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## **Weapons Collection in Central America: El Salvador and Guatemala**

**By Edward J. Laurance and William H. Godnick**

**Contribution to an upcoming publication of the Surplus Weapons Project of the Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC) titled Managing the Remnants of War: Weapons Collection and Disposal as an Element of Peace-Building. This book will also include case studies from Albania, Central African Republic, Croatia, Liberia and Mali.**

## **Weapons Collection in Central America: El Salvador and Guatemala**

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### **Introduction**

On the weekend of 19-20 June 1999, a coalition of citizens, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), businesses, and churches called the *Patriotic Movement against Crime* (MPCD in Spanish) completed the twenty-third round of the voluntary weapons collection program *Goods for Guns* in San Salvador. In two days citizens turned in more than 250 pistols, military rifles and grenades, along with over 5,000 rounds of ammunition, in exchange for vouchers for food, medicine and clothing. Since the program began in September 1996 9,527 weapons and 129,696 rounds of ammunition have been voluntarily turned in.

The principal objective of this chapter is to analyze the Goods for Guns project. How did it come about? What was the role of the government of El Salvador and the international community? Can this outcome be considered successful? As the international community comes to grips with the humanitarian crisis associated with the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons, can this program be used as a prototype of how societies awash with weapons can begin to collect and destroy weapons as a tool in improving human security and enhancing economic and social developments? In particular, how and to what degree can the El Salvador experience be applied in other countries in the region?

However, we will also review earlier disarmament efforts in El Salvador and neighboring Guatemala. These were undertaken in what is referred to as Phase I, namely a peace process. Phase II weapons collection programs are the disarmament component of a peace process brokered or assisted by the United Nations or another multilateral organization. In this chapter, the main focus is on how weapons that remain after immediate post-conflict disarmament can be collected. This is called Phase II disarmament.

The turning in of weapons in the Phase I context is first and foremost a political act associated with the end of a conflict, but also a highly symbolic act of which the full implications are not yet fully understood. Dealing with the questions of collecting weapons in a post-conflict situation is more complex and since it does not normally have the political support of a formal peace process, relies more on local efforts attuned to local, national or regional cultures. The body of knowledge needed to design and implement Phase II programs is just beginning to emerge.

In this discussion of El Salvador, and the following of Guatemala, a description and analysis of the Phase I collection efforts implemented by the UN are included as important background information and a contextual variable in evaluating Phase II collection efforts. First, despite that fact that Phase I programs are normally implemented by organizations other than warring parties, most of them take into account the context of the conflict and the cultures of these parties. Evaluating how this was done, and more importantly the failure to do so, has important lessons for Phase II programs. Second, the actual conduct of Phase I programs can directly influence the implementation of Phase II programs. Finally,

the Phase I program can build capacity and experience within the country that can be utilized in planning and implementing Phase II programs.

### **Central America in Context**

The Central American states of Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama, along with the neighboring states of Chiapas, Mexico and Colombia, are awash with military small arms and light weapons. Many of these weapons are not under government control. These weapons include assault rifles, hand grenades, rocket launchers and mortars, originally designed for use by state-controlled armed forces.

Weapons poured into the region from a variety of sources in the 1970s and 1980s, due mainly to basic tensions produced by the Cold War. While some weapons still flow into the region from the United States, Brazil and Europe, the major acquisition mode is one of diffusion and circulation within the region. Much of this trade is illicit. This illicit, or black market, trade is enhanced by the globalization of the economy, making it easier to ship goods of any kind more easily.

The illicit circulation of these weapons is highly correlated to the narcotics trade in three ways. First, Colombia and other South American states are major sources of drugs for the US market. Central America has been, and continues to be, a major thoroughfare for this traffic. Given that the drug trafficking network is illegal and under attack from governments, weapons are essential to the members of this network. Much of the armed violence currently taking place in Central America is related to drug trafficking, not political conflict. Second, the clandestine networks developed for the drug trade are now being used for weapons and stolen automobiles as well. Third, the billions of dollars in drug money acquired in the region means that money is no object in acquiring the weapons needed to maintain the trade.

