

# Containing and Solving the Problems caused by SALW in Post-Conflict Cambodia<sup>1</sup>

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## Background

At the end of any period of armed conflict disarmament and the re-integration of those participating in and uprooted by hostilities is a precondition to creating a period of stability and development. Luckily this is now widely recognised and DDR (Disarmament, Demobilisation and Re-integration) programmes have become standard practice in peace-keeping and post-conflict peace-building strategies.

However, there are some situations where – even after the end of a conflict – large numbers of weapons are to be found in the hands of civilians who are also likely to be ex-military personnel. This requires a more comprehensive action programme for collecting weapons and creating a situation of relative weapons security.

Cambodia was faced with just such a situation in 1998 at the end of thirty years of war. To complicate matters this was not a war between just two parties; it was a period when several different factions fought each other in constantly changing coalitions, backed at various times by foreign powers that not only supplied weapons but also on occasion directly intervened in the conflict. The final stages of the war in Cambodia (after the United Nations-supervised elections in 1993 until 1998) had two characteristic elements. Firstly the government distributed arms to village militias so the villagers could defend themselves against attacks by the Khmer Rouge. Secondly, there was a

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<sup>1</sup> This article is adopted from a paper presented by the author at the International Quality & Productivity Centre (IQPC) Conference on “Peacekeeping, Reconstruction & Stability Operations” in Brussels, 4-6 December 2006.

series of defections from the ranks of the Khmer Rouge to the Cambodian government. Generally these Khmer Rouge soldiers were integrated into the government forces. This led to a situation, described by the Head of the Department of Weapons and Explosives Control of the Cambodian National Police, where the civil war in Cambodia had no clear winner and no clear loser. Normally the winning army disarms the losing army, but in Cambodia this was not the case and at the end of hostilities there was no DDR programme. While what the Cambodians call this “Win-Win policy” may have laid the grounds for political post-war reconciliation and relative stability, the reality is that in 1998 the Cambodian government was faced with a dangerously chaotic situation regarding the spread of SALW among former military that then formed part of the civilian population.

### **The Scope of the Problem**

The scope of the SALW problem facing the Cambodian Government at the end of hostilities in 1998 is best highlighted by the fact that the Government itself had no idea what the scope of the problem was! During the war no records had been kept as to the number of weapons that had been received by the various parties in the conflict, neither did the government know how many weapons were in the hands of either its military forces or the civilian population. Two recent publications,<sup>2</sup> using statistics that were made available to UNTAC, the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia that organised the first post-conflict elections in Cambodia in 1993, as well as statistics provided by EU ASAC, now estimate the number of weapons in Cambodia at the end of the war to be between 352,250 and 462,500 giving a mean estimate of 407,375. However, these figures were not known to the Cambodian government at the time and could only be extrapolated after several years of weapons control activities in the country.

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<sup>2</sup> Small Arms Survey (Ed), *Stabilising Cambodia – Small Arms Control and Security Sector Reform, Small Arms Survey 2006*, Chapter 5, Geneva, Switzerland, released 26 June 2006, and SEESAC *Evaluation of the EU SALW Assistance to the Kingdom of Cambodia (EU-ASAC)* August 2006, page 15. See [www.eu-asac.org](http://www.eu-asac.org).

The problem could be seen on the streets of the towns and villages of the countries with civilians openly carrying weapons such as AK-47's. Further it manifested itself in a lack of control of SALW in the military, high crime statistics involving SALW including a firearm homicide rate of between 4.5 and 5.0 per 100,000 in 1998 and a significant number of casualties (estimated to be 4% in 1998) admitted to Cambodian hospital suffering from bullet wounds.<sup>3</sup>

The uncontrolled possession and use of small arms therefore posed a serious threat to post-conflict stability and development in Cambodia.

