’s military operations. Following the closure of the borders of Morocco and my decision conveyed by letter to Member States on 4 April, all rotations, repatriations and deployments of uniformed personnel were suspended through 30 June 2020, while internal rotations between the areas east and west of the berm were also drastically reduced. In March, an emergency logistics plan was elaborated that increased team site reserves of lifeline supplies to a minimum of four weeks. MINURSO developed special preventative measures and protocols, as well as educational and awareness-raising initiatives, in consultation with the MINURSO Medical Unit provided by Bangladesh. The Mission leadership remained in regular

contact by videoconference with the United Nations military observers deployed in the team sites.

20. Security constraints east of the berm continued to limit the ground patrols to a radius of 125 km from each team site and night patrols remained suspended on either side of the berm. The gaps in area coverage, previously monitored by more inefficient and hazardous long ground patrols, were filled by extending the scope and frequency of air patrols through the use of the third helicopter deployed to MINURSO since January 2019. These measures are in furtherance of the Action for Peacekeeping commitments on performance as well as safety and security.

21. In December 2019, a military capability study of MINURSO was jointly conducted by the Department of Peace Operations, led by the Office of Military Affairs, and the Department of Safety and Security. The study comprised a desktop review and a field visit to examine the existing capabilities of the Mission's military component against current and future tasks. The report of the military capability study is under review.

22. MINURSO continued expanding the use of geospatial imagery and analysis obtained through bilateral support from the European Union, as well as other high-resolution satellite imagery, to guide and complement its observations from the ground and air. The use of satellite imagery has strengthened the Mission's observational effectiveness in the Territory, in line with Action for Peacekeeping commitments on performance.

23. The previously reported bilateral working and coordination mechanisms proposed with each of the parties continued, with the Royal Moroccan Army serving as a venue for dialogue to resolve violations of military agreement No. 1 and to address potential violations before they become formalized. The military leadership of Frente POLISARIO has yet to engage in the bilateral coordination mechanism, despite agreement in principle to its establishment in October 2019. Interaction with the Frente POLISARIO military forces is therefore limited to local liaison with MINURSO team sites and the Mission's Liaison Office in Tindouf. There has been a significant increase in unaddressed Frente POLISARIO violations, which is described below.

24. Between 1 September 2019 and 31 August 2020, the Mission observed a total of 61 violations – 20 general and 41 freedom-of-movement – committed by the parties, eight by the Royal Moroccan Army (7 general and 1 freedom-of-movement) and 53 by the Frente POLISARIO military forces (13 general and 40 freedom-of-movement). These were in addition to the nine unaddressed long-standing violations by the Royal Moroccan Army, one of which was added in July 2020 and another reinserted in August 2020 after it had been removed in February. The four long-standing violations by the Frente POLISARIO military forces also remain unaddressed.

25. West of the berm, MINURSO found that authorized maintenance works along stretches of the berm in Oum Dreyga and Awsard exceeded the authorized scope owing to the installation of new lines of boulders. These works were declared general violations in May and June 2020, respectively, and were added as one item to the list of long-standing violations in July and in August. The Royal Moroccan Army rejected the Mission's attempts to have these lines of boulders removed, indicating, *inter alia*, in a letter to MINURSO dated 16 April 2020 that they were constructed to minimize the movement of vehicles associated with drug trafficking. The Royal Moroccan Army's position is not in accordance with the rules set out in military agreement No. 1.

26. In May, MINURSO observed the redeployment of members of the Royal Moroccan Army to the line of observation posts that runs parallel to the berm inside the restricted area in several locations in Awsard and Oum Dreyga. These posts,

declared a long-standing violation in August 2012, had been abandoned by the Royal Moroccan Army in 2019 after negotiations with MINURSO and removed from the list of long-standing violations. While MINURSO had agreed to allow a strictly limited and short-term use of these posts in the fight against drug smuggling, the Royal Moroccan Army informed MINURSO verbally in a formal coordination meeting that it intended to go beyond that agreement and continue using the posts. This was declared a general violation of military agreement No. 1 in July and reinserted in the list of long-standing violations in August.

