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### **Small arms and violence in Guatemala**

For Guatemala, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in society has been one of the many consequences of the more than 36 years of civil war. Weapons poured into the region of Central America during the Cold War, fueling armed conflicts. It is impossible to estimate the number of arms that are currently circulating in Central America. In Guatemala, less than 2,000 arms were collected following the Peace Accords in December 1996.<sup>1</sup> The Department for Arms and Munitions Control (DECAM), subordinate to the Ministry of Defense, currently has 150,000 weapons in their registry. In addition, there are an estimated 1.5 million to 2 million arms circulating illegally on the streets.<sup>2</sup>

The abundance of arms combined with a weak economy and the slow reintegration of demobilized combatants, has resulted in a society with a high level of citizen insecurity. Armed violence has increased, especially in the urban areas, which were not significantly affected by the fighting during the civil war. Guatemala is currently considered one of the most violent countries in Latin America, and criminals are often better armed than the police. A survey conducted by the company Borge & Asociados in May 1999 shows that for 26 percent of the Guatemalan population, crime is the problem they are most concerned about.<sup>3</sup>

The criminal activity takes a number of different forms. Delinquent gangs or so-called *maras* have taken control of several different zones in Guatemala City. The most common weapons they use are grenades, shotguns and revolvers. They acquire their weapons either in exchange for drugs, or through families who are wealthy or connected with the military. The *maras* are responsible for assaults on buses and other criminal acts. In Guatemala City each major bus company experiences an average of 3-4 assaults daily. Armed robberies are another great problem. Since the beginning of 1999 until April 2000, 57 robberies of banks and armored cars have taken place, and more than 20 security guards have been killed during the assaults.<sup>4</sup> Armed assaults are also common

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<sup>1</sup> Edward J. Laurance and William H. Godnick, "Weapons Collection in Central America: El Salvador and Guatemala," available from [www.sand.miiis.edu](http://www.sand.miiis.edu)

<sup>2</sup> Siglo Veintiuno, (August 27, 1999) and UNEP, "Violencia y Inseguridad Ciudadana," Chapter 7 of the Report of the United Nations Development Program Guatemala Office, (March 1998), 159.

<sup>3</sup> Prensa Libre (August 22, 1999)

<sup>4</sup> Prensa Libre, (April 7, 2000)

on all types of vehicles. In some areas, one can no longer use the roads by night, and this has caused problems, particularly for commercial transports.

In 1998, the total number of deaths caused by firearms was 2,391. That constituted 49 % of the total number of violent deaths. About 60 percent of the victims were in the age group 10-39 years old and 83 percent of the victims were men. In the first trimester of 1999, firearms caused 456 deaths and 612 injuries. For the period 1996-1999, the homicide rate in Guatemala was estimated at 58 per 100,000 inhabitants, placing the country right behind Colombia and El Salvador in the Latin American region. However, the cities of Escuintla and Izabal had the highest crime rates in this period, with a homicide rate as high as 115 per 100,000 people. According to the Ministry of Defense's Department of Arms and Munitions Control (DECAM), Escuintla is also the department outside of the capital with the highest numbers of legally registered firearms.<sup>5</sup> In Guatemala, as in the rest of Latin America, there is a general lack of reliable data and statistics with regard to violence. While the numbers available might not be accurate, it is possible to make assumptions based on them about the broader trends. For example, although the following homicide numbers from Guatemala City are probably lower than the actual numbers, they clearly show that firearm-related violence was increasing between 1994 and 1997 and that the majority of the victims were men.

Homicides committed with firearms registered at the morgue in Guatemala City				
	1994	1995	1996	1997*
Male	522	615	655	339
Female	36	56	47	37
Total	558	671	702	376

\*From January to June 1997

Source: Based on data from the judiciary morgue in Guatemala City, cited in the Report of the United Nations Development Program Guatemala Office, (March 1998)

The cost of combating crime and violence is high. Private businesses invest a great deal of resources in private security that could otherwise have been spent on marketing of products, technological improvements and human resource training. The additional cost of private security is also added on to the price of the products, making goods and services more expensive for the customers. The government has to spend a large portion of public funds on citizen security, which means that less is available for the purpose of social and economic development. In 1998, the Ministry of the Interior allocated about 722 million Quetzales (approximately US \$ 94 million) to citizen security, or about 20% of its budget.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Prensa Libre (August 22, 1999), Prensa Libre (April 29, 1999), Prensa Libre (June 28, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Centro de Investigaciones Económicas Nacionales, "Diagnóstico de la violencia en Guatemala," paper prepared for seminar on Magnitud y Costos de la Violencia en Guatemala, (May, 1999)

### **Circulation of illicit arms**

Mainly due to the incomplete disarmament process after the Civil War, a large number of illicit arms are still circulating within the country or has been disseminated to other countries in the region. The majority of the black market arms originate either from the guerilla members that did not hand in their weapons after the conflict or from the Guatemalan military. Thefts from private and military arsenals are one way that traffickers obtain arms. In 1999, there were two incidents of arms thefts from the Guatemalan military stocks. In the second incident, military equipment worth more than \$ 26,000 disappeared. Most of the stolen arms were AK-47 and M-16 assault rifles, which are the preferred weapons of the organized crime rings. Military officers and elements from the private security sector were responsible for the theft.