## **Action by the Cambodian Government**

The Government quickly took action. In 1998 house-to-house searches aimed at confiscating illegal weapons began in Phnom Penh. In April 1999 the Cambodian government strengthened the legal framework to limit possession of SALW by promulgating Sub-decree 38 declaring private unlicensed ownership of weapons to be illegal.<sup>4</sup> Shortly afterwards the twenty-four provincial governors were instructed to collect illegal weapons in their provinces. Most of the governors instituted a buy-back campaign paying approximately 10,000 Riel (US\$ 2.50) per weapon. Some governors gave rice in exchange for weapons. Over 100,000 weapons were collected during this period. In May 1999 the government began a series of public weapons destruction ceremonies. In one year some 36,500 weapons were destroyed by crushing in seven ceremonies. But this successful government initiative came to a halt when it ran out of funds to continue the programme.

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<sup>3</sup> Christina Wille, *Finding the Evidence: the links between weapons collection programmes, gun use and homicide rates in Cambodia*, Small Arms Survey, Geneva, Switzerland, April 2006.

<sup>4</sup> The text of Sub-decree 38 can be found at: [http://www.eu-asac.org/programme/arms\\_law.htm](http://www.eu-asac.org/programme/arms_law.htm)

## **International Assistance**

The Cambodian Government appealed to the international community for assistance in continuing its post-conflict stabilisation activities. The European Union responded and quickly established the EU ASAC programme (European Union Assistance of Curbing Small Arms and light weapons in Cambodia).<sup>5</sup> In April 2000 EU ASAC began operations providing technical and financial assistance to the Cambodian Government in curbing SALW. In this way the European Union enabled the continuation and development of the weapons reduction activities the government itself had started. The Government showed its continued commitment by establishing the National Commission for the Reform and Management of Weapons and Explosives in June 2000.

## **The EU ASAC Programme**

In a post-conflict situation one single approach to solving the problems caused by SALW is usually not possible. The strength of the EU ASAC programme was the development of its multi-faceted, integrated approach in assisting the Cambodian Government in weapons management and curbing the illegal possession of SALW in Cambodia, together with the clear and continuing commitment of the Royal Cambodian Government to implementing the programme.

The EU ASAC programme<sup>6</sup> had five major elements:

1. Strengthening the legal framework by assisting the Cambodian Government to develop a new and stricter Arms Law to replace Sub-decree 38 of 1999;

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<sup>5</sup> European Union Council of Ministers Decision 1999/730/CFSP of 15 November 1999.

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller description of the EU ASAC programme see: David de Beer, *An Integrated Approach to Small Arms Management: the EU ASAC Programme on Curbing Small Arms and Light Weapons in Cambodia*. Presentation given in December 2002 to the Peace Research Institute Frankfurt and GTZ. GTZ, Eschborn, Germany, 2003. It is also available on the EU ASAC website:

[http://www.eu-asac.org/media\\_library/speeches/deBeerDecember2002.pdf](http://www.eu-asac.org/media_library/speeches/deBeerDecember2002.pdf)

2. Implementing voluntary weapons handover projects, largely using the “Weapons for Development” strategy;
3. Assisting the Ministry of National Defence to implement a comprehensive weapons registration and safe storage system through which all its SALW are now stored under internationally acceptable conditions;
4. Assisting the Cambodian Government to destroy surplus military weapons and weapons which had been confiscated from or handed in by the civilian population; and
5. Disseminating public information on the dangers and illegality of private weapons possession, the need to hand in illegal weapons and the benefits of a weapons-free Cambodia.

The implementation of each of these five elements was a separate project, but each element supported the other four and made their implementation easier and more effective.

### **The Arms Law**

In an attempt to stabilise the country after thirty years of war, the Cambodian Government was intent on trying to create a post-conflict “weapons free society”, where civilian ownership of weapons would not be permitted. EU ASAC was also convinced that strengthening the legal framework was central to efficient weapons management in the country. To this end EU ASAC assisted the Cambodian Government in drawing up a new Arms Law. It was able to convince the government that this Law would be more effective if a wide range of civil organisations were allowed to give feedback on draft versions of the new law. In the end some seventy NGO’s commented on the law and in May 2001 a Round Table was held attended by representatives of the Government, EU ASAC and civil society. By December 2001 the new draft law had been finalised and in May 2002 it was approved by the Council of Ministers and submitted to parliament. Due to internal political factors (unrelated to the Arms Law) it was not dealt with by the parliament before the end of the parliamentary session and the draft law lapsed.