27. MINURSO detected one discrepancy between the order of battle inventories of arms and equipment and the number of heavy weapons on the ground in Oum Dreyga and declared it a violation in March. Moreover, a violation was declared in January against the Royal Moroccan Army for entering the buffer strip while attempting to remove a truck belonging to the Frente POLISARIO military forces located inside the buffer strip near Awsard (and for which a violation was also declared against Frente POLISARIO; see para. 29). One further violation was registered for restricting MINURSO freedom of movement in the Mahbas area in June.

28. East of the berm, there was a significant deterioration in cooperation by the Frente POLISARIO military forces. They regularly denied MINURSO patrols entry into most of their units, as well as to specific areas and sites in the second and fifth military regions, in repeated violation of military agreement No. 1.¹ Frente POLISARIO argued that military agreement No. 1 granted United Nations military observers the right to “visit”, but not to “inspect”, military sites, contrary to long-standing practice. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to maintain social distancing was also cited as a reason to deny entry into the units. While these were serious violations, in practice MINURSO ground patrols were usually able to adequately conduct visual observations of the units from a distance, owing to the low walls around the units. Similar freedom-of-movement violations were committed in an attempt to limit MINURSO observation of buildings for compliance with paragraph 7 of Security Council resolution 2440 (2018). On one occasion, a team from the Mine Action Service was denied access to a site in Bir Lahlou and ordered to leave the area while conducting route clearance for MINURSO ground patrols.

29. MINURSO has seen indications of increased incursions by the Frente POLISARIO military forces into the buffer strip, in violation of military agreement No. 1. On two occasions, in Agwanit in October 2019 and in Tifariti in May, the evidence was clear, and they were declared violations. In Agwanit, a truck travelling through the buffer strip to carry Frente POLISARIO military personnel to the observation post at the “waypoint 6” post near Guerguerat was damaged after hitting a mine. The incident was protested by the Royal Moroccan Army, which attempted to remove the vehicle (see para. 27).

30. As in previous years, the Royal Moroccan Army addressed communications to MINURSO to register concern over the presence of civilian and military personnel inside the buffer strip. Most of these communications concerned civilian demonstrators gathering in the buffer strip near Bir Lahlou, which the Royal Moroccan Army considers deliberate provocations aimed at raising tensions in this area. Morocco also continued to point out the presence of military personnel accompanying the civilians, in violation of military agreement No. 1. The security and safety risks posed by the movement of civilians in this heavily mined and sensitive area continued to be of concern.

¹ The number of violations cited (33) reflects the number of general areas each month where such violations were declared. The observed number of individual violations is more than 1,000.

31. The relocation of several Frente POLISARIO units in Tifariti in December 2019 and in April and May 2020 was also declared a violation of military agreement No. 1. These included the relocation of one observation post from the restricted area to the buffer strip, where it remained, despite repeated requests by MINURSO to move it back to its original location. Frente POLISARIO indicated that the relocation provided a better vantage point for intercepting drug traffickers present in the area, which is not in accordance with the terms of military agreement No.1. In June, the violations working group of MINURSO declared one additional violation for the extension of one of the post's buildings. In Bir Lahlou, a military unit consisting of six sites and approximately 50 individuals was discovered in June 2020 and declared a violation in the same month. Four other construction projects by the Frente POLISARIO military forces in Bir Lahlou and Tifariti were also declared to be in violation of military agreement No. 1.

32. Discrepancies observed between the order of battle and the number of heavy weapons held by Frente POLISARIO units in Agwanit, Bir Lahlou and Tifariti in the restricted area were declared violations in January, March and April. Requests by MINURSO to remove them from the restricted area remained unaddressed.

