

Hungarian logistics specialist working for UN's Western Sahara mission

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The significance of the NATO/EU and UN missions in the life of Hungarian Defence Forces are well known. Most of the people heard that 1000 officer, non commissioned officer and soldier can serve in abroad in the same time. Unfortunately, not everybody can serve outside and sometimes not so easy to find volunteers for some positions. However, we have a training centre, where we can prepare the applicants for international service, there is still some deficiency in our training. Although, we have a huge number of experienced people from various missions, we still not using properly their knowledge, which they collected on the field. It could be very useful if we can collect their data's about the mission where they served to share with others who are going to serve in the same or similar mission. In February 2003 I had the possibility to carry out a one-year-service in the UN's Western Sahara mission as a military observer. The mission itself was a challenge for me because I had the opportunity to put into practice all the skills I learnt at the Greek Peace Training Centre and also at training courses in Hungary. I'd like to present the experiences, which I got there, mostly from logistic perspective to help others, who are planning to go any missions.

Introduction

Up till now altogether – including me – 20 Hungarian officers and approximately this many police officers have served in the mission. Maybe that is why, and also due to the lack of concrete Hungarian interests the Hungarian Defence Forces have relatively few information on this territory and the developments here, I regard it useful to summarize shortly the history of the conflict.

The Spanish started to conquer the Western Sahara territories in 1886 but actually the whole territory was occupied only in 1934 when the territory controlled by them was officially named Spanish Sahara.¹ Soon they were confronted by the tribes living in the Sahara who had been fighting for their independence for a long time. Spain was one of the last colonial powers, which granted independence to its possessions, although the autonomy given to the inhabitants was partial.

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Finally the Spanish left this territory in 1976 for good and in line with the Madrid Convention (14th November 1975.) the Kingdom of Morocco and Mauritania had first divided it between themselves, and then occupied the Sahara territories.²

Polisario (Frente Popular para la Liberacion de Saguia El-Hamra y Rio de Oro) representing the significant part of the local people declared war on both countries, then after several years of fighting he signed peace with Mauritania completely defeated by that time. However the organisation could not cope with the Moroccan Kingdom which had a larger population and was better equipped, therefore Polisario had disadvantage using guerrilla tactics. After the Moroccan built up a fortress system resembling the Great Wall in China which gave the occupied territories lasting protection, so a stalemate situation evolved between the confronting parties.³ In Figure 1 you can see the situation and the fighting parties' location.



Figure 1. Map of the military situation in Western Sahara (Source: MINURSO)

In 1985 the UN Secretary-General together with the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) planned a mission which intended to settle the fate of this territory. Both the Moroccan Kingdom and Polisario agreed with this idea. However the arrangement was only made on 30th August 1988.

In 1990 the UN Secretary-General forwarded a report (S/21360) to the UN Security Council which was an already complete plan by that time offering a possibility to resolve the escalated armed conflict peacefully. The draft was approved by the Council as Resolution N. 690 on 29th April 1991 which also contributed to the formation of a UN mission (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara) fostering the final concept, namely: where would this territory belong?⁴

This plan ensured a transitional period of time during which the SRSG (Special Representative of the Secretary-General), was given an assignment to prepare and execute the tasks on all questions that might come up in connection with the mission, and the upcoming 'referendum' concerning the future of the territory. The inhabitants had to decide whether to continue their lives in an independent state or to live integrated in Morocco. Among the responsibilities of the Special Representative there was the task of controlling the civil employees, military personnel and policemen belonging to the mission. In addition he had the task of setting up and operating a bureau managing the return of refugees (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR).

Originally 800–1000 civil employees, 1700 military observers and a unit containing 300 policemen were planned for MINURSO.

The task of the mission was the following:

- Controlling the cease-fire,
- Controlling and authentically attesting the reduction of the number of people in the Moroccan units in the Western Sahara territories,
- Monitoring Polisario's and Moroccan units in the given territories, paying special attention to the contraction of units or possible attacks,
- Taking steps in order to release political prisoners from Moroccan prisons,
- Supervising the exchange of POW (prisoners of war) in cooperation with International Red Cross,
- Realizing the repatriation action insisted by UN in the framework of which the refugees would be ensured to be able to return to their former homes (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees),
- Identifying and registering those who would be entitled to take part in the referendum concerning the future of the territory,
- Organising and providing free and transparent election, and publishing the official result.

