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Disarmament Education in the SALW Programme of EU ASAC

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Introduction:

The SALW problems faced in 1998 by Cambodia at the end of nearly thirty years of war are well known: hundreds of thousands of small arms were in circulation throughout the country, either in civilian hands or held by the Cambodian Armed Forces without any proper form of management. This lack of weapons security threatened both the stability of the country and its future prospects for development.

The situation today, some seven years later, could not be more different. Almost all government-controlled weapons are securely stored and registered in a centralised computer database; illegal weapons possession among civilians has been reduced to a fraction of what it was and this is reflected in a dramatic drop in crime statistics involving left-over weapons of war such as AK-47 rifles. In addition almost 180,000 weapons have been destroyed by the Cambodian Government to prevent them being leaked for civilian use or illegally smuggled out of the country and sold.

EU ASAC, the European Union programme for Assistance on curbing Small Arms and light weapons in Cambodia, which started in April 2000 is now generally regarded as one of the more successful small arms management and reduction projects carried out in recent years. There are several reasons for its success, but certainly a major one is the support it has received from the Royal Cambodian Government, which started major small arms reduction activities in 1998 and only later appealed for international assistance to continue this work.

I have been privileged to be the Project Manager of EU ASAC for the last four years. This means that this paper is not an academic study on educational tools for SALW disarmament. It is rather a report from the field of action, where policies have developed over the years to fit the day-to-day SALW realities faced on the ground.

**The EU ASAC programme:**

The essential 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 Cambodia, together with the clear and continuing commitment of the Royal Cambodian Government to implementing the programme.

The EU ASAC programme has had six elements²:

1. Assisting the Cambodian Government in developing a new and stricter Arms Law. This law came into force in June 2005.
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 conditions³;
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. Administering public awareness and education programmes 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. This can be easily demonstrated in taking a detailed look at the “Public Awareness and Education” component. While this was a separate component aimed at educating the people of Cambodia on the dangers of illegal small arms possession, public information and educational activities are to be found in almost all the other components as well.

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: These have included the following activities, most of which are traditionally used in educational and public awareness campaigning:

- NGO’s have been assisted to organise campaigns at local and national level;
- Large billboards have been posted along the national roads in all provinces;
- 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;
- Several series of educational posters, brochures and flyers have been commissioned and distributed through a wide national network;
- TV and radio spots have been broadcast; and
- A “No Gun” sticker has been widely distributed.

The results have been encouraging and it can generally be said that everyone in Cambodia now knows that it is illegal to keep a weapon, and as such an important educational goal has been reached.

**The link between Public Awareness, Education and other EU ASAC activities:**

In designing the EU ASAC project, Public Awareness and Education was seen as a separate project component. But just as the success of the EU ASAC project has relied on an integrated approach where activities in one field support those of another, this has been especially true for Public Awareness educational activities. The success of many of the other EU ASAC activities has relied on a strong educational and public awareness aspects being built into them.

Public Awareness, Education and the Arms Law:

When EU ASAC started its work in Cambodia, the main law governing SALW was Sub-Decree No. 38 of April 1999⁴. While this did declare private weapons possession to be illegal, its general scope was limited and the punishment provided in the sub-decree was regarded as minimal. Between 2000 and 2002 EU ASAC assisted the Royal Cambodian Government in drawing up a draft text for a new, more comprehensive Arms Law. Realising that the success of the law depended on its public acceptance, it was decided to involve legal and civil society organisations in the debate about the provisions of the Arms Law at an early stage. In 2001 a Round Table Discussion on the Arms Law was organised by the Government with the assistance of EU ASAC to allow a wide range of civil society organisations to express their opinion and to listen to the Government's rationale for each element of the new law. The law was finally passed by the National Assembly in April 2005⁵ and this was welcomed by a wide range of organisations. EU ASAC realised that its responsibility did not end at this point; education on the law, particularly within the government, the police and the military had to continue as soon as possible. To this end, once the law was adopted, EU ASAC assisted the Cambodian in printing 20,000 copies of the law to be distributed to every provincial, district and commune administrative office, including the 1,621 commune police stations. Following this, EU ASAC printed 100,000 copies of the law in pocket-sized format. 70,000 copies were given to the National Police so that each police officer could receive a copy and 30,000 copies were given to the Ministry of Defence for wide distribution within the Armed Forces and Gendarmerie. Assistance has also been given to a national disarmament NGO which has been trying to educate other local NGO's on the law and to encourage the Government to have it strictly implemented. Earlier, assistance was given to two NGO's to organise traditional theatrical performances in remote village areas to educate them on the most relevant aspects of the new law. EU ASAC has also produced radio and TV-spots for the Cambodian Government and a television discussion on the Arms Law involving senior military and police officers was subsidised by EU ASAC. In this way the public is educated on the importance of the Arms Law and some of its specific implications. In the context of Cambodian society the wider the understanding of an issue among the population, the more likely it is that they will respond responsibly to Government initiatives to improve the situation. This is certainly true of SALW and the Arms Law.

