
DESTROYING EXCESS SMALL ARMS: U.S. POLICY AND PROGRAMS

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“While robust export controls and enforcement are critical elements in the effort to curb illicit trafficking in small arms and light weapons (SA/LW), the simplest and most reliable way to prevent proliferation of illicit arms is through proper stockpile management and expeditious destruction of excess,” says C. Edward Peartree, Policy Officer, Office of Policy, Plans & Analysis, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, U.S. Department of State. “Taking up this global problem, the State Department, working with the Department of Defense, has dedicated funding and expertise to assisting countries in improving stockpile management practices and destroying excess SA/LW.”

OVERVIEW

The principal source of destabilizing accumulations of small arms and light weapons (SA/LW) in many regions of the world is not new production but re-circulated stocks of surplus military weapons. Cold War stocks in the countries of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, often poorly secured and susceptible to theft or illegal transfer, have been a source of arms for regional criminal organizations and violent terrorist groups. Ex-Warsaw Pact militaries eager to upgrade to NATO standards have dumped large numbers of infantry rifles, machine guns, and light weapons such as rocket-propelled grenade launchers (RPGs) onto the global market. Sales of surplus arms, often to undesirable end-users such as insurgent groups or warring governments under international embargo, have proven a ready source of revenue for cash-poor developing countries.

In Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, small arms used in one regional conflict frequently turn up in another regional conflict. Arms collected in the aftermath of a peace settlement, if not quickly secured and expeditiously destroyed, will often be dispersed into the community, exacerbating instability and violent crime, or fuelling new conflicts. Arms used by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador and by the Contras and Sandanistas in Nicaragua during the 1980s have been recently traced to the civil war in Colombia. Sometimes, the migration of arms spans oceans and continents: U.S.

origin M-16 assault rifles captured in Vietnam after the fall of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) have turned up decades later in Central America.

While robust export controls and enforcement are critical elements in the effort to curb illicit trafficking in SA/LW, the simplest and most reliable way to prevent proliferation of illicit arms is through proper stockpile management and expeditious destruction of excess. Taking up this global problem, the State Department, working with the Department of Defense, has dedicated funding and expertise to assisting countries in improving stockpile management practices and destroying excess SA/LW.

HISTORY OF U.S. EFFORTS

Until recently, U.S. destruction of excess small arms had been largely an ad hoc effort. Recognizing that reducing collected stocks of arms in a post-conflict environment is critical to alleviating violence and improving stability, U.S. military forces, sometimes working with multinational partners, have frequently undertaken the destruction of arms seized or otherwise collected in military or peacekeeping operations. The United States destroyed tens of thousands of small arms and light weapons in Iraq and Kuwait during and after the Gulf War. In Haiti in 1994 and 1995, the U.S. 10th Mountain Division destroyed 18,621 small arms and light weapons. In Panama, coincident with Operation Just Cause in 1990-91, U.S. forces destroyed 77,553 small arms and light weapons. The NATO-led

Stabilization Force (SFOR) in Bosnia and the NATO-led Kosovo security force (KFOR) in Kosovo have destroyed thousands of weapons. In Liberia, between July and October 1999, the U.S. sent experts and contributed \$300,000 — through the U.N. Trust Fund on Liberia — to destroy almost 19,000 small arms and light weapons and more than 3 million rounds of ammunition.

As U.S. engagement on global small arms efforts grew during the late 1990s, interest in concrete measures to mitigate their harmful effects turned to the issue of eliminating re-circulating and surplus stocks in areas of concern. At an October 15, 1999 summit meeting, the United States and Norway agreed to create a Joint Working Group to assist at-risk countries in the destruction of excess SA/LW. Shortly thereafter, on November 18, 1999, the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe endorsed a declaration of 10 regional states to destroy seized and surplus weapons. To support this commitment, the U.S. and Norway offered to send technical assessment teams to member countries to assist destruction efforts. In May 2000, U.S. and Norwegian experts visited Albania on the first assessment visit to be undertaken since the conception of their joint efforts.

THE PILOT PROJECT: ALBANIA

Albania offers an excellent case study in the problems caused by excessive, poorly managed stocks of weapons in an unstable political environment. During the March 1997 political crisis caused by severe economic instability and the collapse of the government, over 500,000 small arms and light weapons and many tons of ammunition were looted from government arsenals around the country. The proliferation of stolen military small arms in Albania led to soaring violent crime and dramatic increases in arms smuggling into neighboring countries such as Macedonia and Yugoslavia. Some estimates indicate that over 50 percent of the stolen Albanian arms ultimately ended up in Kosovo; in any event, the sudden influx of arms to ethnic Albanian separatists helped to ignite armed conflict in that region — a conflict that led to direct U.S. and NATO intervention.

Beginning in May 1998, the Albanian government bolstered efforts to collect weapons circulating in the

civilian population, both through new legislation and increased law enforcement measures. This effort was assisted in 1999 by the initiation of a United Nations Development Program (UNDP) “Weapons in Exchange for Development” program (originally targeted at the Albanian district of Gramsh, later extended to Elbasan and Dirba). Under the UNDP program, a limited number of collected weapons were destroyed, though the focus of the program remained on collection of illegal arms. Efforts to eliminate collected and surplus stocks of Albanian arms began in earnest on September 7, 2000, when U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Eric Newsom, joined by representatives of the Norwegian and German Embassies in Albania, signed a memorandum with Albanian Minister of Defense Ilir Gjoni. According to the memorandum, 130,000-plus weapons collected from the civilian population since the 1997 crisis were to be expeditiously destroyed along with surplus military stocks. The Albanian project was praised within the Stability Pact and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) as an important security and confidence building measure for the Balkan region. As of May 2001, over 50,000 SA/LW have been eliminated in Albania with U.S., German and Norwegian assistance, and the project continues successfully.

EXPANDING EFFORTS

The Albania initiative stimulated interest in the Balkan region and internationally in the importance of reducing stockpiles of surplus arms. A U.S.-Norwegian team conducted a successful joint assessment visit to Macedonia and Bulgaria in October 2000. The commitment of the U.S. government also grew with the release of \$2 million in first-time dedicated funds in the Fiscal Year 2001 foreign operations budget for global small arms destruction. Regional and international organizations addressing the SA/LW proliferation problem began to recognize the importance of SA/LW stockpile management and destruction of excess. The landmark OSCE Document on Small Arms and Light Weapons, adopted by 55 countries on November 24, 2000 contains an entire section on stockpile management and destruction of arms. The United States and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) signed a joint declaration on SA/LW measures in December 2000, which includes commitments to destruction of excess and illicit arms.

In April 2001, NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) expanded its anti-personnel landmine destruction trust fund to include small arms and light weapons, encouraging PfP countries to commit to destruction of surpluses and NATO member countries to financially support these efforts. The U.N. Conference on the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All its Aspects, scheduled for July 2001, will include commitments to SA/LW destruction in its Program of Action.

The United States continues to expand its small arms destruction program. Projects are currently under discussion in the Balkans, Latin America, Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. In addition to an ongoing partnership with Norway and Germany in

Albania, the United States seeks joint ventures with other interested donor countries and organizations. U.S. support for destruction of surplus and illicit small arms and light weapons are intended to promote regional security, peace, and reconciliation in regions of conflict. The unchecked proliferation of these arms threatens civilians, peacekeepers, and law enforcement officials, and complicates the work of rebuilding war-torn societies and regions. Given that destruction is relatively inexpensive (costing generally between \$1-5 per weapon destroyed) and can generally be accomplished using locally available infrastructure (a variety of cheap methods are viable) and personnel, the program offers large dividends in threat reduction for a modest initial investment. ©