There are four other factors that should also be taken into consideration. One, the region's terrain is characterized by naturally porous borders. The many clandestine airstrips and small ports in the region add to the difficulty of monitoring and controlling illicit trade in drugs and weapons. Two, the demand for weapons by these new types of actors- street gangs, drug cartels, etc.- has seen an increase in attacks on state arsenals, armed forces and police, for the purpose of acquiring weapons. The complicity of individuals inside these institutions cannot be ruled out either. Three, states in this region suffer from an underdeveloped justice system, including inadequate numbers of uncorrupt and efficient police and judges. These countries also suffer from serious economic problems. Four, the region is also characterized by a long-standing presence of a gun culture. This culture predates and has been exacerbated by the recent upsurge in small arms and light weapons in the region.

### **Problems Stemming from the Proliferation and Misuse of Small Arms in Central America**

Criminal acts with the increasingly available military-style weapons have made crime the number one social problem. Car jacking, kidnapping, assaults, robberies, high school pranks with hand grenades and trafficking of contraband are commonplace. The increase in

lethality and firepower that comes with military style weapons has emboldened criminals, who often are better armed than police or military forces. By 1995 the Salvadoran Attorney General's Office recorded 7,877 violent deaths in the country, indicating 21 homicides per day. During the twelve years of civil war the daily average was 17 [Universidad Centroamericana, 1996 #71].

The widespread abundance of weapons results in violence often being the first option for conflict resolution, frustrating efforts to restore peace, lawfulness and stability in a non-violent manner. Disputes such as those over land, economic inequality, and human rights are increasingly settled by the use of force. In the case of Guatemala, violent conflict resolution has manifested itself via the practice of lynching, where peasants publicly murder alleged criminals-by burning or stoning to death- who have either escaped justice or been set free prematurely. This phenomenon has much deeper root causes and should not be attributed to the proliferation of weapons. In 1997, more than 100 incidents of lynching were reported in Guatemala [Leon-Escribano , 1999 #67]

The above two problems have led to a 'cycle of violence' in which citizens protect themselves with their own arms or hire one of an increasing number of private security organizations. The sheer number of such weapons in the hand of individuals complicates any solution based on disarmament by voluntary weapons collection. Of the 200 private security companies operating in Guatemala in 1998 only 30 were registered [UNDP, 1998 #126]. Most of these companies are run by ex-military and security officials with access to the legal and black markets for arms. The circulation of weapons and inability of government institutions to provide for the public security creates an even larger market for these enterprises.

Most states in this region are either trying to nurture a new democratic political system or trying to prevent their system from declining into an authoritarian state. The cycle of violence and the growing omnipresent gun culture has allowed and in some cases fostered the increased use of state violence and repression. This creates the possibility of the development of or return to violence by oppositionist forces, just when such forces have been disbanded. Nicaragua has experienced the resurgence of armed militias several times during the last decade. There have also been reports of such activity in Guatemala in 1998 and 1999, though it has not been clear whether these groups have been created with political ends in mind [*Siglo Veintiuno*, 1 July 1998 #114].

The increasing violence in this region has had negative effects on the economy. As mentioned earlier, the crime and violence has created a need for business to hire more and more private security agents to protect their facilities, vehicles and personnel. The resources invested in private security cannot be spent on the marketing of products, human resource training and the technological improvements so desperately needed in Central America.

All of the above problems have had an enormous impact on the civilian population. The number of people killed and injured from armed violence has increased significantly in the past several years. 1998 was one of the most violent years ever for Salvadoran children. By December 1998 stray bullets fired into the air injured 43 children and killed one. Since 1990 guns fired into the air have injured approximately 318 children and killed 15 in since 1990 (*El Diario de Hoy*, 2 December 1998 #115). In El Salvador in 1998, 19 people were killed in

hand grenade assaults and accidents while 47 were seriously injured.<sup>1</sup> As of 29 July 1999, 12 people had been killed and 42 were injured in these incidents involving fragmentation hand grenades.

