

**Working Group for Weapons Reduction in  
Cambodia (WGWR)**

*A Profile*

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# Working Group for Weapons Reduction in Cambodia

## A Profile

### I. Vision and Mission:

The Working Group for Weapons Reduction in Cambodia (WGWR) is a coalition of concerned Cambodian and international organizations and individuals who envision Cambodia as a place of justice and security where neither weapons nor violent means are used to solve problems and where people at all levels of society enjoy peace within themselves and in their communities.

The mission of WGWR is to cooperate as a coalition to:

- Transform the desire to own and use weapons into commitment and skills for non-violent problem solving.
- Reduce the numbers of small arms and light weapons.
- Promote the proper control of weapons which do exist.
- Work so that all weapons removed from society are destroyed so that they are never used anywhere again.

### II. Approaches

To accomplish this, a multi-faceted campaign was formed and is supported by a coalition of committed organizations and individuals, both Khmer and international. Beginning February 1999 the WGWR entered a twelve-month formational period. During this time a strategic analysis will be conducted to assess challenges and obstacles, such as: potential allies, groups whose interests may be threatened, and groups with related interests. The working group expects to initially focus its efforts on public education and information, alliance building, governmental and intergovernmental relations, international involvement and advocacy, and research. WGWR will also examine the feasibility of a future weapons collection programme. At the end of the formational period we hope to have a well-articulated campaign with an informed and focussed direction, and a permanent structure to carry out a long-term action plan. This WGWR profile paper covers the formational period and the expected first steps of direct campaign work.

Given the current and future Cambodian situation, we believe it is vital to promote and link all efforts to reduce the number of weapons and address the practice of using them. Without such an initiative, the work for development, environment, civil society, human rights, and democracy, which are just now starting in Cambodia, will remain vulnerable and fragile.

### III. Background

#### *Recent History*

Cambodia has experienced decades of civil war, violence, and turmoil. However, the impact on the numbers and use of weapons in the country has been varied. During the early 1970's, weapons were common in areas where soldiers had been issued guns; due to corruption, those guns often changed hands. Then, during the late 1970's, the totalitarian Khmer Rouge regime brought a very strict discipline, and only designated Khmer Rouge personnel had weapons. Starting in 1979, there was on-

going armed conflict, particularly in the northwest area of the country. Rival groups were generously armed by various patrons and there are still large numbers of those weapons cached in some areas. In the late 1980's, large numbers of Vietnamese troops, who had been invited into the country to help drive out the Khmer Rouge, left the country - and left behind large numbers of weapons. Many of these are still in circulation. Then, in the early 1990's, weapons flooded into the country, reaching all levels of society, for a combination of reasons:

- a massive UN operation that brought huge amounts of money into the country;
- the failure to systematically demobilize and disarm soldiers from rival sides in the conflict;
- opening up the country to a free market system;
- corruption; and
- in the context of a new and fragile reconciliation process, hesitation to either use or accept authority about the sensitive issue of arms ownership.

The weapons brought into the country at that time stayed in the hands of armed forces, militias, bandits and ordinary citizens. There are no good statistics about either the number of weapons in the country today, or about the number of deaths or injuries from weapons in non-combat situations. In 1993, UNTAC collected statistics from the four sides in the conflict; a total of over 320,000 light weapons and 80,000,000 items of ammunition were reported. The real numbers are thought to be much higher. In addition, arms trading has flourished in Cambodia in recent years due to continuing armed conflict, the perception that weapons enhance personal security, and the ease with which international criminal elements can set up operations. The Cambodian government has been poorly resourced to deal with these problems.

