

Small Arms in Post Conflict Situations

Peace-building in Cambodia: Experiences on the way to a weapons free society

**Presentation by
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Honourable Chairman,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Cambodia is perhaps best known for a series of violent disasters that happened to us in the past: the secret bombing of our country by the United States that caused hundreds of thousands of casualties in the early 1970's; the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 onwards; the occupation by the Vietnamese who drove out the Khmer Rouge in 1979; and the years of war that followed until the Paris Peace Agreements in 1991. After the 1993 elections run by the United Nations there was more fighting inside the country and this only really stopped in 1997. None of the opposing armies kept accurate records of the number of their weapons. In the 1990's the world began to know Cambodia as a country with millions of landmines. Although we received much needed donor aid to begin solving this major and crippling problem, another, maybe equally serious problem was left untouched: post-conflict Cambodia was a country flooded with small arms and light weapons.

In most countries where there is an armed conflict between two or more parties, generally one party emerges victorious. The winning party is then capable of forcing the losing parties to disarm and hand in their weapons. But in Cambodia no party achieved a military victory. Many soldiers, from all sides, just went home and took their weapons with them. Just as the waters of the mighty Mekong River often flood our country, so we were uncontrollably flooded with small arms.

This widespread possession of weapons had many negative effects; in post-conflict Cambodia a situation of lawlessness began to prevail. People openly carrying weapons could be seen in the cities, towns and villages of Cambodia. Many former soldiers who had kept their weapons became bands of criminals robbing villagers of their cattle and other possessions; development agencies refused to enter many areas because they felt they were not safe; weapons influenced the level of domestic violence; in a poor society a weapon was something of value, to be sold or traded to unscrupulous traders. All this threatened the stability and security of Cambodia and was affecting our development potential.

It was with this background that the Royal Cambodian Government in 1998 decided to launch a national campaign against the widespread possession of small arms and to work towards a weapons-free society. The same year it strengthened the legal basis for this campaign by issuing Sub-Decree 38, which effectively made the possession of weapons by private citizens illegal. Searches took place and checkpoints were set up. Illegal weapons found on people and in cars and houses were confiscated. The governor of every province was instructed to carry out weapons collections campaigns; some paid small amounts of money to people to encourage them to hand in their weapons, others gave them rice. When the money ran out to pay for any more weapons, some governors still collected weapons and promised the people they would pay them later. In May 1999, the government took an important new step to show the people of Cambodia that it was serious about creating a weapons-free society. In Phnom Penh at a public weapons destruction ceremony attended by thousands, over 3,800 weapons were crushed by a bulldozer. That day, Prime Minister Hun Sen declared, "May this day be a day of action towards a culture of peace, towards a Cambodia free of violence and crime." By January 2000 the Royal Cambodian Government had on its own initiative destroyed over 36,000 weapons. But we are a poor country and our budget to continue this campaign ran out, so we looked for assistance from the international community.

In June 2000 the National Commission for Weapons Management & Reform in Cambodia was set up to supervise the process of weapons management and destruction in the country. The Deputy Prime Minister, who is also Co-Minister of the Interior, chairs the National Commission. Other leading members include the Co-Ministers of Defence and the Commissioner General of the National Police. In turn Provincial Weapons Management Commissions have been set up, but their efficient functioning is sometimes hindered by a lack of resources.

We were fortunate that in 1999 the European Union reacted quickly to our appeal for assistance. In April 2000 the programme of European Union Assistance for Curbing Small Arms and light weapons in Cambodia (EU ASAC) began operating to help the Royal Government achieve its goal of a weapons-free society. EU ASAC has assisted the Royal Government with its diverse programme:

- It was decided to further strengthen the legal framework for controlling the use, possession and trade of weapons and explosives by drafting a new Arms Law. This law has very strict penalties for possession of weapons by civilians and clearly lays out which military and police officers may have their own weapon. The draft law has been approved by the Council of Ministers and is presently waiting to be debated on by the National Assembly. We expect it will be passed later this year.
- Most weapons in our country are in the possession of the Ministry of National Defence. With the assistance of EU ASAC, the Ministry has begun registering all its weapons in a centralised computer-database and building safe storage facilities to an internationally acceptable standard to store the military reserve weapons. By 2002 two of the six Military Regions had such facilities and this year – in a joint effort between EU ASAC and a new Japanese small arms

programme – all weapons in a third region will be registered and storage facilities built. It is planned that by the end of 2006 all weapons under the control of the Ministry of National Defence will be registered and safely stored. It is equally important to note that after each registration project, the Ministry determines that there are still thousands of surplus weapons in that region. These surplus weapons are then destroyed and are not stored or sold.

- This year a similar project to register and store police weapons in Phnom Penh and two other provinces has just begun.
- EU ASAC is also running a series of “Weapons for Development” projects in various parts of the country. In one project, EU ASAC staff had to be accompanied by armed guards to ensure their safety when they began in 2000. Two years later when this project ended, over 3,200 weapons had been collected and the area was now safe enough for institutional development agencies to begin working there. Current Weapons for Development projects are now smaller-scale, run in co-operation with local NGO’s. A new element is organising training of the local police to improve police-community relations. In this way, the villagers learn to trust the police and become more willing to hand in their illegal weapons. Weapons in the countryside are now no longer really visible and this itself has increased security.
- Illegal weapons that have been voluntarily handed in or confiscated as well as surplus military weapons from the army and the police are destroyed. Since April 2001 the Royal Government of Cambodia, assisted by EU ASAC, has been destroying these weapons in public “Flames of Peace” ceremonies. These colourful ceremonies are attended by thousands of people who are eager to see the weapons that have caused so much suffering in the country destroyed in front of their own eyes. They know these weapons cannot again be secretly sold and used again. Since May 1999 over 105,000 weapons have been destroyed. From this it can also be seen that the Royal Government does not wish to become involved in any international trade in small arms and light weapons.
- There is also much publicity on the dangers that small arms pose to society. There have been radio and television advertisements, billboards, posters and leaflets calling on the people to hand in their weapons. They have also been informed in this way on the main elements of the new draft Arms Law.

Mr. Chairman, I have tried to make it clear that the Royal Cambodian Government is serious about establishing a country free of violence and crime. Five years ago the widespread possession of small arms threatened the stability of our society; now we are implementing a modern system of small arms management in the armed forces and are moving towards a weapons-free society among our civilians. We have not solved all our problems, but the combination of projects has proved effective and we are grateful to donors who have made this possible. In turn we hope we can share our experiences with other countries facing similar problems. In this way we can play our part internationally in helping to end the suffering that small arms and light weapons cause in so many countries.

I thank you for your attention.