In the face of this complex and challenging context, Phase II weapons collection programs are confronted with the following realities:

- The availability of weapons is so great that traditional supply-side arms control measures alone will be inadequate. Rather, emphasis must also be on lowering demand based on local and national political, cultural and economic contexts.
- Phase II weapons collection programs cannot stand alone, and must be integrated with programs that address the root causes of conflict, such as drug use and trafficking, poverty, and inadequate justice systems.
- The effects of these weapons on the population at large, especially innocent civilians, suggests that a human focus should take priority.

## **POST-CONFLICT WEAPONS COLLECTION IN EL SALVADOR**

### **Disarmament as Part of the Salvadoran Peace Process<sup>2</sup>**

El Salvador was overwhelmed by civil strife for the entire decade of the 1980s. Peace only arrived after much sacrifice, as well as strenuous negotiations, in 1992. The signing of the Peace Accords on 16 January 1992, was the culmination of a protracted compromise between the government of El Salvador and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) mediated by the United Nations.

Demobilization of the combatants was set to begin in February 1992 and continue through 31 October 1992. The FMLN guerrillas thus began concentrating on 50 designated points around the country. From these 50 camps, the guerrillas were to further concentrate in 15 verification centers, which were previously designated where they and their weapons would be processed by a team of 12 to 16 military observers from the newly created United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL). In agreement with the Peace Accords, the demobilization of the FMLN combatants was to proceed in phases starting on 1 May 1992, when 20 percent of the force would come in with their weapons. The entire force was scheduled to demobilize by 31 October 1992.

At the same time, the Armed Forces of El Salvador (FAES) also began the process of demobilization. Their first move was to concentrate in 100 locations and then into 62

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<sup>1</sup> Figures correspond to cases investigated by the *Tutela Legal del Arzobispado de San Salvador*.

<sup>2</sup> The following assessment is based on the first author's field research in El Salvador in March 1995, to include interviews with and documents provided by the staff of the United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador (ONUSAL). For a previously published assessment of this disarmament process, see *Managing Arms in Peace Processes: Nicaragua and El Salvador* (Geneva: United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, 1997).

designated positions throughout the country, places where they would normally be posted during peacetime. From these sites, the FAES were restricted in their ability to continue flights over FMLN concentration areas. ONUSAL deployed 368 military observers on 31 January 1992, the day prior to the ceasefire. One week later 147 observers of the Police Division took up their positions to secure a peaceful disarmament process. Their number was increased to 304 by late May of that year. The Legislative Assembly also contributed to the disarmament process by passing a national reconciliation law granting a broad amnesty for political crimes [United Nations, 1995 #69]. Thus began the operation responsible for the demobilization of nearly 10,000 guerrillas and 31,000 soldiers.

While trust was the formal basis for the agreement to disarm, both sides felt an innate mistrust of the other, and soon enough it created delays in the ceasefire process. The activities of death squads, and the government's inability to put a stop to them, raised serious concerns among the leadership of the FMLN. The two security bodies that were to have been abolished- the Treasury Police and the National Guard- were instead transformed by the government into the Military Police and the Frontier Guards respectively. Also, the return of land that was part of the agreement was going very slowly. Consequently, the FMLN delayed the reintegration of the first 20 percent of its ex-combatants. ONUSAL itself doubted the figures provided by the FMLN concerning its true weapons holdings (Interviews with ONUSAL officials, March 1995).

Facing impregnable differences in the implementation of the Peace Accords, the government and the FMLN requested the United Nations' mediation. With this in mind, the Secretary-General sent Mr. Marrack Goulding, Under Secretary General for Peace-Keeping Operations, to El Salvador. On 13 March 1992, following intensive talks a settlement was reached on land issues and the process was restarted.