#### *Current Situation*

In early 1998, concerned individuals and representatives of Cambodian and international NGO's met to discuss the question of weapons reduction in Cambodia, and commissioned the feasibility study: "Possibilities to Reduce the Number of Weapons and the Practice of Using Weapons to Solve Problems in Cambodia." This study was based largely on interviews and reflects the perceptions and experiences of a sectoral and regional cross-section of people across the country. In summary, the research found that the security situation varies widely from area to area, depending on the recent local history. Security in each area influences, in turn, the weapons situation there. For example, in some localities residents reported that almost every household has at least one gun. In others, residents say that only members of the armed forces, upper-level civil servants, and people with criminal intentions have guns.

However, even in places where there are few weapons and few specific cases of violence, people do not feel secure. Fear and distrust of others are strong characteristics of Cambodian society at present due to people's experiences during the Khmer Rouge regime and the subsequent civil war. They also say they fear grudges and vengeance, and do not trust their neighbours or police to help if they are attacked by people with weapons. In every place visited there was a feeling that the security situation could easily deteriorate. The widespread availability of weapons contributes to that feeling, and to a consequent widespread desire to own guns. Most people believe that people who own guns are safer than people who do not. Thus, the society is trapped in a 'tragedy of the commons' - each individual feels safer owning a gun, although most recognize that they and the community as a whole would be safer if there were fewer guns.

The government has, from time to time, made efforts to clean up illegal weapons and to impose more discipline on the carrying of weapons by armed forces. The research team met many government and armed forces officials who are genuinely concerned about the weapons situation and who have worked as well as possible, within the confines of their resources, to improve the situation. In some provinces that have not experienced recent armed conflict there have been significant results. However, in most of the areas studied, the efforts to reduce the numbers of weapons and to impose

more discipline on the use of arms have been sporadic and selective. There is an existing legal framework to govern the ownership and use of weapons. However, people throughout the country report that the governance of weapons is not handled within this framework but rather through a system of relationships, patronage, and payments for waivers to the law.

Particular concerns arising from the report include:

1. The widespread availability of weapons. For example, AK47's are easily available almost everywhere, through networks of relatives, friends, and some members of the armed forces, for prices ranging from \$5 - \$50 USD. In some parts of the country more sophisticated weapons can be readily purchased: B-40 rocket launchers with four explosives cost as little as \$32 USD, and pistols prices start from about \$120 USD. Ammunition is easily available for most weapons in most places.
2. There is at present little import or export of weapons to other countries, but this could quickly change. Weapons flows are very fluid, and weapons dealers in Cambodia have the experience and connections they need to expand international trade. There is a black-market for weapons in the capital city.
3. It is becoming increasingly common that people think of guns as a first solution to solving problems. The public media - both television and newspapers - are replete with graphic depictions of violence, both actual and fictional. Teachers report students taking on the attitudes of the 'Hong Kong' gangster movies, and ordinary citizens in some areas report that guns are becoming a status symbol. People regularly pull out guns in traffic jams and accidents.
4. The "Mafia" - organized gangs of criminals - is fairly new here, but rapidly growing and becoming more sophisticated. Easy access to powerful weapons will make it possible for them to grow into a force which will be very difficult to control later.

Interviews with 254 people (including top-level generals, lower-level armed force personnel, government officials, NGO workers, and ordinary citizens) in nine areas around the country, showed a strong consensus that:

- a. The present weapons situation is a serious problem and very dangerous to individuals and communities;
- b. If people felt 'secure' most would voluntarily give up their guns; but feelings of security will be difficult to achieve;
- c. A sustained and well-resourced effort by the government at all levels could have a significant impact on the numbers and use of weapons in the country;
- d. There is a lot of support for action - by both governmental and nongovernmental bodies - to reduce the number of weapons and the practice of using them to solve problems. Actually, most people interviewed initially viewed the weapons situation as something only the government could solve. After discussion, many of the people interviewed began to think of ways that communities or groups of citizens could also work together to improve the situation.

Since its completion, the feasibility study was distributed among the broader NGO community and other interested parties, both in Cambodia and abroad. The WGWR was established on the basis of the results of the feasibility study and the widespread support that already exists for weapons reduction efforts.

