

Micro-disarmament and peace-building: The European Union's ASAC programme in Cambodia

After thirty years of civil war and fifty years of war along the Viet Nam-Cambodia frontier provoked by external forces, Cambodia finds itself in a state of precarious peace. The countryside is flooded with weapons of every description. The last serious fighting was stilled only in 1998, when the royalist Funcipec party (led by Prince Norodom Ranaridh, a son of King Norodom Sihanouk) was defeated by troops supporting the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) of Prime Minister Hun Sen. There is still power-sharing in the government. Each ministry is run by two co-ministers, but the influential ministers are mainly the CPP members. Meanwhile the Khmer Rouge — the party of the late Pol Pot, who ran the country from 1975–79 and who organized the Killing Fields — is quiet, save in a gambling-rich enclave on the Thai frontier.

Cambodia's political structure remains fragile, under a monarch who is now elderly and in poor health. The uniformed forces are dominant factors in society, both politically and economically, and the elite appears able to carry firearms and to misbehave with impunity. For the wider Asian region, Cambodia is a worrying hub for racketeering, including the smuggling of arms, drugs, women and children, as well as sexual tourism. Although the government is trying to reinforce discipline and good governance, Cambodia is seen as a potential source of political instability. The EU micro-disarmament project, 'Assistance for Curbing Small Arms and Light Weapons in Cambodia' or ASAC, is a response to these perceptions.

Although it is premature to evaluate the project, which only started work in March 2000, the design of the project, and its early impact within Cambodia's political, military and diplomatic communities, merit a description of its first year of operation. The project's results will be reported in a future *Disarmament Forum* article. Meanwhile disarmament specialists will appreciate the concepts underlying the peace-building strategy described below.¹

The project gets off the ground

The ASAC project was created by an EU Council Decision² on 15 November 1999. The Project Manager, Brigadier General (ret.) Henny van der Graaf of the Royal Dutch Army, arrived in Cambodia at the end of March 2000. General van der Graaf has enormous disarmament field

experience (Mali, Bangladesh, Philippines, Albania) and has been a Member of the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Disarmament Matters, as well as headed a weapons technology unit at the Technical University of Eindhoven, in the Netherlands. ASAC has found it helpful — on occasion — to adopt a direct military approach to problem-solving. General van der Graaf has been adept at cutting through the ambiguities of diplomatic negotiation to push the project forward. He has also shown skill in securing support from donor agencies and EU Member States. It turns out to have been very helpful to have a general at the head of a disarmament programme in Cambodia — a country where the military is a key factor, where ministers are sometimes accorded the rank of army general even if they have a civilian administrative background. The EU badge also has been an advantage, with its diplomatic and financial weight.

The general had a limited budget of 500,000 Euros (and with that currency's slide on the foreign exchange, it rapidly lost 10% of its value). But with these resources, General van der Graaf was able to mobilize the momentum of the EU for ASAC objectives. In November 2000, a further 1.3 million Euros were allocated by the EU Council of Ministers to the ASAC project as a twelve-month extension.

The political dimension

The project's mandate comes from the EU Council of Ministers, as disarmament is a political affair. Accordingly, from the start the Project Manager worked closely with the EU political leadership. Regular meetings have been held with the ambassadors of EU countries in Phnom Penh and Bangkok. The French government, representing the Presidency of the EU, appeared to regard ASAC as a significant source of innovation for peace-building and disarmament in post-conflict Cambodia. In the Communiqué following the EU-Japan summit meetings of July 2000, collaboration on disarmament in Cambodia was specifically mentioned as an area of EU-Japanese collaboration. A substantial sum has been allocated by the Japanese government for a security sector project in Cambodia, which will work in collaboration with ASAC starting in 2001.³

While most staff of the EU delegations to Cambodia and Thailand have been very helpful, a few hurdles appeared which conform to the Commission's unfortunate reputation for slowness in delivering EU overseas assistance. On the other hand, his mandate from the Council of Ministers gave General van der Graaf the latitude to take his own initiatives, and this allowed ASAC to move much faster than is the case with most bilateral projects.

