

ILLICIT ARMS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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Good morning ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank the Governments of Canada, the Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland for sponsoring this event and the British American Security Information Council for inviting me to participate. While illicit arms trafficking is not the specific focus of our work at the Program for Arms Control, Disarmament and Conversion (PACDC) our expertise on the subject comes as a result of three of our activities.

First, PACDC's current focus is the investigation, documentation and analysis of voluntary weapons collection programs (VWCP) in Central America. Our documentation of VWCP efforts in El Salvador, and more recently in Panama, has permitted us to see the quantities and types of weapons being turned in voluntarily.

Second, beyond our documentation of VWCP we have made several field visits to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras where we have had the opportunity to interview military officials, ex-combatants, members of youth gangs known as "maras" and common citizens. These experiences have added to our understanding of the issues related to arms transfers and their distribution.

Third, from our home office we monitor all reports on the proliferation and indiscriminate use of small arms and light weapons via the Central American and international press as well as receive reports from partner NGOs within the region.

In titling this presentation Illicit Arms in Central America I deliberately left out trafficking, sales or similar wording. To understand the problems related to small arms in Central America one must also take into consideration the non-transactional distribution, the illegal use of legally obtained firearms and other related circumstances. When I refer to Central America I am speaking about two different definitions interchangeably. The first referring specifically to Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, the core region. However, because of shared borders, economic relations and immigration patterns we must also consider as part of the region the

Caribbean states, northern Colombia, the southern Mexican State of Chiapas and the United States-Mexico border.

During the brief moments that I have your attention I would prefer not to waste your time summarizing specific events from the Cold War and years of civil conflict and their impact on the illicit arms trade. This information is fairly well documented by researchers such as Michael Klare and Christopher Louise. I will only say that many thousands, if not millions, of military weapons of American, Israeli, Belgian, Soviet, German, Austrian, Brazilian, Czech, Yugoslav, Spanish, French, Italian and Korean fabrication among others were left over after the end of the Cold War and civil conflicts. It is recognized that United Nations sponsored disarmament programs have not been able to recover a fraction of the weapons in circulation. The 1,800 weapons collected from the guerrillas in Guatemala after the conclusion of more than three decades of conflict is a prime example of this. The abundance of these weapons is the single most important factor one needs to take into consideration when looking at current illicit arms transfers and use within Central America.

The large post-Cold War inventories of weapons should be analyzed in combination with the following environmental factors:

- Extremely porous, poorly defined and under-monitored borders within the core region and with Mexico and Colombia to the north and south
- Free trade zones and off shore banking facilities in Panama, the Cayman Islands and other Caribbean states
- Increased narcotics trafficking that uses the more than 3,000 clandestine airstrips in Central America as points of transit
- Largely unsuccessful attempts to reintegrate ex-combatants into post-conflict civil society
- Economic hardship that translates into thousands of underpaid or unpaid public servants very susceptible to corruption and graft
- Newly created public security forces that have not had the time, training nor resources to make the transition from military to civilian institutions while keeping up with increasing levels of crime and violence

As I have already mentioned I do not want to spend time covering historical background information when so much has been happening over the course of the last year on this issue. Our documentation of illicit activity involving small quantities of weapons (events where less than 10 weapons are involved) are so numerous that it would be impossible to summarize this activity here. Just by multiplying the times we have encountered small transfers in Central America by an average of five weapons each would put the illicit activity well into the thousands. For the remainder of my presentation I would prefer to focus on the larger or more systematic illicit activity that we have documented in five specific areas: re-circulation of post-Cold War weapons inventories and caches; narco-activity; the private security industry; the legal arms trade; and the role of the United States.

Re-circulation of post-Cold War weapons inventories and caches

Scholars and researchers estimate that up to 2 million military weapons remain in Central America. Evidence suggests that most of the illegal arms in circulation were introduced during the years of conflict. The most common of these weapons being the M-16 and AK-47 assault rifles, RPG projectiles and hand grenades. An AK-47 can be purchased for as little as \$25 on the black market in Honduras or Nicaragua. In El Salvador, approximately 20% of the assault rifles turned in voluntarily for consumer goods were clearly marked "Property of United States Government". We know that these are not newly introduced weapons as there is evidence that the U.S. government introduced tens of thousands of M-16s and grenade launchers in the 1980's.