#### **IV. Activities**

##### **a. Public Education and Information**

The WGWR will encourage public education and further public discussion on the issue of the presence and use of weapons in Cambodia. To accomplish this, a public information strategy will be planned and implemented at all levels of society. Strategies will include developing an informational package for broad distribution and publicly presenting weapons reduction ideas and issues.

Steps for public education will include:

- Condensing the feasibility study into a short pamphlet for broader distribution.
- Finding venues where weapons reduction issues can be presented.
- Developing of Speakers' Bureau: a group of speakers who really believe in not having weapons. Help them practice talking about the issues and answering difficult questions through role-plays, debates inside the group, etc.
- Gathering lessons from the landmines (CCBL) and AIDS campaigns to learn their ideas about designing effective public education materials, videos, etc.
- Discussing with key media contacts how they portray weapons and violence and how they report about weapons-related deaths and injuries.
- Approaching the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Information to encourage them to reduce the amount of gratuitous violence shown on television;
- Focussing on youth in a public education campaign to decrease the "Hong Kong II" attitude which is developing in Cambodia, where they fight about a problem (and bring in the 'Bong Thom' or bodyguard or others to do it) and where guns are used as status symbols. Emphasize changing the idea of looking down on people without guns to the idea that needing a gun means you are weak and not respected.
- Creating a symbol that people can wear to indicate their commitment against weapons.
- Developing and producing other leaflets and posters.
- Organizing an essay and art contest for youths to illustrate weapons reduction and non-violence issues.
- Finding opportunities to study and reflect on the issues of: What is security? How is security achieved? What is the normal role of weapons in a peaceful society?
- Designing public education and training materials which individual organizations doing community-based work in particular areas can incorporate.

##### **b. Alliance Building**

Organizations that are presently involved in peace work form the foundation of the WGWR alliance. To be effective WGWR will require the participation of many groups, organizations and individuals. Alliance building will begin with an analysis of the key issues to be addressed by WGWR and an assessment of the parties in Cambodia who have a potential interest in each of these issues. We will develop a matrix of potential allies with an indication of the expected role and contribution of each. Using this stakeholder analysis we will develop a strategy to enlist the support of each identified ally. Particular emphasis will be placed on gaining the participation of people and organizations in the provinces. Initially workshops to present the results of the feasibility study will be undertaken in the provinces. We will then develop a network of liaisons who will be trained to collect data, arrange meetings, and disseminate information.

In the early phase of building the WGWR alliance we will give particular attention to enlisting allies with connections to specific sectors in Cambodia, such as the health sector, the community development sector, or the education sector. Other key allies could include the UNESCO Culture of Peace Program and the World Bank. In developing these alliances we will need to build on natural

links that already exist. For example, we could propose that one of the annual Dhammayietra Peace Walks focus on the issues of weapons availability, use and attitudes. We will also need to demonstrate to potential allies why weapons reduction is, or should be, within their mandates. For example, a detailed rationale can be developed for the significance of weapons reduction to the health sector or the educational sector before approaching organizations in either sector to enlist their participation.

#### **c. Governmental and Inter-Governmental Relations**

The feasibility study has shown that some departments and ministries of the Royal Government are interested in issues related to disarmament. In fact, the Royal Government has already undertaken some disarmament efforts. We need to fully research these efforts and build on the knowledge and experience that has been gained. The full cooperation and participation of government will be essential to any comprehensive campaign. During the early stage of the WGWR we will develop a detailed analysis of potential allies in the government sector. Initially, we will approach individual officials and enlist their assistance to gain the support of various governmental bodies. Some of these individual officials are already known to WGWR; others still need to be identified.