In order to continue the momentum towards the adoption of the Arms Law EU ASAC assisted local NGOs in their efforts to publicise the (need for the) new law. This took the form of workshops and seminars, but also theatrical performances often drawing crowds of several hundreds in remote parts of the country.

The draft law was once again submitted to Parliament in February 2005 and was passed by the Parliament on 26 April 2005 and became law after being signed by the King on 01 June 2005.<sup>7</sup> Although simple in structure it is internationally one of the strictest laws regulating the possession, purchasing and selling of arms and ammunition. Article 4 of the Arms Law reads:

“Equipping, possession, carrying, use, purchase, sale, trading, loan, transfer, rental, production, fabrication, repair, transportation, transit, import, export and stockpiling of weapons, explosives and ammunition of all its aspects by the civilian population are prohibited in the Kingdom of Cambodia.”

The arms law is fundamental to the protection of the civilian population from illegal arms and explosives. It is also central to oversight and accountability for arms use by police and military. Arrived at through two years of public and government discussion, including extensive debate within the National Commission for the Management and Reform of Weapons and Explosives in Cambodia, the law has achieved a broad national constituency and popular acceptance.

Following its adoption EU ASAC assisted the Cambodian Government in printing 122,000 copies of the law for distribution among the police, military and judicial officials. In addition 850 officers of the Armed Forces were trained in the implications of the Arms Law in seven training sessions.

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<sup>7</sup> The full text of the law is to be found at: [http://www.eu-asac.org/programme/arms\\_law/arms\\_law\\_april\\_2005.pdf](http://www.eu-asac.org/programme/arms_law/arms_law_april_2005.pdf)

## **Voluntary Weapons Handover: Weapons for Development<sup>8</sup>**

EU ASAC's work promoting the voluntary handover of weapons to the local authorities was a large programme which constantly evolved during the years 2001 to 2003. At the beginning of its operations in Cambodia in April 2000, EU ASAC began planning Weapons for Development (WfD) programme. Consultations were held with the government, not so much on where development was needed, but where the areas were where illegal ownership of small arms caused the greatest number of problems. Two districts were chosen and what came to be known as "large-scale WfD pilot projects" were implemented there in 2001/2002.

The projects were comprehensive in that they involved several elements, apart from simply urging villagers to hand in their illegally held weapons to the authorities. The projects involved public awareness on the dangers of illegal weapons and the making of contracts with Village Development Committees promising development objects if an agreed number of weapons were handed in. Security Sector Reform measures were undertaken in an attempt to improve relations between the police and the community and to improve the performance of the police: the policemen were trained in human rights and community relations so that the villagers would have more trust in the police to provide security; while the inadequately equipped police were given motorbikes, mountain bikes, two-way radio's and office equipment to improve both their visibility and response times.

The results were satisfactory in that over a period of twenty months nearly six thousand weapons were handed in. More importantly, however, the security situation in both districts improved dramatically and the villagers felt that the police were doing a better job than before.

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<sup>8</sup> For a full description of this programme see: David de Beer, *Small arms control in Cambodia. Lessons learned from the EU ASAC Programme*, GTZ, Eschborn, Germany, 2005.

But the projects took twenty months to implement and this led to a different, smaller scale series of Weapons for Development projects which lasted less than one year being implemented by local NGOs in 2002 and 2003. The NGOs conducted public awareness and training sessions, largely in local pagodas. EU ASAC produced its own training materials to ensure the quality of what the local NGOs were teaching. In co-operation with the local police, the NGOs kept track of the number of weapons handed in after the training sessions. In 2002 the NGOs were also allocated the task of building water wells for villages which had handed in sufficient weapons. However in 2003 all water wells were built in conjunction with the Provincial Development Committees.