On 24th May 1991 the UN Secretary-General made an official proposal on the beginning day (6th September) of the cease-fire between the opponents. The belligerent parties agreed on the date, however – due to the differences – it seemed so that the cease-fire agreement would not be made. The Moroccan military leadership in the month well before the announcement of the cease-fire (August) had launched an overall attack in the region of Tifariti against Polisario's troops, but after initial success the attack failed, so the Moroccan troops withdrew behind the Berm. However the Polisario lost the significant part of his armament and deployable troops. Nevertheless the UN's efforts were crowned with success so on 6th September the official cease-fire came off between Morocco and the Polisario.⁵

Following the agreement 100 military observers were sent there immediately in order to control the keeping of cease-fire, but this number was soon increased up to 600 which was amended by the logistics and administration divisions deployed to this territory. On the map of Figure 2 you can observe the area of mission.

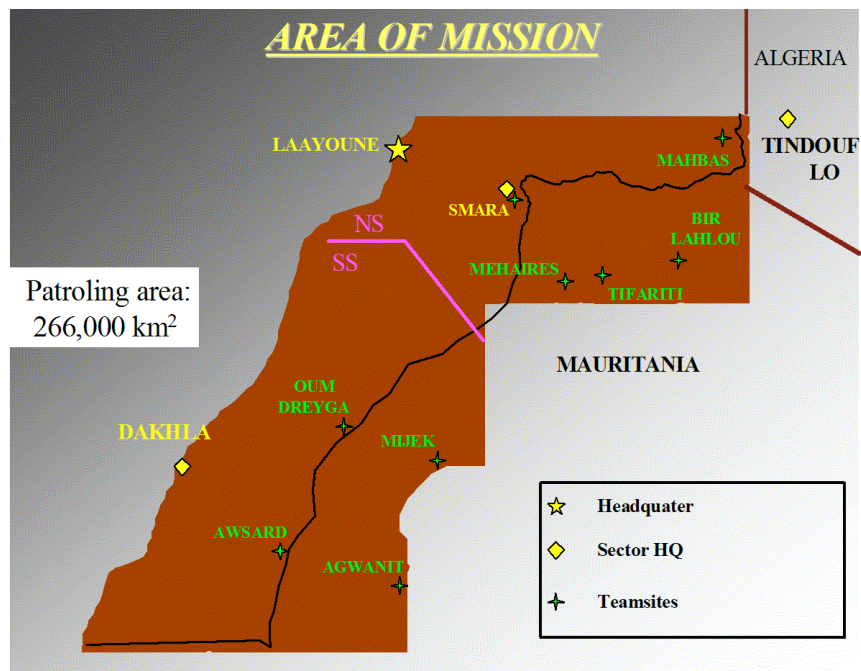


Figure 2. The area of mission (Source: MINURSO)

In this period of time MINURSO had the task to control the cease-fire agreement and the anticipation of possible clashes. The headquarters of the mission was established in Layoune while in the controlled Sahara areas two sector commands were set up with Dakhla (Southern sector) and Smara (Northern sector) centres. Besides this in Tinduf (Algeria) a Liaison Office was set up in order to cooperate easier both with Algerian authorities and the Polisario.

The next step in the whole process was that in 1993 a bureau was established which worked up the data of those people who were entitled to vote, and was also responsible for making the voting lists. The co-workers of the bureau finished the preparation work in August 1994, and started to collect those people who were entitled to vote and process their data.

The preparation work continued not only in Morocco but in Mauritania, too. On 23rd October 1995 on behalf of the Secretary-General Mr. Erik Jensen met the president of Mauritania Mr. Maaouya Ould Sidi Ahmed Taya. The aim of the meeting was to establish an identification bureau in Mauritania, too in order to register the Saharavi people living there. As a result of the negotiations in Choum region, in the town called Atar the UN could finally open the bureau where all the data of the Saharavi people entitled to vote could be collected.⁶

Since there were many problems in connection with the voting in May 1996 the UN Secretary-General dissolved the registration of those entitled to vote, and as a result of this the number of civil employees in the bureau, the policemen and the military observers was reduced by 20% (28th May 1996).