The black market weapons are mostly traded in the border areas with El Salvador and Mexico, among others with the Mexican Zapatista group. The price for a rifle with 25 cartridges is approximately \$650. To transport the contraband, the traffickers use regional service trucks, since they are less likely to be stopped at control posts. Recently the security forces have confiscated dozens of M-16 rifles from criminal groups. These arms come from the Guatemalan military, who originally purchased them from North America.<sup>7</sup>

According to *Jane's Infantry Weapons 1999-2000* the Armed Forces of Guatemala currently maintain the following small arms and light weapons in national stocks:

- 9 mm Star
- 9 mm FN 35
- 0.45 M1911A1
- 9 mm Uzi
- 9 mm Beretta 12
- 0.45 M3A1
- 5.56 mm M16A1
- 7.62 mm Galil
- 00.30 Carbine M1
- 7.62 mm FN MAG
- 00.30 Browning M1919A4
- 0.50 Browning M2HB
- 40 mm M79
- 60 mm M2
- 81 mm M1
- 107 mm M30
- 120 mm ECIA SL
- 3.5 in RL M20
- 106 mm RCL M40

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<sup>7</sup> El Periódico, (June 07, 1999)

*Commercial licenses granted to US dealers for export to Guatemala (1996-1998) in thousands of US dollars*

<b>Item</b>	<b>1996 Quantity</b>	<b>1996 Value</b>	<b>1997 Quantity</b>	<b>1997 Value</b>	<b>1998 Quantity</b>	<b>1998 Value</b>
Raw material	Not specified	\$127,935				
Cartridges .22-.50	48,460,000	\$2,480,244	17,117,000	\$635,886		
Pistols & Revolvers					3	\$1,350
Non-military rifles	2,525	\$253,465	9,020	\$1,051,223	2,200	\$420,674
Rifle-carbine parts	Not specified	\$27,342		\$37,632	Not specified	\$67,601
Shotguns			700	\$154,820		
Non-military shotguns	Not specified	\$2,109,303				
Total		\$4,998,289		\$1,879,561		\$489,625

Source: Norwegian Initiative on Small Arms Transfers (NISAT): Database of Small Arms Production and Transfers

*Requested import licenses, arms and munitions imported and arms sold by Guatemalan arms dealers in 1997*

	<b>Requested import licenses</b>	<b>Quantity imported</b>	<b>Quantity sold</b>
<b>Arms</b>	84,212	20,603	19,588
<b>Munitions</b>	218,663,350	29,832,410	Not specified

Source: Guatemalan Ministry of Defense, Department of Arms and Munitions (DECAM)

**Arms and drug-trafficking**

The illicit circulation of small arms is highly correlated to drug trafficking. Colombia, Peru and Bolivia are the main source-countries for the US market. International drug-traffickers are currently using new transit routes through Guatemala in order to transport the drugs to the United States. These drug networks are increasingly being used for weapons as well. In addition, the drug traffickers need arms to defend themselves against the government's security forces. In 1999, the Guatemalan drug enforcement agency (DOAN) confiscated 176 firearms and 76 grenades in connection with drug-operations.<sup>8</sup> This constituted a significant increase from 1998, when they confiscated 112 firearms

<sup>8</sup> Prensa Libre, (December 21, 1999)

and 5 grenades.<sup>9</sup> The United States have regularly increased their aid to Guatemala to combat drug trafficking. At the beginning of 2000, DOAN received two hundred M-16 and AR-15 rifles from the U.S.