In July of this year two large caches of arms were discovered allegedly belonging to the FMLN (former Salvadoran guerrilla forces). The first containing 600 RPG-7 grenade launchers and Soviet made assault rifles was found by the Nicaraguan police outside of Managua. The second cache was found in the El Salvador's La Libertad province and contained 30 rifles including M-16s and Galils along with 148 blocks of TNT explosive and other materials. The FMLN and Guatemalan URNG are the groups typically blamed for hidden caches because it is politically easy to do so, but weapons have exchanged hands so many times over the past decade that it is not clear who they belong to. Both sides of each conflict have agents that kept military inventories for personal use. In May of this year a former Honduran military official was arrested for the possession of 167 military assault rifles.

The re-circulation of Central American arms appears to have reached the Mexican State of Chiapas and contributed to the armed violence there. On August 11, 1998 the Mexican government accused the former guerrillas and soldiers from El Salvador of exporting arms to the region when they encountered former Salvadoran combatants there. This same day the Salvadoran PNC found and destroyed an alleged FMLN arsenal containing 56 grenades, 64 propellants and 4 detonators. Earlier this year two former Honduran military officials were prosecuted by the Mexican government for supplying weapons to the Zapatistas back in 1994. Central American weapons and mercenaries continue to cross national borders.

Legally distributed weapons also end up in the wrong hands or are unaccounted for as we have learned in Nicaragua. August of this year the Nicaraguan Center for Strategic Studies (CEEN) discovered that 700 AK-47's distributed to farmers by the Nicaraguan Army for protection against armed criminals were unaccounted for and began to appear on the black market. The stockpiling of AK-47's by the state police in Chiapas and their subsequent distribution to certain individuals by the mayor of Chenalho can be directly attributed to the Acteal massacre of 45 people on December 22, 1997.

The point I am trying to make here is that there is a constant re-circulation and re-distribution of weapons that have been in the region for decades. Very few weapons, especially of military issue, are registered and accounted for outside of military arsenals. It is useless to

try and figure out who was the original owner of these arms as most of the serial numbers have been crossed out and they have changed hands many times. The important issue here is that Cold War arsenals continue to circulate in abundance within the region and make both petty crime and massacres like the one that occurred in Chiapas less than a year ago, easy and inexpensive to carry out.

Narco-activity

It is no secret that the disruption of the large Colombian drug cartels and the relative economic vulnerability of the Central American nations has made the region one of the principal transit points for drugs destined for the United States. Drugs and illicit arms deals always seem to go hand in hand. As Christopher Louise has pointed out both products are high value/low density commodities although the relative abundance of arms weakens this argument.

I am a personal witness to the increase in drug trafficking in Central America over the past five years. Large stores with imported consumer goods, mansions and half-built luxury hotels have appeared out of nowhere in a region with serious foreign exchange shortages. Crack has taken over the control of a large segment of El Salvador's youth partially because of the increased deportation of immigrant offenders from the United States and also because drug traffickers are beginning to make payments for transportation and services in drugs and arms. We have not even begun to see the effects of drug addiction within the region.

The arms used for barter come from both re-circulated sources as well as newly introduced weapons. However, it still appears that the latter case is the most prevalent. Panama appears to be one of the key entry points for drugs and arms into the region with its free trade zones and lax banking laws. The Colombian guerrilla group FARC has been known to transport drugs and weapons to Costa Rica via Panama. The US Drug Enforcement Agency has found links between the Colon Free Zone and a Colombian/Asian crime ring involved in trafficking drugs, illegal immigrants and AK-47's between Asia, South America and the United States. At the same time, investigative reports in the Panamanian press have implicated an Argentine national for using Panama as a base for trafficking surplus Argentine arms to Croatia, Bosnia and Ecuador between 1991 and 1995.

On the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica peasants have been armed with AK-47s to protect marijuana plantations. In Guatemala City the police have documented the existence of seventeen armed gangs associated with international drug dealers. The Guatemalan government currently holds 280 legal cases against legitimate arms dealers for selling weapons to drug traffickers.