The members of the bureau could only start their work in December 1997, which was already finished on 3rd September 1998. Since that time the employees of the bureau were waiting whether there would be any referendum on the future of the territory.⁷

From this time on the military type tasks of the mission came into front, therefore the emphasis was put on the observance of cease-fire, patrolling, controlling of military units and on showing of UN presence.

In line with the last decision of the Security Council on 31st October 2003 the whole bureau and the police section was dissolved, and all the material/ documents collected and worked up by them were transported to New York, the UN centre.⁸

Until the next decision international and local employees will remain in the section supplying the military observers and the mission itself.

The structure of MINURSO:

There are 230 military persons in the mission, including also the Force Commander. Out of this 203 serve as military observers, while the other 27 persons are responsible

for the control of the mission and other supply and service actions. Beside this 25 policemen, 166 civil employees coming from all over the world and further 113 local employees help in the work of MINURSO.

States sending soldiers to the mission:

Argentina, Austria, Bangladesh, Bissau-Guinea, Republic of South Korea, Egypt, El Salvador, France, Ghana, Greece, Honduras, Republic of Croatia, Ireland, Kenya, Poland, Hungary, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nigeria, Italy, Russia, Pakistan, Portugal, Sri Lanka, and Uruguay.

States sending policemen:

Ghana, India, Jordan, Nigeria, Norway, Pakistan, Portugal, Senegal, and Kingdom of Sweden.

The operational territory of MINURSO was divided into two sectors. The centre of the Northern Sector is Smara, while the centre of the Southern Sector is Dakhla situated on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean. Patrolling territory is: 266.000 km².⁹

In the sectors team sites (military camps) were set up in places where they could control a certain area from the aspect of their post and approach.

Soldiers sent by the different states, the UN, soldiers trained by other governments and officers capable of serving as military observers carry out service in these team sites. The unwritten regulation of MINURSO is that, if possible, military observers belonging to identical nations may not serve in the same team site, in exceptional cases only. This of course can be applied effectively in the case of countries sending smaller contingents. The same concept is about to be followed in connection with those serving at the headquarters.

After arrival officers carrying out service in team sites are placed in positions based on their former experience and qualification. The first position of the newly arrived is usually generator or logistician. Barely 5–6% is the rate of the newly arrived military observers to the mission who has qualification in logistics or similar experience in this field.

Unfortunately for this reason such officers are also placed in logistics position who haven't got or have only little information on that certain field. It's also a problem that in team sites – in the majority of cases – there are not enough military observers and the tasks in the professional positions (human resources G-1, operation G-3, logistics G-4) are executed after the every day patrolling. That is why in the team sites people work in a rather intensive way (overwork).¹⁰

Of course with judicious G-1 work it could be reached that everyone would get a scope of activities competent with his/her qualification.

The operation of boarding service in the mission

We can not talk about a boarding service in the classical meaning of the word within the framework of MINURSO or the UN. The food and the supply officer is the organic part of the logistics service.

Usually one person holds these two positions; it is only divided into two scope of activities at the command. However it's a requirement for the officers in these positions that they should be able to carry out the tasks of the other person in case of absence. That is why the food and the supply officer implicitly cooperate with each other while executing logistics tasks, and are completely familiar with the work of the other.

The catering work starts in the team sites in the desert where the food officers of the team sites work under the professional control of the food chief of MINURSO, keeping in touch with him every day.

Every week the officers make their request (MINURSO Ration Requisition-MRR) which is based on the consumption data of the given week, the number of persons, the exchange rate of USD and Moroccan dirham.

The requests are first sent to the logistics chief of the sector, then to the catering chief of the mission who – after checking the data – requires the provision used that week and ordered by the food officers.

The ordered goods are delivered to the team sites on the third week after (after ordering), therefore it's very important for the food officer to control his stock and always plan the orders deliberately.