33. Near Bir Lahlou, a logistics hub consisting of 10 new buildings located inside the restricted area, which had already been declared a violation in 2017 and included in the list of long-standing violations in 2018, remained operational. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the site was provided with isolation and basic treatment facilities for potential cases. MINURSO continued to regularly monitor buildings constructed by Frente POLISARIO in various locations outside of the restricted area to ensure they remained in compliance with paragraph 7 of Security Council resolution 2440 (2018), as reported in paragraph 32 of [S/2019/787](#).

34. Both parties regularly reported as major security concerns to MINURSO increases in illicit activities and illegal movements through the Territory, primarily narcotics smuggling and human trafficking. The Royal Moroccan Army reported conducting 29 anti-smuggling operations. Frente POLISARIO also reported conducting one major counter-narcotics operation. Both parties continued to justify some of their military violations by citing the need to counter drug smuggling and other illicit activities.

35. Both parties addressed communications to MINURSO team sites alleging that violations of military agreement No. 1 had been committed by the other party. MINURSO systematically investigated each allegation.

B. Mine action

36. Landmines and other explosive remnants of war continued to pose a threat to MINURSO personnel and logistical convoys, which the Mission aimed to reduce through the activities of its Mine Action Service. As at 31 August 2020, 44 of the 522 known cluster strike areas and 24 of the 61 known minefields remained to be addressed east of the berm.

37. On 20 March, mine action activities were partially suspended east of the berm owing to the closure of the border between Algeria and the Territory of Western Sahara to control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. An emergency explosive ordnance disposal response team was maintained in the Territory.

38. During the reporting period, MINURSO, through its Mine Action Service, conducted survey and clearance of 2,034,929 m² of land impacted by landmines and explosive remnants of war. A total of 1,179 kilometres of Mission patrol and logistical routes were verified east of the berm, facilitating the monitoring of the ceasefire and

ensuring the safe passage of United Nations personnel. A total of 1,461 items of explosive remnants of war were destroyed, including 1,026 cluster munition remnants and one anti-tank mine, increasing the safety and security of MINURSO military observers and the local population.

39. MINURSO, 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 to better ascertain the impact of mines and explosive remnants of war. Through the Mine Action Service, the Mission also continued to provide the Office with technical assistance on operations, programme and data management, administration and finance.

40. The MINURSO Mine Action Service delivered explosive ordnance risk education sessions for 124 MINURSO civilian and military personnel (81 men and 43 women) at Mission headquarters and at the team sites. Similar sessions were also conducted for 187 men, women, boys and girls encountered during clearance operations east of the berm.

41. Despite these efforts, accidents still took place in the Territory. On 15 November 2019, a national staff member of MINURSO was severely injured by a landmine while traveling off-duty, west of the berm. Between 1 September 2019 and 31 August 2020, the Royal Moroccan Army reported 17 injuries to civilians and 1 to military personnel owing to mines and explosive remnants of war west of the berm. East of the berm, two civilian injuries were recorded in the Information Management System for Mine Action.

42. The Royal Moroccan Army reported the release of over 253.5 million m² of land west of the berm and the destruction of 796 items, including 37 anti-personnel and anti-tank mines. MINURSO continued to invite cooperation between the Royal Moroccan Army and the Mission's Mine Action Service.

C. Security

43. The security environment in Western Sahara remained relatively stable but unpredictable. The overall risks in the four security areas (Laayoune, Tindouf, west of the berm and east of the berm) remained low to moderate. From 1 September 2019 to 31 August 2020, 247 security-related incidents were reported, of which 59 affected United Nations personnel, premises and assets. These 59 incidents, an increase of 69 per cent compared with the previous year, included 7 cases of harassment of United Nations personnel, 4 of which were against women (1 case in Laayoune and 3 in Tindouf), 1 attempted break-in, 3 cases of vandalism of United Nations vehicles, 10 traffic accidents with a third party and 38 other traffic accidents across the area of responsibility.

