



Efforts to tackle illegal small arms

During the civil war in Sierra Leone in the 1990s, guns were easy to get. Rebel forces plundered diamond mines and used the proceeds to buy and smuggle in a huge array of small arms and light weapons. The 11-year conflict claimed tens of thousands of lives and developed a gun culture that undermined reconstruction. An “Arms for Development” programme (created by the UN Development Programme and the Government of Sierra Leone) led communities to voluntarily surrender their small arms and light weapons in exchange for small-scale development projects. More than 20 Chiefdoms are now weapons-free and, in return for the weapons surrendered, they have benefited from community-building projects such as schools, health facilities, sports centers and markets. Community members also received training in disarmament education and conflict resolution.

In Cambodia, nearly 500 “Flame of Peace” ceremonies were held over the last few years, resulting in the destruction of 190,000 weapons, partly thanks to assistance provided by the European Union. Homicide by firearms has declined dramatically during this campaign, from 4.0–5.4 per 100,000 in 1998 to 1.1–1.7 in 2003. Armed robberies decreased from 1,822 in 1998 to 1,175 in 2003, and admissions to hospital for bullet wounds have reportedly decreased. This improvement is generally attributed to the government’s record in collecting illegal weapons, securely storing the weapons controlled by the Ministry of National Defence and destroying surplus weapons. Between 2001 and 2005, all small arms and light weapons in the Army and Royal Gendarmerie were registered in a centralised computer database and securely stored.

Uganda has recently started disposing of an estimated 57,000 guns deemed obsolete and unserviceable, with financial support from UNDP. This destruction is done in accordance with the 2004 Nairobi Protocol for the Prevention, Control and Reduction of Small Arms and Light Weapons in the Great Lakes Region and the Horn of Africa. In this protocol, countries undertook to “ensure that small arms and light weapons rendered surplus, redundant or obsolete through the implementation of a peace process, the re-equipment or re-organisation of armed forces and/or other state bodies are securely stored, destroyed or disposed of in a way that prevents them from entering the illicit market or flowing into regions in conflict or any other destination that is not fully consistent with agreed criteria for restraint.” The protocol has been ratified by two thirds of the States in the Great Lakes region and Horn of Africa.

In Brazil, a 2003 gun law restricted ownership and included a voluntary weapons collection drive. The following year, gun deaths dropped by 8% (more than 3,200 lives saved in one year). This was the first drop in gun deaths in 13 years. The Brazilian government collected and destroyed more than half a million firearms from 2001 to 2004, most of which were illegal. Brazil is one of a few countries in the world where mortality rates from gun-related incidents are higher than those for car accidents, espe-

cially among youth. To address the problem, the Brazilian government held a referendum in 2005 that would have banned sales of guns and ammunition country-wide, except for sales to public safety officers, private security firms and sport clubs. Nearly two thirds of voters opposed the proposal. The national debate over the referendum was intense and the debate on how guns contribute to the high level of violence in Brazil is likely to continue.

UNICEF has supported thousands of children associated with fighting forces to put their grim experiences behind them and reintegrate into their communities. In Afghanistan, UNICEF conducted a programme for nearly 4,000 demobilized child soldiers in which they could choose to return to school, enrol in vocational training or undertake income-generating activities. UNICEF-supported Local Demobilization and Reintegration Committees in 18 provinces contributed to community-based programme activities, including psycho-social support for demobilized child soldiers and other war-affected and at-risk children. In Burundi, with the Government's National Structure for Child Soldiers, UNICEF supported the demobilization of more than 800 children in 2005 (of 3,007 released children). In Sierra Leone, UNICEF assisted more than 2,800 children affected by war, ex-combatants and separated children in 2005.

After the adoption of tough laws against illegal guns, homicides tend to decrease. In Australia, an evaluation in 2004 of gun law reforms enacted in the 1990s found dramatic reductions in firearms-related deaths. In Canada, where a series of gun law reforms have been introduced since 1991, the gun homicide rate fell by 46% by 2003. While the numbers of men killed by guns fell by 37%, gun homicides of women decreased by 61%. The decrease in gun-related homicides was accompanied by a 36% drop in the overall homicides over the same period. In the United Kingdom, the gun laws were reformed in 1997. By 2003, the gun homicide rate for men in England and Wales had dropped 33%, while the rate of women killed in gun homicides fell by 48%.

* * * *