Disarmament Education and Military Weapons Registration & Safe Storage:

By the end of June 2006 EU ASAC will have assisted the Cambodian Ministry of National Defence in registering and securely storing all its SALW. This project started after a feasibility study in 2000 and has so far covered all six Military Regions of the Army as well as the Royal Gendarmerie⁶. The Navy and the Air Force will be assisted in 2006. The project is more than just building weapons storage depots and



providing computers. Training forms an important part of the project and for each project cycle four training sessions are held: high-level officers courses (major and upwards), unit commanders, logistics officers and computer operators. In all except the computer courses, disarmament and weapons security training is dealt with in detail. Emphasis is laid on the responsibility of the military to ensure weapons security in the country – and that includes preventing (surplus) military weapons from “leaking” into civilian hands. Issues regarding the Arms Law and other security legislation are also dealt with. A set of posters, particularly aimed at the Army was produced by EU ASAC and distributed in military barracks and offices by the Ministry of National Defence.

Public Awareness, Education and Voluntary Weapons Collection Activities:

It is probably fair to say that the key to the success of a weapons collection campaign is education: those holding weapons illegally must learn that it is illegal to hold weapons and then they must be convinced that it is in their best interests to hand in their illegal weapons to the authorities. This often includes educating them that the reasons they feel they want to keep their weapons are no longer valid as well as providing them with an incentive to hand in their weapons.

EU ASAC worked extensively with the “Weapons for Development” strategy⁷ to encourage voluntary weapons surrender. The approach was two-fold: educate people in the target area and provide a communal incentive for handing in weapons (such as a water well for the whole village). The educational work in the target area was crucial to the success of the project. Generally national NGO’s were hired to educate the people as to the legal situation and the social and moral responsibilities involved in illegal weapons possession. EU ASAC developed its own curriculum for the various NGO’s to use. This ensured a common approach in each target area. Distributing the training handbook to all who attended the sessions held by the NGO’s ensured a wider distribution for the themes dealt with, as there are very few books in the Khmer language and all publications will be read by a wide circle of people. In addition videos were produced; one a documentary-style, the other more of a soap opera. The NGO’s were equipped with video-players, TV’s and generators so that these could be shown in villages where there is no electricity. The NGO’s were given posters and brochures and flyers in all the target areas, as well as the now famous “No Gun” stickers. The underlying message was that weapons possession was illegal and contributed to a high level of violence in a community; a community without weapons was also more likely to receive outside development assistance, as it would be more stable. If the communities responded positively to this and handed in weapons to the local authorities they were generally rewarded with a water well. In some cases NGO’s were also requested to hire traditional theatre groups to produce plays on the danger of illegal weapons possession (or the benefits of the new Arms Law). In rural Cambodia there is no real evening entertainment in up to one thousand people could attend such a performance in a village.

One of the reasons that people often gave for wanting to keep their illegal weapons was that they did not trust the police to protect them. It was clear that there was no real basis of police/community trust. One of the problems of the police was poor equipment. Where possible EU ASAC tried to provide bicycles, motorcycles and two-way radios to improve communication and the response times of the police. But more importantly a series of police training and education programmes was begun to train the police in police/community relations⁸. The curriculum was drawn up by a team drawn from both the National Police Training School and local human rights



NGO's. It was the first time that such Police/NGO co-operation took place. Almost all the police officers in the target provinces received an educational course in the basic principles of police/community relations, but this included respect for human rights as well as the principles of disarmament. It was also important that the communities knew that the police were being trained as this increased their confidence that police performance might improve. And this would then be a reason for them to hand in their illegally-held weapons.

At the end of 2003, after nearly four years of weapons collection activity, fewer and fewer weapons were being handed in. This coincided with a drop in the rate of crimes committed with weapons such as AK-47. It became clear that the efforts to educate people to hand in their weapons had been successful. It appeared also that, while some people still did have weapons, they knew this was illegal and instead of keeping the weapons in the house, they buried them in their fields. This effectively contributed to disarmament as it removed the weapons from daily circulation. Once a weapon has been buried it takes hours to clean it and therefore prevents it from being used in "impulse violence" – a major cause of weapons abuse in Cambodia. In the course of a few years a buried weapon rusts so much that it finally becomes unusable. In cases like this, even though the weapon is not handed in, the impact of education and public awareness has been sufficient to remove weapons from circulation.