44. The reported increased presence of drug smugglers and other criminal elements in the Territory posed a growing and unpredictable threat to the Mission (see para. 34).

45. The risk of terrorist attacks targeting MINURSO remained a serious concern owing to the persistent presence of malicious actors in the surrounding region. There have been no new direct or explicit threats against the Mission since 2017, although several operations that led to the arrest of suspected terrorists have been reported in the Territory west of the berm. As previously reported, in 2019 the Mission implemented additional security measures at its team sites east of the berm to enhance existing mitigating measures against security threats.

46. In Guerguerat, the buffer strip between the Moroccan and Mauritanian gates continued to pose a certain risk for MINURSO military observers, owing to the lack of jurisdiction in the area and the consequent inability to ensure security for

MINURSO. Nevertheless, there were no threats reported against MINURSO. In the Mijek region east of the berm, the presence of illicit gold miners from across the Sahel region is another ongoing concern.

47. Morocco and Frente POLISARIO retain primary responsibility for the safety and security of United Nations personnel, assets and resources west and east of the berm, respectively, and MINURSO continues to have confidence in the commitment and capability of both parties. Adequate cooperation on security issues with MINURSO continued with Morocco west of the berm, Frente POLISARIO east of the berm and in the refugee camps near Tindouf, as well as with Algeria in and around Tindouf. While generally respecting their security obligations towards MINURSO, these interlocutors only rarely shared security-related information with the Mission, which affected the ability of MINURSO to maintain its own situational awareness.

D. Substantive civilian activities

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

49. Until the emergence of the COVID-19 crisis, representatives of Member States continued visiting the Mission in Laayoune and in Tindouf, and my Special Representative for Western Sahara continued to brief Member States regularly in Rabat and in New York. On 18 and 19 September 2019, he also met with the United Nations humanitarian staff operating in Tindouf and in the Sahrawi refugee camps, as well as the head of the Sahrawi Red Crescent and international non-governmental organizations present in the area.

50. Before and during the pandemic, my Special Representative continued to engage with the parties. In October 2019, at the invitation of Morocco, he held four meetings in New York with the Permanent Representative of Morocco to the United Nations (see [S/2019/787](#), para. 54). Nevertheless, until the COVID-19 pandemic restricted movement in March, Moroccan authorities had yet to resume regular meetings with my Special Representative, although coordination was maintained by telephone on the coronavirus response and other matters. Cooperation with Morocco at the level of military command continued. Frente POLISARIO continued to decline meetings with the Mission's leadership, both civilian and military, in Rabouni, where meetings had previously been held in accordance with long-standing practice (see [S/2019/787](#), para. 55).

51. East of the berm or in the refugee camps near Tindouf, MINURSO and United Nations humanitarian staff maintained unimpeded access to the refugees and other local and international interlocutors. MINURSO continued strengthening its analysis and early warning capabilities by monitoring information derived from social media and, in Tindouf, from local communities, in addition to information provided by the mainstream media.

52. In late 2019, and in line with the Action for Peacekeeping commitments on performance, MINURSO launched the implementation of the Comprehensive Performance Assessment System, with the development of an integrated mission plan (results framework) for mandate delivery and an extension to the plan outlining the Mission's efforts to counter the spread of COVID-19, despite the absence of dedicated planning resources. The next step will be to collect and analyse data to assess the Mission's performance in delivering mandated tasks and its impact in its area of responsibility.

E. Challenges to the operations of the Mission

53. MINURSO faced a series of ongoing challenges to its operations that affected the implementation of its mandate and the safety and security of its personnel. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified those challenges, notably with regard to the conditions of service of civilian and uniformed personnel, the rotation of uniformed personnel and supply chain activities. Since late March, the Mission has also experienced difficulties in obtaining clearance for international cargo. Preventative limitations on the movements of United Nations staff between west and east of the berm challenged the supply of essential goods and services to team sites east of the berm. In addition to the suspension of all uniformed personnel rotations until 30 June, these limitations created pressures on both military and civilian personnel, who were isolated for long periods without a break. United Nations staff in Tindouf and the nearby refugee camps were similarly affected.