**Measures to reduce the proliferation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons**

In an attempt to reduce the amount of violent crime, the National Civilian Police (PNC) have carried out several disarmament campaigns in Guatemala City to confiscate illegal weapons. In the first trimester of 1999, the PNC confiscated 886 firearms and 148 grenades. On average, they have collected approximately 50 firearms every week in 1999 in the Guatemala City greater metropolitan area. The most common weapons confiscated are pistols, shotguns, assault rifles and grenades. They also confiscate ammunition, cartridges and other artifacts. In November 1999, the PNC discovered a large arsenal of military arms on the property of Jorge Antonio Zimeri Safie, an alleged drug trafficker with links to private security companies. The arsenal consisted of about a hundred arms of different types, among others AK-47 and G3 rifles, M-16 machine guns, grenade launchers, Claymore mines, grenades, dynamite, mortars and 1,5 million munitions. In another incident in July of 1999, the PNC raided a clandestine arms-shop in Guatemala City and discovered various small arms in addition to a machine used to assemble munitions, cartridges and warheads. The arms-shop presumably supplied arms to criminal groups involved in kidnappings, car thefts and drug trafficking.<sup>10</sup> After confiscation, the police transfer the weapons to the Department for Arms and Munitions Control.<sup>11</sup>

***Confiscated firearms transferred to the Department for Arms and Munitions Control between July 15, 1991 and March 20, 1998***

<b>Item</b>	<b>Quantity</b>
Revolvers	6,460
Pistols	5,322
Shotguns	1,166
Rifles	480
Assault rifles	176
Carbines	111
Submachine guns	106
Total firearms	13,821
Total munitions	41,864

Source: Guatemalan Ministry of Defense, Department for Arms and Munitions Control

One of the other measures discussed to address this problem, is legislative reform. The process is moving very slowly however. There have been several drafts introduced for a

<sup>9</sup> Xinhua News Agency, “Guatemala succeeds in anti-drug war in 1998” (January 19, 1999)

<sup>10</sup> El Periódico, (July 20, 1999)

<sup>11</sup> Siglo Veintiuno, (October 25, 1999)

new Weapons and Munitions Law and the final proposal was supposed to have been presented to Congress for its approval in November 1999. However, the process is being constantly delayed. Among the features of the proposed law is to transfer the responsibility for the arms' registers to the Department of the Interior, which would facilitate investigations for the PNC. The proposed law also establishes severe penalties for illicit trafficking and production of arms and other explosive artifacts.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, Guatemala has signed, but not yet ratified the "Inter-American Convention against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, and Other Related Materials." This is a regional initiative within the Organization of American States (OAS) to address the illicit trafficking of firearms. Guatemala, Costa Rica and Honduras are the only Central American countries that have not yet ratified the treaty.

### **The private security sector**

In response to the high level of crime and citizen insecurity, there is an increasing demand for the services of private security companies. While there are approximately 70 authorized private companies, there are an estimated 120 companies that operate illegally. In total, the private security sector employ about 45,000 private security guards in Guatemala City, of which only 20,000 work for an authorized company. Ex-military and security officials run most of these companies, and they typically have access to both the legal and black markets for arms.

One of the main reasons for the uncontrolled proliferation of private security companies is that there are currently no laws regulating their activities. The National Civilian Police have no established requirements or provide any training for the private security personnel. According to the present legislation, the only requirements for becoming a private security guard are to have completed six years of primary school and the military service. Different organizations have voiced their concern that the increasing number of private security companies and the lack of state control over them will increase violence instead of safety. Over the last couple of years, allegation have been made that security guards are leaking information to facilitate kidnappings, bank robberies and assaults on money transports. Some are also claimed to have close ties to organized crime. In 1998, thirteen security guards were accused of various crimes, among others selling company arms and injuring individuals while on duty.<sup>13</sup> In April 2000 private security guards opened fire against a group of student protesters in Guatemala City and caused the deaths of at least one person in the crowd. The security guards allegedly lost control when they observed gang-members trying to raid the shops they were hired to protect and they accidentally fired at the wrong people.<sup>14</sup>

In relation to the deliberations on the proposed new Weapons Law, a point of contention has been whether to allow private security personnel to use high-caliber military

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<sup>12</sup> Prensa Libre, (November 16, 1999)

<sup>13</sup> Prensa Libre, (February 21, 1999) and Prensa Libre, (March 5, 2000)

<sup>14</sup> Prensa Libre, (April 29, 2000)

weapons. Some security companies, especially those working for the banking industry, are lobbying in favor of this, since many security guards have been killed in armed confrontations with bank-robbers. They claim that one of the main reasons is that security guards are at a disadvantage against criminals since they usually have military weapons. In spite of this, the final draft of the bill stipulates that the banking industry and other private security personnel will continue to be restricted to use only defensive, low-caliber arms.

### **Conclusion**

The proliferation of small arms has an adverse impact on Guatemalan society. The abundance of weapons has created a “culture of violence” illustrated by the propensity to use violence as a first option to resolve conflicts. As a result of the high rates of crime and violence, citizen insecurity has become one of the main social problems. In response to this, citizens are increasingly acquiring their own arms to protect themselves or hiring the services of one of the many private security companies. The black market for arms is thriving and this also correlates highly to the increasing problem of drug trafficking. Because the government has to spend a great deal of resources to address these problems, less is available for social and economic development.