Moreover the food and supply officers have the following tasks as well:

- Write a weekly report (Stock Balance Report) on:
 - the weekly headcount;
 - the visitors coming to the team site (Troop Strength and Visitors Report);
 - the provision damaged during transportation or food of not adequate quality (Inability Proforma Sheet).

Besides this, for special occasions - in line with the regulations of the World Organisation – national food or food, spices uncharacteristic for the certain region is allowed to be ordered (Special Food Requirements).

This way with extra request and the approval of the commander of the mission spices or other type of provision can be required even from China on the occasion of China's National Day. Of course it's not really typical.

When it's permanently warm (March-October), when the average temperature reaches 40–50 centigrade, and many times it exceeds this temperature, then the food

officer is allowed to require extra quantity of mineral water – above the norm –, and other types of beverages (Supplement for Special Condition).¹¹

In team sites food supply is a significant challenge for all food officers but job which is well done can mean also success. When I arrived to Mehaires team site, the commander asked me the field in which I could do a successful job (I could do my best). Since the team site was infamous for its bad quality food, and also the skills of the food officer in this field left much to be desired, I asked the commander to be the new food officer. At first he was surprised because it's not the favourite position. It requires work and responsibility but finally – to the happiness of my predecessor – I became the food officer of the team site. It was very helpful that I did my high school studies in the Food Supply NCO Training Vocational Secondary School between 1987–1991, where – besides military qualification – I acquired a qualification as a cook, confectioner and waiter.

The institution which was led and well controlled by Lieutenant Colonel Ferenc Széli was closed during the reorganisation of the Hungarian Defence Forces. It had an outstanding teaching staff. Nevertheless the knowledge acquired here and the time spent as the head of the food supply meant a significant professional background to me.

In the first three months I had to cook almost every day because the original profession of 'our cooks' were smuggler, herdsman and soldier. They couldn't cook many dishes except for some certain ones; therefore I had to solve their training as well.

Through the officers serving in the team site and the efficient support of the commander in almost three months our team site became the best supplied unit of the Northern Sector.

Due to well-considered 'household management' the introduction of weekly menu, the systematisation of materials, we managed to have the food supply last for two weeks instead of the stock obligatory for one week.

After a while we were able to bake our own, various type of bread (with vegetables, chicken or potato) instead of the supply from the centre or when it didn't arrive.

In order to make the menu a little bit varied we changed the chicken – provided from the centre – for camel the meat of which – if well done – is almost equal to the tastiest calf.

I spent seven months in the team site as food officer and G5 (accommodation, sport and culture officer), then – based on the suggestion of the commander of the French Sector – as the chief of food supply of the mission.

I felt very honoured because firstly I didn't apply for this position, and secondly in the years passed it never happened that a captain could fulfil this position. Referring to the Table of Organisation (TOE) only majors and lieutenant colonels may do this duty.

On arriving to the headquarters I was faced with completely new challenges, different to the problems in the desert. Troop service was replaced by staff officer's service which requires another type of work organization and execution from the supplier.

During the work here I had the chance to work together not only with professional officers coming from other countries but also with people who served in other UN's missions, with skilled civil servants and representatives of local organs.

As the chief food officer of the mission my task was to organize the food supply of the eleven team sites situated on the territory of three countries (Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania) and ensure the transportation of the requested food products.

After summarizing the food request of the team sites, we send the summarized order for the transportation company (S.C.A.B.) the employees of which transport the food products to the cold-storage plant located in Layoune.

When the food arrives the R&I section (Receiving and Inspection Department) controls the food products item by item according to only their weight and number of pieces. The quality control is the task of the actual chief food officer who carries out this control two times a week together with the Force Medical Officer and the Hygiene Officer belonging to the Korean Medical Group. The results of the control procedures are officially sent to the commander of the mission, the Procurement and the ISS section (Integrated Support Services), which includes the civil and military supply system within the mission.

If the provision meets all requirements (much more severe international quality regulations refer to the mission than to the Hungarian circumstances), then the employees of the transportation company – with the supervision of the Inspection Department and the chief food officer – prepare the provision requested three weeks before for the team sites.