Components of the ASAC project

Dr Owen Greene of Bradford University was asked by the EU to visit Cambodia in the summer of 1999 to design the project. His report and proposal posited a set of neatly interlocking components, including a new arms law, weapon collection and destruction, addressing storage of stocks and ammunition, and an awareness programme. The key to micro-disarmament will probably prove to be the collection and destruction of weapons.

The *draft of an arms law* was prepared during June-August 2000 by Irish lawyer Dennis Brennan, working in partnership with Ms. Kim Sathavy. Ms. Sathavy is the Legal Advisor to Sar Kheng, who serves as the Interior Minister and the Second Deputy Prime Minister. The partnership was not only helpful in terms of the cross-fertilization of ideas and skills — it also produced the draft law in three languages (Khmer, English and French).

The new text brings together into a single coherent law a number of existing statutes including the UNTAC⁴ 1993 anti-gun laws and the Prime Minister's Sub-Decree 38 promulgated in 1998.⁵ The draft text of the law was discussed as it evolved, with representatives of the relevant ministries (Interior, Defence, Justice) often meeting in informal working sessions chaired by police Brigadier General Uk Kim Lek of the Ministry of Interior. The draft was then presented for comment to specialized civil society organizations (CSOs). ASAC staff participated in seminars with these various groups.

Arguably the most important aspect of the law — as compared to existing statutes — is its definition of comparative responsibility and appropriate sanctions: thus members of the armed forces and the legally armed staff of registered security companies will be expected to see their right to carry arms as a privilege, and to exercise especial care. Punishment for misuse of firearms will be proportionally more severe for those who abuse the privilege. There are far fewer guns on the streets of Phnom Penh in the past few years, thanks to a strict application (including house-to-house searches for small arms) of the Prime Minister's Sub-Decree 38 from 1998 by the governor of the city. But Cambodia still has a gun culture. Wealthy industrialists still travel with openly armed bodyguards. There are frequent reports of soldiers carrying their official weapons when off duty for illegal hunting or to threaten rivals in karaoke bars. If Cambodia is to obtain long-term peace and prosperity, the rule of law must replace the rule of the gun.

The draft law is currently undergoing broad review by government and by civil society; it is expected to progress through parliament during 2001. This is an important part of the edifice of peace-building: to ensure that guns are removed from the streets, and that similar rules apply to all citizens of a peaceful, weapon-free Cambodia.

Official *stocks of weapons and ammunition* become a source of concern when they are not well protected, and when record keeping does not allow for checks to ensure that arms and ammunition are not disappearing. Lt Colonel Alain Perigaud, a retired French officer with previous service in Cambodia, spent two months (August-September 2000) working with the Cambodian army to design a pilot project for better storage and record keeping.

It has been instructive and disturbing to observe the minimal security which exists around some of the weapons stores in Cambodia. In the better cases, rows of oiled Kalashnikovs rifles lean against the wall of a cement block building, with only the padlocked outer door to keep them safe. There are no numbered rows, no individual slots for each weapon, no padlocked chain to keep the rifles in their place in provincial armouries. It is difficult to know how many weapons there are in any armoury. Cambodia appears to have no central records, which means that each local police, gendarmerie and army garrison may possess an unknown and unverified quantity of arms and ammunition. It would seem that the armed forces of Cambodia have ample supplies of small arms and ammunition, and that no further purchases are needed. Claims that ammunition supplies are scarce and tightly controlled are not borne out by stories and field surveys in several provinces, where soldiers are often reported to lend government rifles for hunting and to provide free ammunition in exchange for a share of the kill.

Far worse are the conditions of storage for collected civilian weapons. Around 100,000 rifles have been collected by the Royal Cambodian Government. They are stored all over Cambodia, in police stations and army barracks, often with poor or scant security. We have found, for example: rifles stacked in unguarded wooden sheds behind the army barracks; rifles, ammunition, grenades and landmines piled together with boots and other stores; unexploded ordnance (such as grenades and mines) stacked around and under desks in police stations in the middle of provincial towns, where the risk of accidental explosion appears as great as the risk of theft. In no case did we find rifles immobilized by the removal of their moving parts. Often rifles and ammunition were stored together. None of these old firearms is useful for the armed forces, yet each is capable of killing or maiming.

