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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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UNIDIR CONFERENCE

INCREASING THE COST-EFFECTIVENESS OF WEAPONS COLLECTION BY INVOLVING LOCAL COMMUNITIES IN DECISION-MAKING

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Session 6: HOW IT WORKS IN CAMBODIA

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EU ASAC (European Union Assistance on curbing Small Arms and light
weapons in Cambodia)

Introduction:

The most important point in examining EU ASAC's weapons collection activities in Cambodia is recognising that they took place as just one part of a multi-faceted integrated programme aimed at improving weapons security and weapons management in the country. Apart from weapons collection campaigning, the various components of this programme, largely set up by my predecessor Brig. Gen. Henny van der Graaf, have been:

- Strengthening the legal framework on weapons ownership and management,
- Security sector reform, more especially registering and securely storing all weapons in the hands of the Ministry of National Defence; that is in the six Military Regions of the Royal Cambodian Army, in the Royal Gendarmerie, the Navy and the Air Force.
- Extensive public awareness campaigning, both through the government and local NGO's involving public education, film production, radio spots, theatre shows etc.;
- Searching for weapons caches left over from the war under a special agreement with the National Commission for the Reform of Weapons and Explosives Management in Cambodia.
- Public weapons destruction ceremonies in which EU ASAC has assisted the Government to destroy over 90.000 illegal and surplus weapons since 2001, bringing the total of weapons destroyed in Cambodia since 1999 to over 130.000.

Each component of the EU ASAC programme, while having its own identity and objectives, supports and strengthens the impact of each of the other components.

This has been vital to the success of improving weapons management in Cambodia, but it threatens to "fall by the wayside" if one purely concentrates on weapons collection activities in general and assessing weapons collection in particular. I am well aware that the UNIDIR researchers only looked at some of our weapons collection activities and certainly did not examine their link to our other important programme components.

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The different stages of EU ASAC's Weapons Collection strategies:

In April 2003, at a DfID-sponsored conference at Wilton Park in England on "Mainstreaming weapons collection into development projects" (a concept which I do not think was even touched upon by the UNIDIR research team), I briefly described the stages through which EU ASAC's weapons collection strategies had developed until then.

Large-scale projects:

General van der Graaf has already described how he set up the first two large-scale WfD projects in Cambodia. SSR, through the training and equipping of local police in the target areas was built into the projects and a mixtures of large-scale (schools, clinics, roads, police post renovations) and small scale (water-wells) development rewards were offered after consultation with local authorities down to the elected Village Development Council level. One reason for the success of the projects was the role of the local Field Managers. (It is an unfortunate omission in the UNIDIR report is that the contribution the Field Manager made to the success of the [3-step] Snuol project was not looked into.) The Field Manager was a retired teacher, a survivor of the Khmer Rouge genocide, who was known to and respected by the villagers. He had a particularly "hands-on approach" and was certainly able to help channel the wishes of local communities, particularly as he personally conducted extensive negotiations with each elected Village Development Committee about the development rewards to be offered to the communities.

Once implementation began these large-scale projects took eighteen months to complete. While successful in themselves in jump-starting the concept of WfD in Cambodia, they were too expensive to replicate throughout the country, covered a longer period than the donor requirement of one calendar year and equally importantly it was found that the large development objects such as schools, the clinic etc. were not accessible to all families who had contributed weapons.

Small-scale projects:

A decision was taken, beginning 2002, to employ local NGO's to conduct public awareness campaigns in target areas. Villagers were encouraged to hand in their illegal weapons to the local police and towards the end of the year the NGO's were responsible for providing water wells for the local communities. EU ASAC developed and standardised the training and public awareness materials, commissioned two videos on the dangers of small arms which were shown by the NGO's at dozens of public awareness meetings. Unfortunately it was found that while some NGO's were good at public awareness, they not so good at organising the building of the water wells. Others provided good water wells but were less good at the public awareness activities.

The experiences of 2002 led to developing the next stage: in 2003 NGO's were only entrusted with the public awareness activities in their target areas. It was decided to integrate all the development rewards (water wells) into the government development plan for each province. The government master plan included the building of far more water wells than they could afford, so EU ASAC took responsibility of providing the water wells for the villages where sufficient weapons had been handed in to the local authorities. Commercial construction companies were contracted to build the wells to government specifications and the government authorities then took responsibility for maintaining the wells as part of their overall maintenance work in each province.

