



EUROPEAN UNION

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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, EU ASAC PROGRAMME MANAGER
AT THE WGWR NATIONAL WORKSHOP ON ELECTION VIOLENCE,
PHNOM PENH, 26 JUNE 2003**

Excellency Lt. Gen. Net Savoien, Deputy Commissioner-General of National Police
Mr. Neb Sinthay, Executive Director of WGWR
Representatives of the Press and Media,
Honourable participants in this workshop

Earlier this year when Mr. Neb Sinthay, Executive Director of WGWR, asked me whether EU ASAC would be prepared to support WGWR in organising a campaign aimed at reducing weapons-related violence during the election period, I immediately expressed my interest. Maybe he was lucky that he approached me on a subject that combines two of my major interests: curbing the use of small arms and lights weapons in society and organising of free and fair elections. My first visit to Cambodia was in fact in 1993 as an election officer for UNTAC near Poipet on the border with Thailand.

I have just returned from Siem Reap, where earlier this week EU ASAC assisted the Royal Cambodian Government to destroy 3,043 weapons in a ceremony presided over by H.E. Tea Banh, Co-Minister of National Defence. These weapons had been in the possession of Military Region 4 of the Cambodian Army, but it was decided that as these were surplus weapons that the military region did not need, they could be destroyed in a Flame of Peace ceremony.

This is important because it is accepted that, in almost every country, the major source of weapons which are “leaked” into the hands of criminals or arms smugglers are weapons that originate from the military. It is therefore important that all surplus weapons are promptly destroyed before they find their way into the hands of people who could use them to destabilise society – or use them to influence a forthcoming election.

This is why EU ASAC is co-operating with the Ministry of National Defence in implementing a system of weapons management. This means that all small arms such as AK-47’s in possession of the army are being registered in a computer database and then properly stored. Three kinds of storage facilities are being provided: long-term, medium-term and short-term. With the weapons registered and safely locked away, the chances of “leakage” of military weapons back into society are much smaller and this makes the Registration and safe Storage programme an important step towards the Culture of Peace in Cambodia. The Military Regions of Kampong Cham and of Battambang have already had their weapons registered in a computer database and safe storage depots have been built in which the weapons are locked up. Preparations



have begun to have a similar programme implemented in Military Region 4 of Siem Reap this year.

In addition a pilot project on Weapons Registration and Safe Storage is being implemented with the National Police this year in the provinces of Phnom Penh, Kandal and Kampong Speu. By introducing this weapons management system for the military and the police, the Royal Cambodian Government has taken a significant step in reducing the introduction of further illegal weapons into Cambodia.

Some of you will ask, "What is EU ASAC?" EU ASAC is the programme set up by the fifteen countries that together form the European Union to help the Royal Cambodian Government in its efforts to solve the problems caused by too many weapons in society. In 1999 the Royal Government asked for assistance and EU ASAC is the result.

I have already mentioned the assistance EU ASAC gives to the Royal Government in the destruction of weapons and registering and storing military and police weapons. This is all part of a wider weapons management programme introduced when it began its work in April 2000:

EU ASAC has also been providing assistance to the Royal Government in drawing up a new Arms Law which imposes strict punishment on the illegal possession of arms. In October 2002 H.E. Hun Sen sent the draft law to the National Assembly. After the election we expect the National Assembly to pass this law, which will supersede Sub-decree 38 of 1999 which has played such an important part in improving the situation concerning small arms in the Kingdom Cambodia. It is also important to note the civil society played a meaningful role in the discussions on the form the new law was to take.

It is important to note that the situation regarding the possession of weapons in Cambodian society today, one month before the 2003 National Assembly elections, is radically different from the situation during the last National Assembly elections in 1998. At that time possession of weapons by civilians and the militia was very common and the level of violence involving these small arms was high. But since 1998 much has changed. The government began a weapons collection campaign that started in Phnom Penh in 1998 and then spread to all the provinces. The militias have been disarmed and over 100,000 weapons were collected in a two-year period. The legal framework on weapons possession was strengthened with the introduction of Sub-decree No. 38 on 30 April 1999. Five days later the first weapons destruction ceremony took place in Phnom Penh when, under the leadership of H.E. Samdach Hun Sen, nearly 4,000 weapons were crushed by a bulldozer. Including the weapons that were destroyed in Siem Reap two days ago, more than 111,000 weapons have now been publicly destroyed in Cambodia.

Weapons collections campaigns, some of them supported by EU ASAC, are still continuing in various provinces. Earlier this month 474 weapons that had been handed in largely by former Khmer Rouge fighters in Kampot province were destroyed in a Flame of Peace ceremony. In exchange for handing in their weapons the communities received water wells. For them this was an example of the slogan often used by the Royal Cambodian Government: "Peace brings Development".

The result of this all is that the level of armed violence in Cambodia has dropped considerably since 1998. It is important to note that no-one involved in weapons collection activities believes that 100% of the weapons will be collected. This would



never happen in any country in the world. Weapons collection campaigns such as those undertaken in Cambodia are also not anti-crime campaigns. Unfortunately hardened criminals will always find a way to own weapons – as they do in any country. But the Cambodian weapons collection campaign has in the first instance, in almost all parts of the country, largely removed weapons from the streets and public areas of the villages, towns and cities of the country. In very few places do people openly carry weapons any more. We also know that people kept weapons because they felt a need to protect themselves. These weapons used to be kept inside the houses and therefore formed a danger in daily life. We have found out that most of these weapons have been either handed in to the authorities or – because through public awareness campaigns the people know that keeping weapons is illegal – the people have buried the weapons in their fields or gardens. Although these people still illegally possess a weapon, it is of much less danger in daily life if it is hidden or buried outside the house. In this way, as a result of weapons collection campaigns, we have been able to see a decrease in weapons-related crime over the last four or five years.

The slogan I quoted earlier, “Peace brings Development” certainly applies to the month ahead of us. If the election campaign and the election are peaceful, then the international community – which will be closely observing these elections – will be far more ready to give more money for the development of Cambodia. They will feel they are giving money to a peaceful and stable country that has had democratic elections. Each violent incident before the election will detract from this impression in the eyes of donors and potential donors.

The Government’s programme relating to small arms is something that every Cambodian can be proud of. A real test of its effectiveness will be the election campaign of the coming weeks. International observers will not only want to see that the elections are carried out according to the rules drawn up by the government and the National Election Commission, but also that the election campaign period was free of intimidation and armed violence.

The European Union has been very happy at making a contribution to increase weapons security in Cambodia. The situation now is better than in 1998, but EU ASAC does not pretend there are no more illegal weapons in the Cambodian society. And even legal weapons can be illegally used to cause election violence. It is up to the Cambodian Government and all the political parties to ensure that there is no armed violence during the election period. This can only be to the benefit of all the people of Cambodia.

I thank you for your attention and I wish all of you a successful workshop.