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Post-conflict SALW Management in Cambodia: Improving Security in Cambodia and the ASEAN region.

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Introduction

It was five years ago this month that the European Union started its EU ASAC programme assisting the Cambodian Government to manage the post-conflict small arms problem it faced following the cessation of hostilities in 1998². So, apart from the forthcoming Biennial Meeting of States, this is an additional reason to reflect at what has been achieved in Cambodia and how it has been achieved. But it is also time to look towards the future, to see how the lessons learned over the last five years have changed Cambodia and could also assist other countries in the ASEAN region also confronted by problems caused by SALW.

I have been privileged to be the Project Manager of EU ASAC for over three of the five years it has been operating. This means that this paper is not an academic study or a distant reflection of developments in the country. It is rather a report from the field of action, where SALW policies have developed over the years to fit the day-to-day realities faced on the ground.

One of the strengths of present SALW work in Cambodia is that it is merely building upon what the Cambodian Government itself initiated in 1998 and 1999. Once the



last elements of the Khmer Rouge stopped fighting and were absorbed into the Government structures in 1998, the problems caused by the uncontrolled and extensive spread of small arms throughout Cambodia became apparent. Over decades of war the international powers had armed various factions fighting in Cambodia and in the last stages of the war the Cambodian Government gave weapons to village militias so that they could protect their villages from raids by the Khmer Rouge. For decades there were no serious steps taken to disarm anybody, with the result that hundreds of thousands of weapons were in civilian hands and the government had no means of managing or controlling its own pool of weapons in the hands of the military and police. The uncontrolled possession and use of small arms posed a serious threat to post-conflict stability and development.

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 illegal³. 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.

The Cambodian Government appealed to the international community for assistance. The European Union responded and quickly established the EU ASAC programme (European Union Assistance of Curbing Small Arms and light weapons in Cambodia)⁴. In April 2000 it 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 itself 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:

The strength of the EU ASAC programme has been the development of its multi-faceted, integrated approach in assisting the Cambodian Government in weapons management and curbing the illegal possession of SALW in Cambodia⁵, together with the clear and continuing commitment of the Royal Cambodian Government to implementing the programme.

The EU ASAC programme⁶ has had six elements:

1. Assisting the Cambodian Government in developing a new and stricter Arms Law to replace Sub-decree 38 of 1999;
2. Assisting the Ministry of National Defence to develop a comprehensive weapons registration and safe storage system through which all its SALW are stored under internationally acceptable conditions⁷;
3. Implementing voluntary weapons handover projects, largely using the “Weapons for Development” strategy;
4. Searching for weapons hidden in weapons caches in remote forest and mountain areas, in co-operation with the police and military authorities;
5. Assisting the Cambodian Government to destroy surplus military weapons and weapons which had been confiscated from or handed in by the civilian population; and
6. 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 six elements has been a separate project, but each element has supported the other five and made their implementation easier and more effective.



1. The Arms Law:

One of the laudable features of the Cambodian Government's small arms policy is their expressed intention to create, as far as possible, a "weapons free society".

Article 4 of the 2005 Draft Arms Law⁸ 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 draft law has achieved a broad national constituency and popular acceptance. Preparations for the draft law to be debated in the National Assembly debate are presently underway.

2. Weapons Registration and Safe Storage for the Ministry of National Defence:

It can be said that five years ago 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.

This was the situation that faced EU ASAC in 2000 when it began to look into the possibility of assisting the Royal Government implement a system of weapons management in the Armed Forces. Today the situation is 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 since 2001 EU ASAC together with the Ministry of National Defence has implemented Weapons Registration and Safe Storage projects in one or more of the six Military Regions of the Royal Cambodian Army⁹. New and secure weapons



storage depots are built for weapons in medium-term storage in the Military Regions. Weapons in daily use requiring short-term storage racks are installed in offices and barracks. All weapons are registered in a specially designed computer database, so that the whereabouts of a weapon can be traced at any time.

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 has been invested in training military staff in weapons management procedures.