We also know that regional crime rings involving ex-combatants from both sides of the conflict have become involved in drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion and bank assaults, especially in the area known as the Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua) Small arms are necessary to keep these enterprises going.

Most of the drugs go to the United States via Mexico. It is natural that payment would often arrive in the form of weapons. However, automatic weapons are so cheap and plentiful within the region it is unlikely that this would be the most desirable form of payment for intermediate level drug traffickers. New, expensive and sophisticated automatic weaponry is only accessible to the actors higher up in the drug trade. At the same time, the relative abundance and low price of automatic weapons in Central America might even provide incentive for their export to other parts of the world, including the United States.

Often the youth street gangs known as "maras" are blamed for much of the drug and arms trade in the region, and they do participate in these activities. Through my visits to the field and interviews with members of these gangs it has become clear to me that their participation in the illicit arms trade is minimal. Most of these youths are between the ages of eleven and seventeen. While gang members might come across an AK-47 every now and then, most use homemade pistols made out of metal tubes and bed-springs and are too high on crack to be major players in the arms trade or afford the \$25 necessary to buy an old assault rifle.

The Private Security Industry

Increases in crime and violence in combination with weak public security forces has created the need for well-armed private security in Central America. Not only do banks and government buildings have private guards with modified assault weapons, but just about every delivery truck and medium to large size business in the region does as well. The Central American governments are not well prepared to deal with these businesses legislatively nor operationally, leaving many of these companies on the fringes of legality. The fact that many of these companies are owned by former military and security personnel and purchase weapons on a regular basis raises question marks as to their possible role in the illicit arms trade. My knowledge of specific statistics on this industry is limited to El Salvador and Guatemala.

The Salvadoran government has registered 80 private security companies that employ more than 17,000 agents since 1993. All private security agents are required by law to take a five-day course, that costs US\$50, administered by the National Public Security Academy (ANSP). Only 7,128 individuals have done so, but this has not stopped these companies from hiring individuals and providing them with high power weaponry.

In Guatemala the situation could be even more critical. The chapter on citizen security in the March 1998 report published by the Guatemalan office of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) estimated that 200 private security forces operate in that country, only thirty are legally registered. Armed community watch groups are also emerging and have formed 800 committees in the capital city alone.

In theory, these groups are doing what the police can not and there is nothing inherently wrong with that, but the arming of individuals with little training and relatively few economic prospects can only be a recipe for disaster. The Ministry of Defense is the institution responsible for

controlling and registering arms until it is eventually transferred over to civilian authorities. In my interviews with Ministry representatives I have been told of several occasions where owners of private security companies have obtained permits to buy weapons that can not be accounted for or for individuals that do not exist. There is no doubt in my mind that this industry contributes to the illicit arms trade. While Guatemala does have a small indigenous arms industry it is safe to assume that most weapons sold legally are imported from outside the region. What is clear is that there is minimal local capacity to monitor and verify the arms that the industry purchases and distributes to its agents.

Legal Arms Trade

A large majority of illegal weapons circulating in the world were once produced and sold within the limits of the law. They may enter the illicit world through theft or illegal sales. Often times looking closely at the legal trade provides insights into the illicit trade as well. I have had the opportunity to analyze some of this information regarding the legal arms trade, specifically in Guatemala. As I mentioned earlier, the Guatemalan government has filed claims against many legitimate arms dealers for questionable sales to drug dealers. Since 1991, the Department of Control of Arms and Munitions (DECAM) has closed 50 arms stores for irregularities. One of the armories closed earlier this year could not account for 629,000 rounds of ammunition sold to a single individual eight months prior. The individual claimed that the bullets were used for hunting and protecting his ranch. To use that many rounds of ammunition would require 2,568 shots per day every day for that time period. This is only one of many similar cases.

The statistics maintained by DECAM regarding the legal arms trade are also alarming. Of 84,212 arms solicited for import in 1997 only 20,603 import permits were granted. 19,588 of those imported were reported sold. What about the more than 60,000 permits that were not granted? The laws of supply and demand would suggest that many of these arms entered the market illegally. The statistics for munitions are even more staggering. Guatemala and Central America society in general are arming themselves to the hilt, whether it is via legal or illegal means. It seems that both the legal and illegal channels are related and feed of each other increasing demand for high-powered weapons in countries where cultures of gun possession go back in time well before the cold war.