The strategy used in 2003 of having NGO's carry out public awareness campaigns and integrating the development rewards into the government development programme with the local authorities taking responsibility for maintaining the development objects was for EU ASAC perhaps the ideal "mix": the projects were completed within a calendar year, the public awareness was delegated to NGO's, the building of water wells to commercial firms and the maintenance was guaranteed by the local authorities.

Luckily EU ASAC succeeded in raising extra funds (from Germany) to carry out extensive police training aimed at improving police-community relations at the grass roots level.



EU ASAC was able to bring human rights groups, often critical of the government, together with the Training Department of the National Police and together they drew up the curriculum for ten-day training courses for police at commune level. The National Police co-operated fully and by the end of 2003 trainings – run jointly by the human rights groups and the National Police – had been held in eight provinces. This is an example of an SSR activity incorporated into a WfD programme aimed at meeting a need expressed at grass roots level to improve relations between the police and the community.

In 2002 and 2003 the role of the Field Manager was to supervise the work of the implementing NGO's and to liaise with the provincial authorities on the construction of the water wells. This was one step removed from the people in the target area compared with his responsibilities in the earlier large-scale projects.

Weapons caches:

In 2002 and 2003 it was not expected that under the supervision of the NGO's the villagers would search for weapons caches hidden in the mountains and forests. The public awareness was aimed at getting the villagers to hand in the weapons they held illegally in their houses. EU ASAC spent almost one year negotiating a separate agreement with the National Commission for the Reform of Weapons and Explosives Management that allows it to search for and destroy weapons caches throughout the country in co-operation with the Ministries of the Interior and Defence. It was good that in the first large-scale project the population in Snuol spontaneously searched for weapons caches, which were luckily not mined. In Pailin (also visited by the UNIDIR researchers) different stories on weapons caches have emerged in the course of time; some relating to border disputes with Thailand as to in which country the caches may now be. The true situation is often more difficult to learn than through one simple quote of one government official. The longer one works in Cambodia the more one realises that it is often naïve to accept one statement by one individual at face value. The society is far more complex than it appears to be – even to those expatriates who have lived there for years. We have discovered, sometimes to our cost, that the issue of weapons caches is very sensitive and difficult to penetrate.

Mainstreaming by institutional development agencies:

2003 also saw the first breakthrough in EU ASAC's attempts to get institutional development organisations working in Cambodia to “mainstream” weapons security into their own programmes. EU ASAC approached well-established development agencies such as GTZ, CARE and CWS about the possibility of co-operating. Various forms of co-operation developed. For example EU ASAC information on small arms was given at the same meetings where the development agencies did their own work with the communities or the agencies just distributed EU ASAC information on small arms. The most progress was made when CWS decided to build in a Peace and Security project into their next three-year programme in the province of Kampong Thom and are now actively working with two EU ASAC field staff to implement this programme which includes encouraging the villagers in their target areas to hand in their weapons so that the other development brought by CWS is not endangered by illegal possession of small arms in the community. This concept of “mainstreaming” certainly could be important in future weapons security work in Cambodia, particularly as in most areas the numbers of weapons in circulation in the villages has dropped to a level where direct weapons collection campaigns are probably no longer viable due to a process of diminishing returns. And I think it is this concept of “mainstreaming” weapons collection activities into institutional development agencies already active in the field that General van der Graaf has referred to as having longer-term viability, rather than an isolated development project being set up around which weapons can be collected.

Yesterday I referred to the first project run for police wives and the complications that ensued following their every wish, with an end result that the status of the police wives in the community was possibly eroded because they were singled out for help. In the second half of 2003 EU ASAC, through a subsidy from the British Embassy, had the chance to initiate



another project with police wives in a weapons collection target area. This time the approach and implementation was totally different. EU ASAC consulted an international NGO experienced in training women to run small poultry farms and vegetable gardens (and therefore not only grow rice). Agreement was reached that this NGO would implement a programme training police wives in a specific to increase their income through vegetable gardens and poultry farms and then to use these police wives to train other women in the village to do the same. This project has been a great success, not only being simple for EU ASAC to manage (as everything was delegated to one international NGO), but it also increased the income of the police wives and their status in the villages as they were seen to be passing on benefits to the rest of the community. But to be brutally honest, the target group – the police wives – were not consulted at all during the design phase as just one part of a broader weapons collection and management project for a particular province. EU ASAC had learned from mistakes made in earlier projects.