Where possible the public awareness work by the NGOs was followed by the training of the local police in improving Police/Community Relations.<sup>9</sup> This was done with the full co-operation of the Training Department of the National Police, which was prepared to work with local human rights organisations (often critical of the government) to draw up a special Police Training Manual and then together organise training courses for local police officers. In an innovative attempt to curb corruption there was also a unique project to improve the income of the wives of policemen and their standing in the community where their husbands served.<sup>10</sup>

EU ASAC's experience in the local communities indicated that, by the end of 2003, a large majority of Cambodians knew that it was illegal to possess a firearm. Indications were that many of those who had decided not to voluntarily hand in their weapons to the local authorities had decided to remove the weapons from their houses and to hide them. The preferred method of hiding a weapon is simply to dig a hole in the ground and place the weapon in the hole with the result that its condition deteriorates rapidly in a few months. The result is that weapons such as AK-47's, which are leftovers from the war, were being noticeably less

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<sup>9</sup> For a full report on Police Training see:

[www.eu-asac.org/media\\_library/reports/Reporton2003PoliceTrainingproject.pdf](http://www.eu-asac.org/media_library/reports/Reporton2003PoliceTrainingproject.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> For a report of this project see: [www.eu-asac.org/media\\_library/reports/FinalReportPreahVihear.pdf](http://www.eu-asac.org/media_library/reports/FinalReportPreahVihear.pdf) and [www.eu-asac.org/media\\_library/reports/PreahVihearReport2004.pdf](http://www.eu-asac.org/media_library/reports/PreahVihearReport2004.pdf).

used in the daily violence that is still common in Cambodian society. Crimes involving knives and axes are now much more common than crimes involving AK-47's while criminal violence involving the use of firearms is now generally carried out with K-54 and K-59 handguns. These are weapons that are not considered to be directly part of the post-conflict SALW problem. In addition there was a steady decline in numbers of weapons collected during weapons collection campaigns.

It was therefore decided to end EU ASAC's involvement in Weapons for Development at the end of 2003 due to the clear trend showing improving weapons security regarding left-over weapons of war in Cambodia.

### **Voluntary Weapons Handover: Commune Council Capacity Building**

Having ended its involvement in Weapons for Development, EU ASAC did not want to suddenly abandon those Cambodian authorities who still had responsibilities for weapons security and weapons collection on the ground. In 2004 it therefore began what was also called "an exit strategy" for Weapons Handover activities, namely capacity building of the Commune Councils in matters of security and specifically weapons security. In co-operation with the Department of Local Administration, EU ASAC set up a series of courses in four provinces to train commune councils and provide capacity to work on security and the problems that any remaining illegal weapons in the community may cause. This complemented the police trainings as both programmes were aimed at improving co-operation between the police, the community and the commune councils. By the end of 2004 representatives of one hundred and sixty three Commune councils had been trained.

## **Weapons Registration and Safe Storage<sup>11</sup>**

It can be said that when EU ASAC started in 2000 the Ministry of National Defence did not know how many weapons it had; it did not know where they were stored; it did not know what condition they were in and it had no control over members of the Armed Forces taking their weapons home at night or over the weekend. In addition, existing weapons storage depots were mostly in very bad condition and there was often nothing to stop people just walking off with stored weapons and passing them on to civilians for criminal use.

Faced with this situation EU ASAC began to look into the possibility of assisting the Royal Government implement a system of weapons management in the Armed Forces. At the close of the EU ASAC project in June 2006 the situation was completely different – thanks to the concerted efforts of the Ministry of National Defence and the willingness of donors to support the Military Weapons Registration & Safe Storage projects implemented by EU ASAC together with the Ministry.

Each year between 2001 and 2005 EU ASAC, together with the Ministry of National Defence, implemented Weapons Registration and Safe Storage projects in one or more of the six Military Regions of the Royal Cambodian Army.<sup>12</sup> In 2005 and 2006 similar projects were also implemented for the Gendarmerie, the Navy and the Air Force. New and secure weapons storage depots were built for weapons in medium-term storage in the Military Regions. For weapons in daily use requiring short-term storage racks were installed in offices and barracks. National, long-term storage depots in the centre of the country were also renovated. In total forty-seven depots were built or renovated by EU ASAC. All weapons are registered in a specially designed computer database, so that the whereabouts of a weapon can be traced at any time.