Role of the United States

There is no doubt that the United States and former Soviet Union, and to a lesser extent Israel and Cuba, are the powers most responsible for the millions of assault rifles, rocket launchers and grenades that remain in Central America after the Cold War. It is not my intent to let the US government off the hook, but it does not appear that major flows of weapons, either by government or private sources are flowing to the region at present. Maybe one of my American colleagues that speak later on in this workshop can address this matter more accurately and contradict what I am saying. However, it is clear that many of the

weapons being sold and used indiscriminately come from the United States.

For that reason, I believe the U.S. government has a responsibility to help collect and destroy these weapons. It is even in the United States' self interest to prevent these weapons from being sent northward. At the same time the U.S. government and society in general have to do something to reduce the demand for illegal drugs, which only promotes the illicit arms trade further.

An interesting bit of information that recently came out in the New York Times is that 135 American citizens have been arrested in Mexico for firearms possession, seventy-eight remain in prison, mostly for carrying hunting rifles across the border. It appears that most of the arrested were legitimate hunters that did not realize that the Mexican government had begun strictly enforcing laws already on the books in attempt to minimize guns for drugs exchanges. While I do not believe that these arrests get at the heart of the illicit trade from the U.S. southward it does demonstrate how easy it could have been to smuggle arms across borders in the recent past. It is probably even easier to smuggle from Mexico into Central America. It also demonstrates that Mexico is not willing to conform to the lax standards for firearms' possession in the U.S. State of Texas. This makes the general point that the harmonization of laws among OAS states could contribute to the decrease in illicit trafficking.

Conclusion

The evidence available to us indicates that most of the illicit arms traffic and distribution that takes place in the region takes place with recycled and re-circulated weapons. Incomplete weapons collection and destruction programs after conflicts have officially ended can take most of the recent blame. The issue of illicit arms in Central America can not be tackled without looking at drug trafficking, which appears to deal with both newly introduced and recycled arms, simultaneously. We are witnessing daily bank assaults with AK-47s in Costa Rica, a country without an army and a tradition of peace and democracy and the only core nation of the Central American region to respond to the 1998 UN International Study on Firearm Regulation.

The Inter-American Convention Against the Illicit Production of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials, of which I understand we will learn about in detail later in this workshop, is an encouraging step toward fighting the illicit trade in arms. I only have concrete information that ten members of the OAS have ratified this convention, one of them being El Salvador last week. The proposed creation of a Central American Security Commission to serve as a parallel mechanism to the OAS convention in the sub-region is also encouraging, but has failed to materialize.

Central American security forces at all levels need the time, resources and training to be able to improve enforcement and prosecution in order to reduce both the supply and demand aspects of the illicit arms trade. This is not a simple task in practice. However, I am optimistic about the

future of Central America in this respect when I look to the even greater problems of Africa, the Middle East and the former Soviet Union. It is my belief as well as that of the people I work with that the issue of illicit arms in Central America can not be tackled without giving equal attention to existing surplus, the legal trade and the economic needs of the region's former combatants. Thank you.

Recommended Resources

Michael Klare and David Anderson, A SCOURGE OF GUNS: The Diffusion of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Latin America, Arm Sales Monitoring Project of the Federation of American Scientists, Washington D.C., August 1996.

Christopher Louise, Light Weapons in Central America: A Preliminary Report of the Militarisation of Civil Society in El Salvador, Guatemala and Chiapas, Research note prepared for an international workshop of the British American Security Information Council's Project on Light Weapons, London, 30 June - 2 July 1996.

Sarah Meek, *Chapter 4: The Organization of American States in Society Under Siege: Licit Responses to Illicit Arms* Edited by Virginia Gamba, *Toward Collaborative Peace Series: Volume II*, Institute for Security Studies, Halfway House-South Africa, 1998.

UN, United Nations International Study on Firearm Regulation, UN, New York, 1998.