The initial contingent of 20 percent of FMLN ex-combatants was demobilized by 30 June 1992, two months after the initial date. Nonetheless, ONUSAL considered the number of surrendered arms to be insufficient. The FMLN answered these concerns by claiming the first contingent was composed fundamentally of support personnel, who were usually unarmed. At the insistence of ONUSAL, the FMLN decided to hand over more arms, representing 20% of its arsenal. Although the turn in was finished on 18 August 1992, despite various delays, the majority of the weapons were in poor condition, which provoked further new doubts about the authenticity of this first demobilization.

The reintegration of the second 20 percent of FMLN ex-combatants, which had been scheduled for 31 July 1992, was suspended a few days before this date by the FMLN. The FMLN claimed the government was not complying with the Peace Accords. The disarmament process was re-calendarized and the date for demobilization of the second contingent was moved to 24 September 1992. In addition, a further 20 percent of the FMLN's weapons were surrendered. On this occasion, almost all the weapons were found in reasonable condition.

On 23 October 1992, the dates for demobilization of the three remaining contingents were established. 31 October, 20 November and 15 December 1992. The third contingent was demobilized punctually on 30 and 31 October. Almost all of the weapons turned over to ONUSAL were in good condition. The demobilization of the fourth contingent began

punctually on 20 November 1992, and the destruction of weapons commenced on 2 December 1992.

ONUSAL was still not convinced that the FMLN had turned over all of its weapons, and with that in mind decided to conduct searches in both Nicaragua and Honduras. Between 29 March and 3 April 1993 ONUSAL conducted operations in these countries with the cooperation of their armed forces. Weapons stockpiles were found in the outskirts of Managua, Nicaragua, and quickly destroyed [*El Diario de Hoy*, 30 March 1993 #116]. More than 15 tons of FMLN-owned weaponry was collected and destroyed at a blasting site. All rifles, sub-machine guns, machine guns and grenade launchers were melted in intense fire for more than 5 hours, crushed with a bulldozer and buried in the ground.

In Honduras, ONUSAL found a weapons cache said to have been stored shortly before the signing of the Peace Accords. All of the weapons were said to be new [*El Diario de Hoy*, 3 April 1993 #117]. All of the materiel, with just a few exceptions, were destroyed on site where it was discovered. The destruction was carried out using C-4 explosives and electric detonation caps. Those weapons exempted from the explosion were destroyed using oxy-acetylene torch.

Seemingly, the FMLN had complied fully with disarming themselves as dictated in the Peace Accords. However, the discrepancies concerning the size of the FMLN arsenal continued to trouble ONUSAL. There seemed to be a serious disparity between the amount of weapons expected to be in the FMLN's hands, and that of which they actually returned. Yet since there was no way of discovering the truth, ONUSAL had accepted the estimates as valid [Baranyani, 1993 #53]. By 15 December 1992, approximately 93 percent of declared FMLN weapons had been collected, although only 47 percent had been destroyed.

The FMLN had expressly denied the existence of further weapons caches. It said that the only ones left were those found in Nicaragua and Honduras by ONUSAL. It denied there were more in hiding. But then an explosion on 23 May 1993 in the Santa Rosa section of Managua, Nicaragua, exposed a large, hidden FMLN arms cache. This discovery placed the FMLN actions in doubt, and also threatened the legitimacy of their efforts to disarm. There ensued a scandal that imperiled the peace process. In a letter to Mr. Boutros-Ghali FMLN representative Salvador Sánchez Cerén assured,

the reason we did not take an inventory of or destroy these arms was at no time because we were thinking of using them to conduct a further military offensive... The real reason... was simply that we had a profound mistrust of the FAES. This forces us to keep one last negotiating card up our sleeve... [United Nations Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali, 1993 #54].