Such stocks are a reservoir of potential violence. All of these old weapons and explosives should be destroyed. Discussions are in hand to encourage provincial governors to order the destruction of elderly firearms and unstable explosives. The ASAC initiative with the Cambodian military reinforces this — a pilot project incorporating guidelines for official weapons security and record-keeping should get underway in early 2001.

Meanwhile there remain hundreds of thousands of *weapons to be collected from civilians*. How is it possible to collect them, and why would people agree to give up their weapons in a climate of insecurity? Alongside the new law and the improved management of official weapons stores, an ASAC initiative has been launched to exchange illegal civilian weapons for community development projects. This innovative idea appears preferable to the concept of creating a gun market by trying to 'buy back' weapons with cash or individual incentives, and it has been tried on a small scale with some success in Albania, Mali and other countries.

The author joined the ASAC team as a Weapons for Development Advisor, and set off around villages in three selected provinces to persuade villagers to consider a swap: if they bring in their weapons for immediate destruction (which is important to build local confidence), ASAC will mobilize funds for development projects. This naturally raises important questions, such as how many weapons justify a road or a well? Here, the feasible and practical answer is: 'Enough to evidence the bona fides of the community and to reduce the risk of violence'.

It must be admitted that verification of hidden weapons is impossible. Only the community can know whether all firearms and explosives have been destroyed. As the weapons for development (WfD) process creates a climate of greater confidence and security, remaining weapons should be handed in for destruction as they lose their relevance. If all weapons are removed from circulation, the community will benefit twice over: individually from peace when there are no more illegal weapons to create violence, and no more hidden explosives to injure innocent children; collectively from the development project offered to the group in exchange for weapons surrendered and destroyed.

Other key questions include: 'What will happen to the weapons we hand in?', 'If we surrender illegal weapons, will we be punished?' and 'Who will provide security if we hand in our weapons?' Swift local weapon destruction emerges as an essential requirement for building confidence in peace and order. A commitment by the provincial authorities to an arms amnesty is the first condition for obtaining the voluntary surrender of arms. Meanwhile ASAC is studying ways to strengthen the capacity of the police to deliver security: better training and motivation; better deployment of resources; provision of motor bikes for quick response, and radio communications to ensure contact between outlying stations and the centre; improved dialogue and co-operation between the military and the police. The police must show the people that they are on the side of peace and order, and that they have the backing of the political authorities who will impose discipline and sanctions on members and ex-members of the uniformed armed forces who seem to be blamed for much of the crime in rural Cambodia.

A *national awareness programme* is essential to underpin each of these initiatives. A national workshop took place on 14 and 15 June 2000, which laid the basis for an expanding public information programme. In co-operation with the Working Group for Weapons Reduction (WGWR) and three other national CSOs,⁶ this is targeting both popular understanding of the new arms law and voluntary surrender of weapons. WGWR had previously published the results of a detailed 1998 survey of Cambodian attitudes to arms control and peace-building, which was instrumental in the EU adopting the ASAC project concept. The importance of involving CSOs in the conception and execution of civilian arms control measures has been amply demonstrated during the ASAC experience throughout 2000. It is intended that the ASAC-sponsored public awareness programme should also improve civil-

military-police relations through work on joint codes of conduct, which will improve the behaviour of the security forces and their perception by the general public. Relations have sometimes been strained between the police and the army. Their common code of conduct was the focus of an important roundtable in November 2000 at which Second Deputy Prime Minister Sar Kheng gave his blessing to a code, which will be carried in the pocket of every Cambodian in uniform.

Conclusion

It is too early to judge whether the provincial political authorities will be able to deliver the conditions of security that will encourage the villagers to bring in their weapons. We found a positive sign in gestures of goodwill made by some community leaders, who delivered weapons and explosives caches during the ASAC sensitization tour in July and August 2000.

If we admit that we cannot easily count hidden weapons, we must nevertheless seek ways to measure the impact of a WfD initiative. This may be done through counting the numbers of weapons and unexploded ordnance that are destroyed thanks to the WfD programme; by evaluating the actual measurable decrease in accidents or acts of violence involving small arms; and by taking further opinion surveys to assess the degree to which local people have more or less confidence in lasting peace.

