

## **Disarmament and Peace Building in the Kingdom of Cambodia: The response of the European Union to Small Arms and Light Weapons in Cambodia**

In the late 1960's, Cambodia was sucked into a devastating conflict. With the Viet Cong taking refuge in South East Cambodia, Nixon and Kissinger unleashed the most concentrated bombing campaign in the history of warfare on an undefended rural population.

The secret B-52 'Menu' bombings and the imposition of a military dictatorship crippled Cambodia and fuelled the rise of the Khmer Rouge, who then committed mass genocide on an unprecedented scale. Following a 10-year Vietnamese occupation and civil war, an uneasy peace arrived in 1993, not truly consolidated until Pol Pot's death in 1998. The enduring legacy of these events is desperate poverty, a lack of development and huge numbers of weapons, mines and UXO.

Violence has become indelibly stamped on Khmer society with many losing the ability to comprehend the consequences of their actions or discern right from wrong. Throwing grenades into packed rooms over a karaoke or gambling dispute, domestic shootings, drunkenly spraying a party with automatic gunfire, killing a neighbour over land rights, murder during robberies; all of these incidents are depressingly common in Cambodia.

The Working Group for Weapons Reduction in Cambodia (WGWR) estimated in 1998 that 1 in 3 families possessed a weapon. One of the poorest nations on earth with a long recent history of horrific violence, abundant weapons and weak law and order institutions, Cambodia risks becoming a regional hub for weapons trading. Rumours abound of Cambodian weapons surfacing in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Indonesia. In 1999, following a request from the Royal Government, the EU formed EU ASAC (European Union Assistance on Curbing Small Arms and Light Weapons in Cambodia) to tackle the widespread proliferation and destabilising effects of small arms.

The response of EU ASAC has been a programme of 5 uniquely inter-related components: **Arms Law:** After 2 years of public and government discussion, the draft law has achieved a broad national constituency and has been sent to the National Assembly for debate.

**Safe Storage and Registration of Military Weapons:** The military have incalculable weapons and explosives stored in insecure conditions which encourage theft, illegal use and sale and potentially lethal accidents. Safe stores with computerised registration systems have now been built in two military regions with 30,000 weapons in place. A similar project will be implemented for the National Police in 2003.

**Public Awareness:** Civil society capacity building is considered a key long-term objective of the programme and grassroots awareness of the destabilising effects of small arms is vital. NGOs conduct awareness campaigns and workshops which focus on non-violent conflict resolution, Buddhist morality, community responsibility and human rights.

**Weapons for Development:** Weapons buy-back schemes simply create a de-facto arms trade with the implementing agency as arms dealers. WfD rejects this strategy, utilising a combination of grassroots public awareness, police support, and community-owned development incentives to encourage the voluntary hand-in of weapons by the civil population. The message is that there can be no human security without physical security. The weakness of the police (due to no education or training and a \$15 monthly salary) is the primary reason why people keep their weapons, so building community trust is a priority. No individual rewards are offered but rather development which benefits the whole community such as schools, water wells, health posts, rural roads etc. For example, Pir Thnou, a village near the Vietnamese border, received a three room school after locals handed in 725 weapons and 1342 explosives to the local authorities.

In 18 months, 5636 weapons and 19,526 explosives have been handed in from the 2 target areas. In smaller scale projects implemented by 7 local NGOs, 1000 weapons have been handed in since June.

**Weapons Destruction:** Merely collecting weapons is not enough to guarantee their removal from society so publicly destroying them is the only truly effective method of disposal. 58,000 weapons have been destroyed by burning since 2001 in ceremonies called *Flames of Peace* which provide spectacular symbols of the shift to a culture of peace, raising local, national and international awareness. A new project to excavate and destroy old Khmer Rouge weapons caches is also underway.

The situation in Cambodia has improved drastically in recent years but small arms still create massive social problems. The efforts of the Royal Government must be applauded and EU ASAC has shown that the issue must be addressed at all levels of society to have a positive impact. The real issue to be addressed though is the manner in which larger powers pump weapons and bombs into developing nations as part of wider strategies.

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