As a next step, the results of the feasibility study will be presented to various departments and government agencies and provincial authorities through educational seminars. We may be able to use the networks established through the Cambodian Center for Conflict Resolution (CCCR) to acquaint officials from different sectors with the issues and to assess support. We will consider developing a working group or advisory committee of government officials to promote weapons reduction to their peers. Some of this work has already begun. For example, in December 1998 the municipality of Phnom Penh invited the WGWR to share the results of its local and international research with over 200 government, military and police officials and civil servants to assist in the planning of their weapons reduction efforts. WGWR members are already active in NGO and World Bank discussions of how to support government demobilization efforts so that they are effective.

WGWR will also use its links with the international campaign to identify other key governments that may be in a position to encourage the Government of Cambodia to take up the objectives of the campaign. For example, a government such as Australia or Canada, which has already declared its interest in the general goals of the campaign, may be requested to make diplomatic approaches to the Government of Cambodia on these issues.

WGWR can use opportunities provided by key inter-governmental fora to raise the issues of weapons reduction. We can request that support for weapons reduction is included in the presentations before the Consultative Group meetings. We should use opportunities to present this issue at appropriate ASEAN and other regional meetings.

#### **d. International Involvement and Advocacy**

The international dimensions of the campaign fall into three areas: learning from micro-disarmament activities in other post-war states; developing links with activities and organizations in surrounding countries, and monitoring the regional arms trade; and playing a role in the international campaign to reverse the widespread presence of light weapons and small arms and to reduce their use.

##### *Learning from micro-disarmament activities elsewhere*

This work has been begun, but it needs to be ongoing, with regular exchange of information fostered between groups involved in work on this issue. We have already made contact with a campaign in Mozambique (Hoes for Guns, which has on-going voluntary weapons turn-in programs run through the Mozambican Council of Churches). Contact has also been made with an agency in Nicaragua which has focussed on reintegrating re-arming groups and tackling the social problems that contribute

to groups re-arming themselves. We will make more linkages and foster an on-going network of information exchange.

*Developing regional links and monitoring of the arms trade*

There is not a single post-war society that has disarmed successfully. The oversupply of arms has harmed development in the post-war state and, in almost every case, the arms have flowed over borders into neighboring states to fuel crime waves or political instability. We will encourage cooperation by official agencies of neighboring states for support of this program (for their mutual benefit) and promote the education of NGO allies in neighboring states.

*Playing a role in the international campaign*

In October 1998, an international campaign to tackle the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons was launched in Belgium. Three members of the Working Group, including the authors of the feasibility study, attended the International NGO Action Network on Small Arms conference. Three Nobel Prize winners and almost all international institutions which are working in the field of small arms and light weapons reduction also attended. Lessons learned from weapons collection programs in other countries shed light on disarmament problems and possible solutions in Cambodia. Experiences in other countries highlight elements valuable in any successful disarmament effort. For example: amnesty for owners of illegal weapons who voluntarily give them up, strategies for voluntary weapons collection programs, public destruction of weapons collected, and public education about the issue which de-glamorizes weapons and their use and challenges beliefs that having a gun makes someone safer. We strongly support this new network and will participate in it. Although the network will not be directly involved in our work in Cambodia, it will focus global attention on our area of concern and will benefit our in-country and regional activities.

**e. Research**

To establish the basis for WGWR, we will conduct more extensive research on weapons issues in Cambodia. Research will at first focus on all previous initiatives and obstacles to reduce and/ or control the number of weapons in Cambodia. Research will then shift to gathering more information about current government actions and stance regarding weapons reduction, demobilization, legislation, and law enforcement. Relevant statistics, from a variety of sources, will be gathered to assess the impact of weapons use in Cambodia. Local media will be monitored. Further research will be designed to feed directly into a public education program.

Research priorities include:

- a. Finding out more about previous work done on this issue:
  - Earlier governmental efforts to collect weapons, including work in Rattanakiri Province related to wildlife conservation activities and other instances alluded to in the feasibility study.
  - Successful citizen actions against weapons in Cambodia
  - International precedents and their relation to our work in Cambodia.
  - Archived information in newspapers such as the Cambodian Daily, the Phnom Penh Post, and several Khmer language papers
- b. Gather more information from governmental sources:
  - Determine and follow-up the government's stance and plans on enforcement of already existing laws, further weapons collection, demobilization, etc.
  - Review the government's statistical information on the number of weapons and weapons registrations in Cambodia, and other related issues.