Public Awareness, Education and Weapons Destruction:

Between 1999 and the end of 2005, almost 180,000 weapons have been destroyed by the Royal Cambodian Government⁹. Since 2001 EU ASAC has provided financial and technical assistance to the Government for organising "Flames of Peace" destruction ceremonies. These are large public events, organised by provincial governors in co-operation with the National Police or the Ministry of National Defence in which thousands of weapons are piled up on a pyre on a base of wooden poles and charcoal and then set alight. The pyre will burn for up to forty-eight hours and the weapons are then no more than scrap metal. Each Flame of Peace ceremony carries an important message, not only to the three or four thousand Cambodians who attend the ceremony, but also to the country as a whole: "Because the country is at peace, weapons which in the past were used to kill Cambodians are no longer needed and can therefore be destroyed." The fact that a senior cabinet minister generally presides over each ceremony and that senior generals from the Police and the Ministry of National Defence are present underlines this aspect of government policy. The governor is expected to invite the press and other media to attend the ceremonies. Television coverage of such spectacular events is picked up by most major channels in the country and very often the national and provincial press cover the Flames of Peace as well. Weapons destruction, while being an end in itself as part of the weapons management programme, also plays an important educational role. The destruction ceremonies are a reminder to the public that disarmament is an on-going process and contributed to the growing feeling of security in the country. As has been pointed out earlier, when people feel security is increasing they are more likely to hand in any illegal weapon they may be keeping because they did not trust the security situation.

Other Aspects of SALW Public Awareness Work:

While the SALW public awareness and educational aspects of the EU ASAC programme in Cambodia have been explained above, there are some other aspects of SALW education in Cambodia that should be mentioned. Since 1998 there has been a



national NGO working in Cambodia: WGWR (Working Group for Weapons Reduction)¹⁰. This has done some valuable research, particularly in the past, and it could probably be said that WGWR's research spurred the government to take action on SALW in 1998 and 1999. Good research, well presented, can therefore have an educational impact and lead to action.

WGWR also maintains a network of local NGO's which are interested in Cambodian disarmament issues. Through this local network WGWR has been able to educate many organisations, particularly youth groups, on the dangers of SALW and to use their lobbying power with the government. WGWR played an important role in the consultations with civil society on the new Arms Law and this involvement has resulted in a popular acceptance of the law from the moment it was passed in the National Assembly.

For the last two years WGWR has piloted a scheme of "Peace Rooms" in schools in two provinces. It has equipped small reading rooms with posters, brochures and booklets relating to Peace and Disarmament in an attempt to get teachers and school children aware of the dangers of SALW. A year ago a breakthrough was achieved when WGWR signed a Memorandum of Agreement with the Ministry of Education. This allowed for the drawing up of a Peace Education Curriculum which was first used in two provinces and has now been printed with the object of using it officially in schools throughout the country.

EU ASAC is pleased to have been able to sponsor many activities of WGWR under its NGO support programme as part of its Public Awareness and Educational project.

Another dimension to Public Awareness and Education was given by supporting a (now independent) project that trained Cambodian art students to make sculptures and furniture out of weapons that had been destroyed in Flames of Peace ceremonies. These works of art have captured the imagination of those who have seen them and are in themselves a strong advertisement for a weapons-free Cambodia. From August to November 2005 an exhibition including EU ASAC's weapons collection and destruction work and the art work of the Cambodian students was open to the public and drew tens of thousands of visitors.

A small, but remarkable success has been the distribution of "No Gun" stickers throughout the country. In their tens of thousands, these stickers are to be found on motor bikes, taxis, police vehicles, boats, office doors, cupboard doors and in many other places. At times it has been almost impossible to keep up with the demand for them and in 2005 over 50,000 have been distributed. The sticker has virtually become the unofficial symbol of Cambodia's desire to leave its SALW problem behind and to look towards a future where the old Culture of Violence is replaced by a new Culture of Peace.

Conclusion:

EU ASAC can certainly be seen as a SALW success story. Part of this success has relied on the wide scope of the project and its comprehensive, integrated approach to the problems of SALW in Cambodia. Intensive work on Public Awareness and disarmament education has played an important role; but this work is not only to be found in the "obvious" Public Awareness activities, but it has been integrated into all the other components as well.

It is to be hoped that the success of EU ASAC will not only invite further research into the reasons for this success so that it may assist other programmes elsewhere in



the world, but that it also convince donors that by supporting a comprehensive SALW project over an extended period of time can be successful. And the success of one project has a wider educational impact in other areas suffering under SALW problems.

Notes:

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

² 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

³ 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.

⁴ The text of Sub-decree No. 38 is to be found at:

http://www.eu-asac.org/programme/arms_law/Royal%20Government%20of%20Cambodia%20Sub-Decree%20No.%2038%201998.pdf

⁵ For the full text of the Arms Law see:

http://www.eu-asac.org/programme/arms_law/arms_law_april_2005.pdf

⁶ For details of the EU ASAC Weapons and Safe Storage project see:

http://www.eu-asac.org/weapons_en.pdf

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

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

⁷ For a full description see the publication by David de Beer, *Small Arms Control in Cambodia: Lessons learned from the EU ASAC programme*, GTZ, Eschborn, 2005 or see article by David de Beer and Neil Wilford: www.eu-asac.org/media_library/reports/WfDStrategies.pdf

⁸ For a full report on Police Training see:

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

⁹ For a full list of weapons destruction ceremonies see:

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

¹⁰ See for further information: www.wgwr.org