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<sup>11</sup> For an illustrated report of this project see: [www.eu-asac.org/weapons\\_en.pdf](http://www.eu-asac.org/weapons_en.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed report of a project in a Military Region see: [www.eu-asac.org/media\\_library/reports/ImprovedRecordKeepingandSafeStorageProjectInMR4SiemReap.pdf](http://www.eu-asac.org/media_library/reports/ImprovedRecordKeepingandSafeStorageProjectInMR4SiemReap.pdf)

But EU ASAC decided that weapons management could not only be improved with secure buildings, but that human skills had to be improved as well. So much time and money was invested in training military staff in weapons management procedures.

In each Military Region all unit commanders were trained in the basics of weapons management. Following this, approximately one hundred logistical officers per Region were trained how to register the weapons and write down the details of the serial number, date and place of manufacture etc of each weapon on a registration sheet. Four computer operators from each Military Region were trained in Phnom Penh how to use the computer database and given the task of entering the data on the manual registration sheets into the computer database.

But this was not the end of the project. Once the storage depots were filled with weapons that had been registered, there were still thousands of weapons left over. Through registering the weapons the Military Region discovered that it had more weapons than it really needed. It was then agreed with the Ministry of National Defence that all surplus weapons which remain after a Registration and Safe Storage project would be publicly destroyed.

### **Weapons Destruction**

In May 1999, a year before EU ASAC commenced operations in April 2000, the Cambodian Government started implementing its policy of destroying illegal and surplus weapons. In a series of seven ceremonies over 36,500 weapons were destroyed by crushing in colourful public ceremonies, the first of which was presided over by the Prime Minister. In April 2001 EU ASAC continued this tradition of public weapons destruction by giving the Cambodian Government technical and financial assistance for weapons destruction. It was decided, however, to destroy the weapons by burning them in Flames of Peace ceremonies. Each ceremony was attended by thousands of people, often trucked in from outlying villages. Each destruction ceremony was a powerful symbol; both of the Cambodian Government's intention to create a

weapons free society and also reassuring the villagers those weapons they had handed in were destroyed and as a result security in the country had been increased.

Between May 1999 and June 2006 198,148 weapons were destroyed in Cambodia, of which 142,871 with financial and technical assistance from EU ASAC.<sup>13</sup>

### **Public Awareness**

Over the years EU ASAC employed a wide variety of activities to improve public awareness on the dangers posed by SALW as well as the need to hand in weapons to the authorities. NGO's were helped to organise campaigns at local and national level, large billboards were posted along the national roads, video documentaries commissioned and shown throughout the country and special theatrical performances were commissioned and performed in many outlying provinces. T-shirts with relevant texts were distributed at dozens of festivals and weapons destruction ceremonies as well as to motorcycle taxi drivers, series of educational posters were commissioned and distributed through a wide national network, TV and radio spots were broadcast and what became an independent project was set up training Cambodian art students to make sculptures and furniture out of weapons that had been destroyed in Flames of Peace ceremonies.<sup>14</sup> One of the greatest successes was the distribution of small "No Gun" stickers which, in their tens of thousands, are still stuck on motorcycles, taxis, police vehicles, boats and an innumerable number of other places.

As a result of all these public awareness activities it can generally be said that everyone in Cambodia knows that it is illegal to possess a

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<sup>13</sup> For a full list of weapons destruction ceremonies see:

[www.eu-asac.org/programme/weapons\\_destruction/weaponsDestructionTable.pdf](http://www.eu-asac.org/programme/weapons_destruction/weaponsDestructionTable.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> For some pictures of these artworks see: [www.sashaconstable.com/cambodia\\_papc.php](http://www.sashaconstable.com/cambodia_papc.php)

weapon and this has – as has been explained above – assisted in weapons collection and removing weapons from circulation.