In each Military Region all unit commanders were trained in the basics of weapons management. Later about one hundred logistical officers were trained how to register each weapon and write down the details of its serial number, date and place of manufacture etc on a registration sheet. Four computer operators from each Military Region were trained in Phnom Penh how to use 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 & Safe Storage project will be publicly destroyed.

In 2005 EU ASAC is completing a project in the sixth and final Military Region of the Army and is implementing a similar project on national level with the Royal Gendarmerie. It is hoped that in 2006 the entire programme can be completed after implementing projects with the Navy and the Air Force.

3. Voluntary Weapons Handover¹⁰

3.a. Weapons for Development

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 a 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 was supported 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.

But the projects took twenty months to implement and this led to a different, smaller scale WfD project which lasted less than one year being implemented by a local NGO’s in 2002 and 2003. The NGO’s 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 NGO’s were teaching. In co-operation with the local police, the NGO’s kept track of the number of weapons handed in after the training sessions. In 2002 the NGO’s 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 NGO’s was followed by the training of the local police in improving Police/Community Relations¹¹. 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.



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 and CKC's, which are leftovers from the war, are being noticeably less used in the daily violence that is still common in Cambodian society. Crimes involving knives and axes now seem to be more common than crimes involving AK-47's and CKC's while criminal violence involving the use of firearms is now generally carried out with K-54 and K-59 handguns. These are new weapons, smuggled into Cambodia in recent years, and are not directly part of the post-conflict SALW problem.

3.b. An Exit-strategy for WfD: Commune Council Capacity Building

It was 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. In addition there was a steady decline in numbers of weapons collected during weapons collection campaigns. It was then decided, as an exit strategy from weapons collection, to implement a programme training the newly created Commune Councils to take responsibility for Weapons Security in their communes. In 2004 a pilot programme was initiated in four provinces where EU ASAC had implemented Weapons for Development (WfD) campaigns, had trained the local police, had built military weapons depots and had destroyed weapons. Using the broad network of contacts gained through these activities in previous years and its high degree of acceptability to all partners, EU ASAC staff designed a Commune Council training programme to give responsibility for Weapons Security to the local authorities.

The major aims of the Commune Council Capacity Building (CCCB) programme were laid out as follows:

- To strengthen sustainable capacity of the Commune Councils and police at commune level on issues relating to local weapons security through



mainstreaming the concept of community responsibility for security into these target structures;

- To improve communication and co-operation between the above groups on local security issues;
- To reduce numbers of illegally held and collected weapons in the target areas which were stored under bad conditions in local police posts;
- To raise grassroots community awareness on weapons security issues and the need for community responsibility for security by implementing a comprehensive public awareness campaign and encouraging provincial, district and commune level civil and security authorities and local stakeholders to disseminate information.

This was implemented in four provinces in Cambodia, using the training teams already involved in training the Commune Councils. Documentation on security and weapons security was prepared by EU ASAC for members of the Commune Councils and the police at commune level. These police documents will allow the police to report more consistently on all incidents involving weapons.

The approach used in setting up and implementing the project was to keep it as low-cost and simple as possible. This was done so that after the initial pilot projects funded by EU ASAC ended, the project could be repeated by other provincial authorities themselves at minimal costs. By the end of the year trainings had been held for representatives of 163 Commune Councils in the four provinces.

It is also probably the first time that an Exit-strategy following Weapons for Development programmes has been implemented aimed at empowering the local authorities to continue improving weapons security in their communities.

4. Searching for Weapons Caches

In 2003 and 2004 also assisted the Cambodian authorities in searching for and destroying weapons hidden in caches during the years of war. EU ASAC received tips from a series of local informants, some of whom claimed to have been involved in the hiding of the weapons during the conflict. Once a weapons cache had been located a team, including police and military representatives, travelled to the site to collect the weapons and bring them back to the nearest police or military headquarters where they would await destruction. Mostly these caches were in extremely remote



areas, requiring travelling by improvised transport and by foot. Recovered weapons were at times hand carried from the site to ox-carts.