I just want to give one example of how different components of EU ASAC's work can support each other. In the province of Kampong Speu an NGO was active in 2002/2003 encourage villagers to hand in weapons. In a meeting with a district police commissioner in the province he explained to me that the results of the weapons collection activities were being undermined because soldiers from the local military region were quite willing to "leak" surplus military weapons back into civilian society to replace the collected weapons. He urgently requested me to implement a Military Weapons Registration and Safe Storage project in the province so that all military weapons would be accounted for and the surplus weapons destroyed. Thanks to a grant from the Netherlands government we are presently implementing such a project in Kampong Speu. This once again illustrates that weapons collection cannot be seen in isolation, but is part of a broader concept of weapons security and management.

Human security:

EU ASAC has taken the issue of human security and how the target groups feel about weapons and security in the local communities very seriously. On the EU ASAC website, in the section on Voluntary Weapons Collection, there is a database of nearly 8.000 survey forms filled in by villagers on this issue in 2002 and 2003. The information contained in this database has been used in policy decision-making by EU ASAC.

Training Commune Councils - an exit strategy for Weapons for Development:

With fewer weapons in the communities each weapons collection campaign becomes less cost-effective and at some stage a decision can be made to stop active weapons collections campaigns. This was done by EU ASAC at the end of 2003. But the question was raised as to what happens **after** weapons collection campaigns end, even if there are still some weapons left in the local communities. In 2004 EU ASAC has pioneered a programme of training local authorities to take over responsibility for weapons security... In four provinces where EU ASAC has excellent relations with all level of local authorities (provincial, district and commune) because of its history of weapons collection, police training, weapons registration and safe storage and weapons destruction, a programme of Commune Council Capacity Building (CCCB) has been started. In the new commune council structure in Cambodia, one of the five responsibilities of the commune councils is "Administration and Security". While many agencies are eager to assist on "Administration", no-one had any ideas on what "Security" entailed. Based on the experience of the EU ASAC Field Manager, a curriculum on Security and particularly Weapons Security was drawn up for Commune Council members. After Provincial Orientation Meetings were held involving all stakeholders such as the provincial and district governors, the provincial and district police chiefs and the local government development structures, EU ASAC ran training courses for the provincial and district trainers who have general responsibility for training members of the commune councils. In this way, training on security and weapons security has been mainstreamed into the local government structures of these four provinces in Cambodia.



Trainings on the commune level involve not only commune council members, but also local police working at commune level. In the Cambodian hierarchical structure there is no formal link between the police at commune level and the commune council – even though the commune council is now responsible for security. The trainings by EU ASAC are the first conscious attempt to break through this hierarchical divide and improve communication on security where it is so badly needed. The police are in addition receiving basic training on weapons security and also on legislation relating to weapons possession. The commune authorities are now being taught who to approach if weapons are handed in and how to co-operate with the police if they know that weapons are being illegally hidden by a family. Mine clearance agencies are also involved as in the Khmer language there is no distinction between ammunition and a weapon and this sometimes results in UXO or hand grenades being handed in when it is thought that only weapons are involved.

Following the initial success of CCCB in relation to weapons security, EU ASAC is presently conducting negotiations with the municipality of Phnom Penh to introduce a modified form of this programme as a pilot project in seven communes in the city before the end of 2004. The question of localising weapons security authority after large collection campaigns could well be built into future programme designs as an exit strategy to weapons collection programmes.

Conclusion:

The EU ASAC project in Cambodia has continued to develop since it was started in 2000. Its development has been shaped by the different needs expressed by the government, the donors, the project management and the people of Cambodia. This is perhaps the key to the success of the project: the joint commitment and identification of all these stakeholders in the project.

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