54. The lack of progress in the political process contributed to increased criticism of MINURSO and the United Nations by Frente POLISARIO. In a letter to me dated 7 September, Frente POLISARIO Secretary-General Ghali indicated that “the failure of the United Nations Secretariat and the Security Council to act robustly [...has...] undermined the credibility of the United Nations and deepened the loss of faith amid the Sahrawi people in the already fragile United Nations peace process”. The statements coincided with reduced collaboration by Frente POLISARIO military forces with MINURSO on the ground. The lack of dialogue between the military leaderships resulted in questions related to the ceasefire being left unaddressed and inconsistencies in relations across regions.

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

56. 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, where the Mission’s ground patrols may intersect with terrorists or other criminal elements moving through these areas, exposing them to collateral or direct risks.

57. The general perception by the population of the Mission’s impartiality also continued to be affected by the requirement by 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

58. The question of individuals who are still unaccounted for, in relation to past hostilities, remains a major humanitarian concern. The International Committee of the Red Cross remains 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

59. 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 Sahrawi refugees living in the five camps near Tindouf.

60. Malnutrition, and particularly a high prevalence of anaemia among Sahrawi refugee children and women, has been a concern for several years, with UNHCR and WFP continuing to work together on its treatment and prevention. UNHCR collaborated with the Algerian Red Crescent and relevant stakeholders to support Sahrawi families suffering from malnutrition, with severely affected households receiving lactating goats, cattle feed and veterinary services for the goats to improve the overall nutrition of families. In addition, WFP started the first large-scale voucher project in the camps, providing pregnant and lactating women and girls with access to fresh food, offering dignity of choice while supporting local retailers. To enhance livelihood opportunities and resilience and to improve food security and nutrition, WFP continued to support the world's first fish farm in a refugee camp and started the new innovative H2Optimal project to grow vegetables and trees in the desert.

61. UNICEF provided support to maternal and child health programmes, including the expanded immunization programme and capacity-building for health staff; primary education activities related to quality learning environments, with a particular focus on water, sanitation and hygiene in schools; child protection through the inclusion of children with disabilities; and youth activities by promoting life skills. While some 21,000 children were immunized in 2019, chronic shortages of vaccines and key immunization supplies continued to represent a challenge. In 2019–2020, based on a five-year strategy (2018–2022) for the construction and rehabilitation of schools in the five camps, UNICEF and its partners rehabilitated nine primary schools and one kindergarten, and constructed one kindergarten, with two intermediate schools and one primary school planned to be constructed by the end of 2020.

62. The main challenge for humanitarian actors remained the resource shortfall and a lack of predictable funding. To date, UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP have received only 58 per cent of their combined overall needs for their 2020 regular programmes. UNHCR, other United Nations agencies, and partners struggled to meet international standards in life-saving activities in the areas of shelter, water and sanitation, health, nutrition, education, energy, provision of non-food items and livelihoods. The departure of skilled personnel for better-paying jobs in several sectors, such as health and education (because of lack of adequate financial incentives for teachers and difficult working conditions) remained a major concern. Health facilities are in urgent need of rehabilitation, and the distribution of hygiene kits to women and girls of reproductive age was insufficient to meet needs. In 2020, UNHCR shared its water, sanitation and hygiene strategy and multi-year plan for the period 2020–2024 for improving access to and the quality of the water supply for Sahrawi refugees in Algeria. A significant level of funding was still needed for its implementation, despite budget reprioritizations.