It's good to know that the chief food officer has the right and duty to travel every 2–3 months as an average to the company seat where together with the workers of the accountancy section the invoices, the slaughter-houses or other producing units are controlled from where the transportation company transport any kind of food products for MINURSO. The seat of the transportation company and the majority of the industrial units are located in Agadir 750 km from Layoune, but there are products that come from Casablanca.

At dawn following the packaging, the food products – under continuous supervision of UN's employees – are transported to the airport where the transportation service's employees and the staff of the transportation company load the goods into the aircraft.

The organized transportation of goods is not easy at all because in the desert there are only few roads that are asphalted or in good condition, in addition due to great

distances the food products can exclusively delivered to the team sites with either Antonov type aircraft or MI-8 type helicopters. In Figure 3 you can see the air support system of the mission which operates on a territory three times bigger than Hungary.

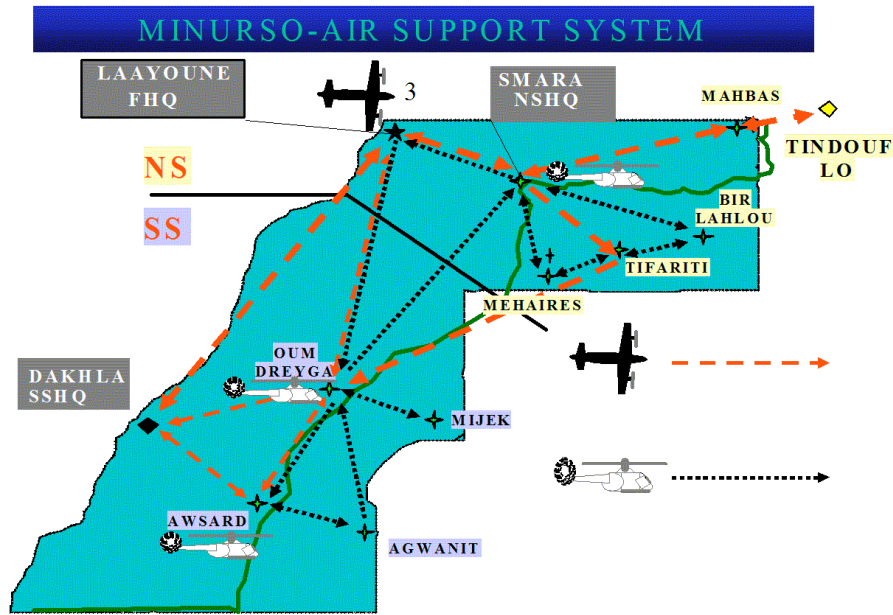


Figure 3. The air support system (Source: MINURSO)

The transportation is organized through the civil transportation service (OIC MOVCOM) including the members of the Air Operation Office, keeping in touch with the official organs of the three countries. However due to extreme weather conditions (sand storm or temperature permanently above 50 degrees) many times we are forced to stop the resupply flights, so in these cases the food products are carried to the team sites by trucks or patrol cars. Once the requested goods arrive at the team sites, the food officer controls the food products on the list item by item, and then he informs the chief food officer of the mission on the result.

On the side of the team sites the work might be finished on this point, the chief food officer however has still got a lot to do. The invoices sent by the transportation company are controlled item by item both by him and the financial expert assigned by the ISS section (Integrated Support Cell). Afterwards the invoice signed and approved

by the chief food officer is taken to the accountancy section where the personnel deal with the transfer of the money.

Besides the many things I am in charge of, I have just finished a handbook in connection with editing and setting up a menu which contains more than 250 simple international recipes, tables of weight and other units of measure, information making the life and work easier for food officers and cooks. The assistance manual was printed and published by the end of November 2003. Besides this – with the help of a Hungarian computer specialist serving in the mission – we worked on the modification of the food supply programme, and this way made the life easier for food officers working in the team site.

In December 2003 we organized a professional training and conference for the food specialists of the team sites, which were repeated time by time in line with the demands. This task was carried on by my successor, who was taking my place in February 2004 as a military observer.

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