Several factors led to the curtailing of weapons cache activities at the end of 2004. Intelligence did not always prove to be reliable and the planning of a weapons cache expedition seemed at times to encourage other elements to empty the location before the expedition arrived. The present high price of scrap metal has caused many Cambodians to look for hidden weapons and UXO themselves, including illegally raiding weapons caches, in order to sell them to scrap metal dealers.

5. Weapons Destruction

A year before EU ASAC started 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 is attended by thousands of people, often trucked in from outlying villages. The destruction ceremonies remain a powerful symbol; both of the Cambodian Government's intention to create a weapons free society and also reassuring the villagers that weapons they have handed in are now destroyed to increase security.

Since May 1999 154,188 weapons have been destroyed in Cambodia, of which 105,467 with financial and technical assistance from EU ASAC¹².

6. Public Awareness:

Over the years EU ASAC has 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 have been assisted to organise campaigns at local and national level, large billboards have been posted along the national roads, video documentaries have been commissioned and shown throughout the country, T-shirts with relevant texts have been distributed at dozens of festivals and weapons destruction ceremonies as well as to motorbike taxi drivers, series of educational posters have been



commissioned and distributed through a wide national network, TV and radio spots have been broadcast and a (now independent) project has even been set up training Cambodian art students to make sculptures and furniture out of weapons that have been destroyed in Flames of Peace ceremonies¹³. One of the greatest successes has been the distribution of small “No Gun” stickers which, in their tens of thousands, are stuck on motor bikes, taxis, police vehicles, boats and an innumerable number of other places. It has been almost impossible to keep up with the demand for them. The results have been encouraging and it can generally be said that everyone in Cambodia knows that it is illegal to keep a weapon and this has – as has been explained above – assisted in weapons collection and removing weapons from circulation.

Cambodian Government Policy: Internal, Regional and International

Progress has been made in Cambodia because the government is committed to making the country a “weapons free” society. But since it started dealing with SALW problems as a matter of internal security in 1998 the Cambodian Government has gradually become more aware of wider SALW concerns and the role it can play in improving regional and international security.

The Ministry of National Defence has now virtually completed a full registration of its SALW in a centralised computer database. It is now turning its attention to the problems posed by its ammunition supplies. Its ammunition is often stored under bad conditions and some of the ammunition is old and possibly unstable. While the Ministry of National Defence is presently looking for a donor to implement a registration and safe storage project for its ammunition comparable to that of EU ASAC’s weapons programme, it is at the same time negotiating with the United States to have its surplus and outdated ammunition destroyed.

In July 2002 the Ministry of Defence was approached by a British Arms broker¹⁴ who wanted to buy surplus weapons parts. The Minister of Defence refused to sell, saying he did not want to get Cambodia involved in the arms trade.

Another example of the Cambodian Government’s willingness to contribute to increasing international security is its co-operation with the United States in 2004 to deal with its supply of MANPADS. The Cambodian Army had some 273 Russian manufactured shoulder-fired missiles dating back to its civil war in the 1990’s. There



was concern that these may not have been well stored and could have been targeted for stealing by international terrorist organisations. When approached, the Cambodian Government agreed to have the MANPADS destroyed. This was done on 31 March 2004 by the United States which in exchange helped upgrade weapons storage facilities for a total of US\$ 273,000 or US\$ 1,000 per MANPAD. In the second half of 2004 the Cambodian Government began to realise the need to increase its security legislation to play a more responsible role in regional security. Cambodia's long and porous borders with Thailand, Laos and Vietnam may make it vulnerable to threats caused by international crime and international terrorism. In December 2004 and January 2005 a series of draft laws improving Cambodia's ability to improve its performance combating international threats was sent by the Council of Ministers to the National Assembly for approval¹⁵. There is no specific anti-terrorism law planned, but the draft Arms Law which was drafted with the assistance of EU ASAC serves as the cornerstone of this series of security measures.