63. To prevent the spread of COVID-19 and mitigate its impacts, all non-life-saving activities were put on hold on 16 March 2020. Food, water, sanitation and hygiene and health sector services were prioritized, as well as other critical areas. Life-saving activities were maintained in the camps, with basic and essential services being provided. UNHCR also provided veterinary medicines to help eliminate goat plague in the camps; the epidemic caused the loss of hundreds of livestock, further degrading the food security of vulnerable Sahrawi refugees. Algerian authorities included the Saharawi refugee population in their overall COVID-19 prevention and response. A

temporary military hospital was set up by the Algerian army within the camps and Sahrawi refugees were admitted to public health facilities.

64. UNHCR coordinated a COVID-19 preparedness and response plan in the Sahrawi refugee camps with Sahrawi health experts and Tindouf health authorities, including through the provision of medical supplies; disinfection campaigns; sensitization and awareness-raising campaigns; the provision of support to community COVID-19 isolation centres; and the maintenance of critical water, sanitation and hygiene services and other infection prevention and control equipment. New protocols were also followed in camps by all partners to reduce transmission, including remotely monitoring projects and adapting distributions to minimize large gatherings. UNICEF also took the lead in ensuring educational continuity and the safe return to schools, as well as psychosocial support for children in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with other United Nations agencies and partners.

65. With the onset of the pandemic, subsequent camp lockdowns and the halting of economic activities, a rise in the number of refugees needing food assistance was anticipated. A household impact survey conducted in April by WFP, UNHCR and the International Committee for the Development of Peoples indicated that the pandemic had had a negative effect on households and that the majority had lost income. WFP scaled up in-kind food rations by 19,096 beneficiaries for three months (May–July) to include refugees vulnerable to food insecurity.

66. In April 2020, UNHCR, WFP and UNICEF, along with five NGOs, issued a joint appeal in response to the COVID-19 situation for approximately \$15 million of total immediate needs to prevent transmission of the virus, provide adequate care and adapt programmes to mitigate the worst effects of the pandemic. The three agencies received approximately 60 per cent of their overall needs in response to the COVID-19 situation.

C. Confidence-building measures

67. 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

68. In its resolution [2494 \(2019\)](#), 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. Lack of access by OHCHR to Western Sahara continues to result in substantial gaps in human rights monitoring in the Territory. Human rights defenders, researchers, lawyers and representatives of international non-governmental organizations also continue to experience similar constraints.

69. OHCHR remained concerned about the continued trend of restrictions on the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association in Western Sahara by Moroccan authorities. During the reporting period, OHCHR received reports of harassment, arbitrary arrest and sentencing of journalists, lawyers and human rights

defenders.² OHCHR also received several reports about torture, ill-treatment and medical neglect in Moroccan prisons, with civil society organizations and lawyers advocating for the release during the COVID-19 pandemic of Sahrawi prisoners such as the Gdeim Izik group and a group of students.³

70. I received letters from Morocco on 14 August and 24 August 2020 that provided information concerning the “daily promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms” in the Territory, including information on the specific incidents outlined in my regular reports to the Security Council, as well as information regarding alleged “violations of human rights, fundamental freedoms and international humanitarian law in the Tindouf camps”.

71. Furthermore, the human rights situation in Western Sahara has been adversely affected by the COVID-19 crisis, especially with regard to economic and social rights. OHCHR received reports of negative consequences of border closures, impediments to humanitarian aid and decreased economic activities in the Tindouf refugee camps. OHCHR also received reports of harassment, arrest and ill-treatment by Frente POLISARIO security forces of bloggers, doctors and nurses engaged in documenting COVID-19 cases in the Tindouf camps.

VI. African Union

72. In his address at the thirty-third ordinary session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union on 9 February 2020, Chairperson of the African Union Commission Moussa Faki Mahamat noted that “the Western Sahara conflict remains the oldest unresolved conflict on the continent” and called for the “implementation of the [2018] Nouakchott decision, which asks the [African Union] Troika to give an effective support to the efforts made by [the United Nations], to whom the parties have voluntarily entrusted the search for a lasting and fair solution to the dispute”.

VII. Financial aspects

73. By its resolution [2494 \(2019\)](#) of 30 October 2019, the Security Council extended the mandate of MINURSO until 31 October 2020.