### **A Multi-Faceted, Integrated Programme**

The advantages of the multi-faceted, integrated programme are quickly summarised:

- The adoption of the new Arms Law and public awareness activities on the Arms Law resulted in the nationwide realisation that possession of SALW by the civilian population was illegal;
- Communities, who knew that private SALW possession was illegal, were encouraged through public awareness activities and by peer pressure (the communal reward of a water well) to hand in their firearms to the authorities;
- Knowing that it is illegal for civilians to possess SALW has led to the “doubters” (people who think they may need a weapons in future) to bury their weapons in their gardens – effectively taking them out of circulation, as they rust in a short period of time;
- Security Sector Reform, through extra Police training and ensuring the Police had extra equipment ensured the villagers had more trust in the Police to do their work better and therefore was a factor in villagers deciding to hand in their weapons;
- Security Sector Reform, through Weapons Registration and Safe Storage, ensured that all weapons belonging to the Ministry of Defence were accounted for and could less easily be stolen or removed from military premises to be redistributed to the civilian population;
- The destruction of surplus and illegal weapons made it impossible for them to be redistributed to the civilian population (or illegally traded on international markets), while the Flames of Peace ceremonies sent a clear message to the population that the Government was serious about its weapons control measures.

The end result is that Cambodia today is a far more secure country than at any time since the end of the 1960's and the success of the Cambodian

Government in getting the enormous SALW problems under control have contributed to the stability that the country needs to develop in order to meet the growing expectation of the population.

## **Lessons Learned<sup>15</sup>**

The conclusions of the lessons learned with regard to setting up and implementing a SALW management project can be summarised as follows:

- The success of a SALW security and management programme requires a clear and on-going commitment of the host government to co-operate with the programme and to openly claim ownership of it. In addition the Government must be in a position to implement its authority on the area where the programme is to be carried out.
- SALW security and management programmes cannot be solely designed and implemented following technical guidelines; they are inherently political programmes with a profound effect on society and they need to be designed and managed as such. This means that there must be open contact with the national government or regional authorities.
- Reducing the threat SALW pose to the security and stability of a country is most likely to be achieved by implementing a comprehensive project comprising of several separate, but complementary programme components. Each programme component strengthens the overall impact and the final result is generally more than the sum of the individual components.
- A strong legal framework should be in place that both reflects the government's intention to reduce the problems caused by SALW and also gives guidelines within which weapons collection and Security Sector Reform projects can be implemented.

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<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed study of Lessons Learned from the EU ASAC SALW programme in Cambodia see: [www.eu-asac.org/media\\_library/speeches/lessons.pdf](http://www.eu-asac.org/media_library/speeches/lessons.pdf)

- A comprehensive Weapons Handover (Weapons for Development) project that seeks to improve 'human security' and includes elements of Social Sector Reform to ensure better police-community relations is likely to be successful in stimulating the local population to hand in their illegal weapons.
- The development incentives of a Weapons for Development programme should, whenever possible, be incorporated into the government's local development plans.
- In an early stage of the project an exit-strategy for the Weapons for Development programme (like the Commune Council Capacity Building programme) should be developed whereby local responsibility for weapons security will be ensured once the Weapons for Development project ends.
- The provision of high quality weapons storage facilities and a centralised computerised weapons registration system, together with an investment in human capacity not only improved security by limiting the "leaking" of weapons from the military to civilians, but it also helped to win the confidence of the Ministry of Defence in the entire programme.
- Once all weapons in a Military Region have been registered and securely stored, the military authorities can be convinced that they have more weapons than they need and that the surplus can be destroyed. Such a decision is made easier if the programme has the confidence of the Ministry of Defence.
- For a government that is trying to limit the number of weapons in circulation or create a weapons-free society it is important that the population can feel that progress has been made and that they can see that the collected or surplus weapons are destroyed.
- A combination of national and local public awareness strategies serves to strengthen the core message of all SALW campaigns: illegal weapons are a danger to the community and a community without weapons is likely to attract more development.
- A SALW security and management project needs to be evaluated primarily on the impact that it has had on curbing the problems caused by SALW and whether donor funds have been properly managed in achieving the aims of the project.