Remaining challenges: Internal Security and Increased Regional Co-operation:

It is clear that the Government of Cambodia had made great strides in dealing with the problems posed by post-conflict SALW. There is, however, one major SALW problem facing Cambodia today. There is a clear distinction between the post-conflict weapons and a "new generation" of weapons, largely handguns which have been smuggled into the country since the end of hostilities and are now the choice use of professional criminals. Dealing with the challenges posed by the K-54 and K-59 pistols is a matter for the National Police, those responsible for ensuring the integrity of Cambodia's long and porous borders with Thailand, Laos and Vietnam as well as the relevant authorities in these three countries. Here is one good example of how trans-border regional co-operation is now needed to take the fight against the problems cause by SALW one step further.

Largely because of the resources the European Union has made available to improve the SALW situation, the Cambodian Government is now being recognised internationally as having one of the more secure policies on SALW in the South East Asian region. Given the growth in international concern about the threat and possible spread of terrorism in South East Asia, there may well be a case for initiating a South East Asia SALW Clearing House to try to regionalise the best SALW practices as



developed in Cambodia in other targeted countries in the South East Asia Region. Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand are three ASEAN countries facing totally different political and social challenges in which SALW play an important part. Bodies such as the ASEAN Regional Forum have already called for closer co-operation among Member States to combat the threat of terrorism, while the possibility of forming an ASEAN Security Community was discussed by South East Asian Foreign Ministers early in July 2004. Secure management of SALW plays an important role in minimising terrorist threats and this way the lessons learned from the EU ASAC project could be well used and further developed by other countries in the region.

Notes:

¹ David de Beer has been Special Adviser to the European Commission and EU ASAC Project Manager since January 2002.

² Brigadier-General Henny J. van der Graaf RNA (ret.) was EU ASAC Project Manager from April 2000 to December 2001.

³ The text of Sub-decree 38 can be found at: http://www.eu-asac.org/programme/arms_law.htm

⁴ European Union Council of Ministers Decision 1999/730/CFSP of 15 November 1999

⁵ 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

⁶ While the core-funding for the EU ASAC programme has been provided by the European Commission (2000-2005 = €7,786,207), important additional funding was provided by The Netherlands (€363,000 for Weapons for Development and €500,000 for Weapons Registration & Safe Storage), GTZ (US\$ 200,000 for police training and support as part of WfD), United Kingdom (US\$ 116,000 for Weapons for Development and police support), Japan (US\$ 137,000 for Weapons for Development) and Canada (CAN\$ 40,800 for police training).

⁷ In a pilot project in 2003 EU ASAC also assisted the Ministry of the Interior in registering and providing safe storage facilities for the SALW used by the police in three provinces.

⁸ The full text of the 2005 version of the Draft Arms is to be found at:

http://www.eu-asac.org/programme/arms_law/draft_arms_law_2005.pdf

⁹ For a detailed report of a project in a Military Region see:

www.eu-asac.org/media_library/reports/ImprovedRecordKeepingandSafeStorageProjectInMR4SiemReap.pdf

¹⁰ For a more detailed analysis of this topic see article by David de Beer and Neil Wilford:

www.eu-asac.org/media_library/reports/WfDStrategies.pdf

¹¹ For a full report on Police Training see:

www.eu-asac.org/media_library/reports/Reporton2003PoliceTrainingproject.pdf

¹² For a full list of weapons destruction ceremonies see:

www.eu-asac.org/programme/weapons_destruction/weaponsDestructionTable.pdf

¹³ For full details of this project see: www.peaceartprojectcambodia.org

¹⁴ The broker was President of Imperial Defence Services Ltd., Hertfordshire, United Kingdom.

¹⁵ This proposed legislation includes:

- Law to accede to Chemical Weapons Convention
- Law on Drug Trafficking
- Draft Law on Weapons, Explosives and Ammunitions Control
- International Convention on the Elimination of Funding Terrorism
- Protocol on the Fighting Smuggling and Immigration on land, water and airway, which supplements to the UN Conventions on the Fighting the Organized Trans-border Crimes.
- Protocol on the Prevention, Suppression and Punishment for Human Trafficking, especially women and children, which supplements to the UN Convention on Trans-border crimes.