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EU-Assistance on curbing Small Arms and light weapons in Cambodia

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EU-ASAC

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Speech by DAVID DE BEER,  
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on the occasion of the  
Presentation of Peace of Art Project Cambodia (PAPC)  
at the FCC, Phnom Penh  
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### Images and Imagery in Weapons Collection Programmes

Most of my speeches in Cambodia, particularly those at Flames of Peace weapons destruction ceremonies where EU ASAC assists the Cambodian Government in destroying surplus small arms, begin with the salutation “Venerable Monks”. To expatriates those two words in themselves conjure up an image of monks with clean-shaven heads in orange robes chanting a blessing. And this indeed is what a Western observer would see at the beginning of a Flame of Peace weapons destruction ceremony.

But the thousands of Cambodian participants taking part in the ceremony – many of them trucked in from outlying villages in the province – have a different experience of the same event. For them this is the blessing of the ceremony and those who preside over it confirming the activities are part of the Buddhists’ proclaimed aim to generate moves towards peace in this world. Or, as Prime Minister Hun Sen expressed it on 5 May 1999 at the first public weapons destruction ceremony organised by the Cambodian Government: “to be a day of action towards a Culture of Peace”.

This dichotomy between the simple image and the experience felt through the imagery runs right through EU ASAC’s weapons collection and destruction programme.

What does the image of a weapon mean to an expatriate? Something that is (or was) prevalent in Cambodia; something that **symbolises** the violence, killings and insecurity that were so long part of Cambodia’s modern history.

But what does the same image of a weapon mean to a family working in the rice paddies? The image does not symbolise the violence, intimidation, times of war, bombing and forced removals? It **recalls** the horror and insecurity of the decades of war. However for Cambodians a weapon can also represent security, if those authorities that are meant to provide security do not do so. A weapon can also be there to defend yourself and your family, and that can be one reason not to hand it in to the authorities.

What does the image of a Flame of Peace weapons destruction ceremony mean to an expatriate? Perhaps no more than a colourful ceremony where thousands of civilians



from the surrounding areas watch the spectacle of piled-up weapons being set alight in order to destroy them.

What does a Flame of Peace ceremony mean to the local people who come to watch? They see thousands of weapons stacked up waiting to be destroyed and know that each weapon played its part in the violence, death and destruction which has been part of their past and which still throws a long shadow over their present existence. And then the weapons are engulfed in flames, in the same way as the body of a person who has just died is engulfed by flames at his or her cremation. At the cremation, the failures of the past and the inadequacies of the present are laid to rest. After a Flame of Peace ceremony the weapons, recalling violence, disruption and death in this life are no more.

EU ASAC is quite simply a weapons management, collection and destruction programme. So how do these images and experiences translate into our work? It is important in implementing a weapons' collection programme that the people must come to see that their security does not rely on an illegally-owned weapon, but on the local authorities and the police. They must know and understand that the weapons they hand in are to be destroyed (or even better "see" the weapons being destroyed). This allows them to realise that, by giving up their weapon, their image of a violent or intimidating society changes to that of a society more aimed towards the Culture of Peace. This is a central theme in all public awareness activities undertaken to encourage the handing in of weapons to the authorities and it is also the reason why we try to arrange for the public destruction of all surplus weapons in Flames of Peace ceremonies.

But the central theme of changing the image of a violent and intimidating society to that of one aimed more towards achieving a Culture of Peace is precisely what is embodied in the PAPC project with weapons and other remnants of war being turned into art. The PAPC project is certainly a worthy contribution to the Cambodian Culture of Peace and therefore EU ASAC is pleased to have been able to assist PAPC in getting started and is proud to be associated with it and its efforts to promote an image of peace.

And now you will have noticed that I am back where I began, talking about a Culture of Peace. I have come full circle and it is time to thank the organisers of this evening for giving me the chance to share some insights into the work of EU ASAC in Cambodia. It is also time to again wish the PAPC and all those involved in it much success in the future as they play their part in providing striking images of Cambodia as a country where weapons should no longer recall violence and war, but can be creatively used to describe Cambodia as being on the road towards attaining a Culture of Peace.

I thank you for your attention.