- Develop a format for data gathering and presentation.
- c. Gather statistically significant data to further strengthen the feasibility study
  - Statistics regarding weapons related injuries and deaths from MEDICAM, ICRC, Phnom Penh hospitals, and human rights organizations.
  - Propose to expand CMAC's data gathering to include injuries and deaths due to small arms.
  - Follow-up on additional statistical sources. E.g. Cambodian Defenders Project, etc.
- d. Media monitoring
  - Ask the Women's Media Center to monitor the portrayal of weapons and their use in the local media.
  - Continue to collect items from the national and international media on related issues.

Further research will focus on information that will feed directly into a public education programme. It will include:

- Interviewing people who have been directly affected by the problems posed by weapons.
- Compiling statistics about deaths and injuries caused by guns which are reported to hospitals or other medical facilities in at least two provincial capitals, and in at least five rural communes. Include information about the circumstances of the incident and whether the death or injury was inflicted by a stranger or by a person known to the victim. The goal of this is to ascertain to what extent people really are 'safer' if they do not own weapons.
- Tracking in at least three communes where there are frequent problems such as robberies to understand which families have the most problems: those believed to have guns or those who are believed not to have guns. We will also collect basic socio-economic data on these families. This activity would have to be done by an organization working in the area that knows the situation and can interpret the results.
- Tracking activities of the Tuk Thla arms market in Phnom Penh and monitoring government activities aimed at closing it.
- Monitoring the changing prices of weapons in Cambodia and tracking changes in the level of imports or exports.
- Following training, discipline and demobilization activities of the security forces in Cambodia with particular attention to the role of international donors (World Bank... etc.).
- Reviewing national campaigns for lessons learned regarding public education and media materials used. E.g. the landmines (CCBL), AIDS campaigns, and others.
- Reviewing the body of Cambodian and international law that relates to weapons.

#### **f. Weapons Collection**

After the first year formational period, WGWR tentatively plans to develop and implement a pilot weapons collection programme. The programme would destroy all weapons and ammunition received. Research-to-date indicates that the following design elements would be most effective:

- A mobile team model.
- Working in cooperation with the government to assure amnesty in those areas for people turning in illegal weapons.
- Giving compensation at below-market values for the weapons turned in.
- Providing local government bodies with some small compensation for each item turned in.
- Using the experience from this pilot programme to design a larger scale programme.
- Sharing the lessons from the pilot project with development organizations that might be interested in incorporating elements into their work.

## V. WGWR Structure and Governance

The structure of WGWR has four levels:

1. Alliance: Anyone who is interested in and supports the mission and vision of WGWR is welcome to participate in its activities.
2. Working Group (WG): The WG is the core body to which all higher-level decision-making is entrusted. The WG currently consists of 19 members. Some members participate as individuals, and others participate on behalf of eight Cambodian and international organizations working in Cambodia.
3. Executive Committee (EC): The EC is comprised of a sub-group of the WG and acts on behalf of the WG for more detailed decision making, coordination, and supervision of the Secretariat.
4. Secretariat: The Secretariat is comprised of the staff of the WGWR who carry out daily decision making and coordination of activities. Currently the WGWR staff consists of a coordinator and an administrative assistant, both full-time Cambodian nationals, and a half-time expatriate advisor.

The WGWR is not formally either an organization or an institution; it is, as the name indicates, a Working Group.

The core budget for the initial year is being funded internally by working group members. This will prevent the initial work from being funder-driven. During this year, as the working group matures and its direction becomes clearer, we will begin to seek external funding for a longer-term, larger-scale weapons reduction movement.

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