74. The General Assembly, by its resolution [74/294](#) of 30 June 2020, appropriated the amount of \$57.5 million for the maintenance of the Mission for the period from 1 July 2020 to 30 June 2021. Should the Security Council decide to extend the mandate of MINURSO beyond 31 October 2020, the cost of maintaining the Mission would be limited to the amounts approved by the General Assembly.

75. As at 20 August 2020, unpaid assessed contributions to the Special Account for MINURSO amounted to \$56.6 million. The total outstanding assessed contributions for all peacekeeping operations as at that date amounted to \$5,247.7 million.

76. Reimbursement of troop costs and the costs of contingent-owned major equipment and self-sustainment has been made for the period up to 31 December 2019 in accordance with the quarterly payment schedule.

² See, for instance, special procedures mandate holders’ allegation letters JAL MAR 2/2020 of 7 July 2020 and JAL MAR 3/2020 of 21 July 2020, and opinion No. 2019/67 of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, adopted on 20 November 2019 ([A/HRC/WGAD/2019/67](#)), as well as the report of the Secretary-General on cooperation with the United Nations, its representatives and mechanisms in the field of human rights ([A/HRC/45/36](#)).

³ See [A/HRC/WGAD/2019/67](#).

VIII. Observations and recommendations

77. I remain convinced that a solution to the question of Western Sahara is possible despite the pause in the political process since the resignation, for health reasons, of my Personal Envoy, Horst Köhler. 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 \(2019\)](#) and [2494 \(2019\)](#) continues to require strong political will from the parties, and from the international community. Personal Envoy Köhler was able to reinstate a much-needed dynamic and momentum in the political process, including through the round-table process he launched which brought together Morocco, Frente POLISARIO, Algeria and Mauritania. It is essential that continuity in this political process not be lost. I remain committed to appointing a new Personal Envoy to build on the progress achieved. I 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.

78. I am concerned that the parties have moved further apart since my previous report to the Security Council ([S/2019/787](#)). The continued lack of trust between them has been exacerbated by assertive acts and symbolic gestures in the Territory that could potentially undermine the ceasefire and serve as a source of increased tensions. This could be detrimental to the achievement of a just, lasting and mutually acceptable political solution through negotiation. I believe, however, that the parties continue to have a great number of interests in common that should encourage them to work together. I therefore urge the parties to make active gestures of good faith that demonstrate their willingness to make progress towards a political solution to the conflict, and to refrain from rhetoric and actions that are harmful to such a resolution.

79. Despite some of the challenges described in the present report, MINURSO has continued to fulfil its mandate and maintain an enabling environment for a political process to resume. The Mission's diligence in monitoring the implementation of the agreements related to the ceasefire, and its persistent attempts to engage with the parties to address potential sources of tension, fulfil a crucial conflict prevention role. As a result of these efforts, instances of tension have been defused and several major and long-standing violations have been resolved west of the berm, providing tangible results illustrating the value of preventive diplomacy and open channels of communication.

80. The foundation of confidence in the ceasefire is compliance by the parties with the agreed terms and respect for the authority of the United Nations to adjudicate them. I am concerned about the recent decline in compliance with military agreement No. 1. This undermines the arrangements that are the basis for the lasting ceasefire. I call on Frente POLISARIO to meet with the MINURSO Force Commander and swiftly resolve the many outstanding violations of military agreement No. 1. I call on Morocco to maintain the military cooperation I cited in my previous report. I further encourage the Security Council to reiterate this fundamental principle and its steadfast support for MINURSO in upholding the terms of the ceasefire and preventing conflict.

81. Resolving disputes and concerns requires engagement with the leadership of MINURSO. Unfortunately, it has been more than a year since either party has met with my Special Representative. In the interests of all, I call once again on all the parties to remain committed and to maintain regular contacts with MINURSO leadership, both civilian and military. My Special Representative's unhindered ability to meet with either party as necessary is essential to his role as my representative in the Territory. I also encourage Frente POLISARIO to appoint a new Coordinator with MINURSO in the Mission area.