EU donor responses have been positive to the idea of funding a WfD pilot programme in Kracheh and Pursat provinces. ASAC has also been offered helpful support by the World Food Programme, by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP Seila project), and positive partnership noises have been heard from the Japanese government, as well as numerous CSOs and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). From the first, the ASAC strategy was to prepare the WfD pilot projects in partnership with existing field development organizations. Indeed, one criterion for 'feasibility' is the availability of competent and willing partners who could carry out the 'development' component. Competent development organizations have been identified in both Kracheh Province and Pursat Province, where the pilot projects are expected to run during the 2001 dry season.

We do not wish to leave the impression that the small EU micro-disarmament project is the principal player in Cambodian peace-building. There are many actors in the field, among which we have highlighted EU-Japan collaboration. A significant quantity of landmines (150,000) and unexploded ordnance (650,000) have been destroyed since the end of the war.⁷ Around 10,000 soldiers were demobilized during 2000 as a part of the restructuring of the Cambodian armed forces. Other donors (notably United Nations agencies, the German Agency for Technical Co-operation, and a host of NGOs) are active in related areas such as de-mining, rehabilitation of victims, training and sensitization of official bodies, surveillance of and support for human rights and good governance, etc.

ASAC has been working in Cambodia for less than one year. The project's design is exciting and the initial impact has been substantial. But this discussion of the project's activities is not intended to suggest that ASAC has been in any way 'successful' in achieving its disarmament and peace-building objectives. The law has not yet been passed. So far no weapons have been placed in better storage, nor apparently has any weapons destruction taken place since Prime Minister Hun Sen launched his weapons destruction campaign at a ceremony in the national stadium in Phnom Penh in 1998.

The ASAC disarmament initiative has been extended for a second year. By the end of 2001 the new law should have been passed and signed; there will be new models in place for official weapons

storage and recording; old weapons will have been destroyed publicly in several provinces, and ageing explosives and ammunition will have been destroyed safely; a WfD dynamic will exist and reinforce peace in at least two provinces; security (and the security forces) will have improved in these provinces; the code of conduct for civil-military-police relations will be in the pocket of every Cambodian in uniform; a large-scale public awareness programme will be underway concerning the new law and in support of a weapon-free Cambodia; local CSOs will have been strengthened by their partnership with ASAC; and all of these measures will have improved the prospects for long-term peace and good governance in Cambodia.

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Notes

1. The author would like to thank Dennis Brennan for his devastating critiques which have greatly improved this article, and is grateful to Eric Berman and Henny van der Graaf for their helpful comments and suggestions.
2. See the Official Journal of the European Communities, L 294/5, 16.11.1999.
3. 'Recognizing that an excessive and destabilizing accumulation of small arms and light weapons had been hampering social and economic development in Cambodia, the former Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi informed Prime Minister Hun Sen last January that Japan would send a fact-finding mission on the issue. Japan had already agreed with the EU that both would consider possible concrete cooperation between them in addressing the issue in Cambodia. Based on the outcome of the survey by the mission, the Government of Japan will examine how it will contribute to solving the problems in Cambodia.' Extract from the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release announcing the July 2000 mission, led by Mr. Toshio Sano, Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Division, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
4. The United Nations Transitional Administration in Cambodia (UNTAC) ran the country from 1992 until 1993, when elections were organized and the administration of Cambodia was handed over to the newly elected government.
5. Sub-decree 38, signed by Prime Minister Hun Sen, aims to create a weapon-free Cambodia.
6. The Working Group on Weapons Reduction is a consortium of CSOs that achieved a certain reputation through their 1998 survey of weapons in ten provinces of Cambodia. The other CSOs with which ASAC is working to achieve greater national awareness of the weapons issue and the new law are: Cambodian Institute for Human Rights, Cambodian Institute for Democracy and Human Rights, and Adhoc—The Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association.
7. All credit to NGOs working in de-mining and to the Cambodian Mine Action Group (CMAG), which has had support from numerous bilateral donors. There has been a withdrawal of donor support from CMAG during 1999–2000, following allegations of serious financial corruption. Such unhappy cases of high-level mismanagement do much to undermine international confidence in other government agencies and NGOs working for peace, security and better governance in Cambodia.