82. The status of the buffer strip as a demilitarized zone remains a cornerstone of the ceasefire in Western Sahara and I am concerned about the recent incursions into this zone. I call on the parties to discontinue military activity or presence inside this area.

83. I am also concerned about the increased reports of the presence of drug smugglers and other criminal elements in Western Sahara, which both parties demonstrated commitment to countering. Recognizing that this is a valid concern, I remind the parties that addressing these challenges with military means in a manner that contravenes military agreement No. 1 undermines the ceasefire and therefore cannot be justified.

84. 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.

85. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of non-custodial sanctions and the release of selected categories of prisoners should be considered, since persons deprived of their liberty are highly vulnerable. In addition, a reduction in the number of people in pretrial detention, detained for minor or political offences, near the end of their sentences or detained unlawfully should be expedited. It is also important to ensure that those who cannot be released have adequate health care.

86. UNHCR and humanitarian actors in the Tindouf camps are facing increased challenges in meeting the needs of vulnerable Sahrawi refugees. Health and nutrition indicators remain at alarming levels, the provision of drinking water continues to fall well below international standards, chronic shortages of vaccines prevail and the threat of COVID-19 has added yet another layer of vulnerability. I therefore encourage sustained support by the international community of humanitarian operations in the Tindouf camps.

87. 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 encourage them to continue.

88. MINURSO is 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, the Mission is a vital early warning mechanism. MINURSO also fills an indispensable conflict-prevention role and provides 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 \(2019\)](#) and [2494 \(2019\)](#). I therefore recommend that the Council extend the mandate of MINURSO for one year, until 31 October 2021.

89. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people around the world has been devastating. Our fight against this common enemy has not ended. MINURSO was able to continue conducting its primary mandated task of monitoring the ceasefire – and prevent any cases from affecting the Mission – as a result of the steadfast commitment of all MINURSO personnel, many of whom delayed leave and/or significantly overstayed their anticipated tour of duty, as well as the support of the Mission's troop-contributing countries. I extend my deepest thanks 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. I also thank my Special Representative for Western Sahara and Head of MINURSO, Colin Stewart, and the Force Commander, Major General Zia Ur Rehman, for their exemplary leadership under these particularly challenging circumstances.

Annex I

United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara

Contributions as at 31 August 2020

<i>Country</i>	<i>Military observers^a</i>	<i>Troops^a</i>	<i>Civilian police^b</i>	<i>Total</i>
Argentina	2	–	–	2
Austria	5	–	–	5
Bangladesh	3	20	–	23
Bhutan	2	–	–	2
Brazil	4	–	–	4
China	9	–	–	9
Colombia	1	–	–	1
Côte d'Ivoire	2	–	–	2
Croatia	10	–	–	10
Djibouti	1	–	–	1
Ecuador	4	–	–	4
Egypt	21	–	–	21
El Salvador	2	–	–	2
France	3	–	–	3
Germany	3	–	–	3
Ghana	7	7	–	14
Guinea	4	–	–	4
Honduras	9	–	–	9
Hungary	5	–	–	5
India	1	–	–	1
Indonesia	2	–	–	2
Ireland	2	–	–	2
Italy	2	–	–	2
Jordan	2	–	–	2
Kazakhstan	6	–	–	6
Malawi	2	–	–	2
Malaysia	7	–	–	7
Mexico	3	–	–	3
Mongolia	3	–	–	3
Montenegro	1	–	–	1
Nepal	4	–	–	4
Nigeria	3	–	–	3
Pakistan	10	–	–	10
Poland	1	–	–	1
Republic of Korea	4	–	–	4
Russian Federation	10	–	–	10
Sri Lanka	1	–	–	1
Sweden	3	–	–	3

<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	168	27	–	196^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