After this scandal, the FMLN proceeded to disclose the locations of 109 hidden weapons caches, both within El Salvador and in neighboring countries. The FMLN also declared that any more weapons that should happen to resurface "shall be accounted solely by those persons in whose possession they are found. The FMLN disclaims all responsibility." [United Nations Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali, 1993 #54]. Discoveries in more recent years of alleged FMLN caches in Zaragoza, El Salvador and in Managua, Nicaragua demonstrate how extensive the proliferation of arms from the conflict continues to be.

In the end, over 11,000 guerillas surrendered more than 10,000 weapons, 74 missiles and 9,000 grenades. The weapons of the FMLN were destroyed while those of the 30,000 FAES troops were collected and stored. The following table provides a detailed breakdown of the weapons turned in:

**Table 1: Weapons Collected by ONUSAL 1992-93**

Pistols	411
Assault rifles	8,268
Sub-machine guns	239
Machine guns	271
Grenade launchers	662
Mortars and cannons	379
Missiles	74
Rounds of ammunition	4,032,606
Rockets	140
Grenades (hand, mortar and CN.57)	9,228
Explosives	5,107.1

*Source: United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador, 1993*

ONUSAL executed a series of operations intended to uncover the caches declared by the FMLN and destroy all weapons within. Still, apart from some concerns raised by the government about the legality and legitimacy of the FMLN as a political party, the Santa Rosa incident and the subsequent operations to recover the weapons passed with little further impact on the peace process. As further discoveries of alleged FMLN caches in El Salvador and Nicaragua demonstrate many weapons were still hidden throughout the region. This was very much due to twelve years of warfare that saw frequent ambushes and the free flow of weapons that rarely were formally accounted for by both sides of the conflict. Additionally, some parties felt that, “a hard core of perhaps 1,500 FMLN troops will never turn in weapons or accept a government amnesty, even if ordered to do so by FMLN leadership” [Baranyi 1993 #53]. As a result of the massive amounts of weapons left uncollected in El Salvador, the government, the FMLN and ONUSAL estimated that approximately 360,000 military-style weapons were left in private hands. The fluid nature of the conflict insured that all types of weapons remained in circulation and in caches. These included all of the weaponry listed in the above table.

It should also be noted that the Belgian company Danger and Disaster (IDAS) carried out de-mining activities under contract with the government. Between March 1993 and January 1994 425 minefields were cleared where FMLN claimed to have laid 9,553 of these artifacts [Isacson, 1997 #64]. The FMLN provided the information necessary to locate the minefields and the operation was largely successful as there are rarely, if ever, reports of landmine accidents in El Salvador. Of the 9,553 mines claimed by the FMLN 6,946 mines were cleared and destroyed by IDAS and evidence was found regarding the detonation or removal of 2,565 more. The entire effort took place prior to the Ottawa Process and the international movement to ban landmines. While IDAS might have been very efficient in its work there appears to have been little local capacity building involved. In the discussion of



Guatemala below more attention will be paid to the de-mining process and how local capacity building has been an intrinsic part of that effort.

The Phase I collection effort in El Salvador affected the follow-on Phase II efforts in the following ways:

- Given the requisite trust between parties, the mechanics of a disarmament process can be easily worked out. Few, if any, of the weapons turned in by the FMLN and decommissioned and stored by the FAES were circulating in the post-Peace Accord period.
- Since destruction of the FMLN weapons was an integral part of the disarmament program, both sides were now equipped with the technical capacity to do so in any Phase II efforts. More importantly both sides, now integrated into a new political system as a result of the Peace Accords, saw the political and symbolic value of destroying weapons.
- The task of accounting for weapons prior to turn in creates an almost enhanced database that will be useful in accounting for weapons in the post-conflict period. However, the El Salvador experience also demonstrates that the fluid nature of this type of warfare ensures that it is not possible for anywhere near 100 percent of the weapons on either side to be accounted for.
- A responsible police force is a prerequisite for a successful Phase II collection program. The peace process created such a force in the new National Civilian Police (PNC).
- The use of disarmament programs during a peace process to symbolize the end of armed conflict, and promote the continuation of the struggle by political means, provides the potential for a unified approach to a Phase II collection effort in the post-conflict period.
- The method of using the formula 'one combatant, one weapon' to establish how many weapons could be collected and destroyed insured that tens of thousands of weapons would be circulating after the peace process concluded. Both sides knew that there were thousands of military weapons in the hands of individuals and in caches. There was no attempt to demilitarize society, creating a major challenge for Phase II programs. It may be that such a goal would be difficult in the aftermath of a twelve-year war.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that when peace occurred in South Africa in 1994, an attempt was made by a coalition of NGOs to have civil society turn in their weapons. The campaign, called Gun Free South Africa, succeeded in having less than 1,000 weapons turned in. Interviews with Gun Free South Africa, September 1996.

# **VOLUNTARY WEAPONS COLLECTION IN EL SALVADOR**

## **Origins and context of the buy-back concept**

By the spring of 1995 the human security situation in El Salvador was critical. Further, both the government and citizens of El Salvador had identified the availability of arms circulating in el Salvador as a major factor in this situation, exacerbated by the inability of the newly formed PNC to deal effectively with the situation using traditional law enforcement methods. It was at this juncture that the search for a solution turned to another approach- the voluntary turning in of weapons using what had become known as buy-back programs.

### *US and regional programs*

By the early 1990s, gun violence in the United States was on the rise and law enforcement methods did not seem able to stop the increase in the context of what amounted to an unlimited supply. The presence of a powerful gun lobby in the United States constantly frustrated attempts to deal with the problem through stronger laws and regulations on gun ownership and use. The result was the development of gun buy-back programs, whereby citizens would be given amnesty for turning in weapons that they no longer needed or wanted, in exchange for a monetary reward. The results of these programs were mixed at best, but were seen by a frustrated citizenry as a proactive response to the problem [Laurance, 1996 #91].

At the same time this approach was being applied in both UN operations and in several countries close to El Salvador. The US Army conducted a buy-back program as part of its mandate as a member of a multinational force in Haiti in 1994 and 1995. The program was designed to cope with a situation in which the civil society was heavily and visibly armed with military-style small arms and light weapons. It was a classic buy-back program in that amnesty was granted and no questions were asked. Cash was given in return for weapons at a set price scale. From September 1994 through January 1995, 3,684 weapons and 6,512 rounds of ammunition were turned in. 15,236 weapons were seized during the same time period. By the end of March 1995 the total of weapons collected- seized and surrender in exchange for cash- was over 33,000 [Laurance, 1996, p. 84 #91].

A gun buy-back was conducted in Nicaragua in 1992 by the Special Disarmament Brigade which was created by the government expressly for this purpose, with the support of the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Italian government. This buy-back was more like a Phase II program, in that it was a follow-on to a formal Phase I UN disarmament process that clearly did not collect all of the weapons which remained in Nicaragua at the end of the civil war. The primary focus of this effort were groups known to have rearmed in the wake of the peace process. Incentives included cash and in one case seed money for a development project. The operation ran from January 1992 through the end of 1993, with 142,000 weapons retrieved of which 64,000 were bought back. The total cost of the program was US\$ 6 million [Laurance, 1996, p. 85 #91].

An entirely different type of buy-back was held in the Dominican Republic between 2 and 6 January 1996, coinciding with Epiphany celebrations. [O'Connor, 1996 #68]. It was to have

a major impact on the eventual model followed in El Salvador. It was the brainchild of Fernando Mateo, a dual citizen of the Dominican Republic and the US. Mateo had made famous 'Goods for Guns' efforts in New York City, where vouchers for toys and not cash were used as an incentive. Mateo's four-pronged approach was to obtain support from the church, generate government support, generate funding from the business community and drum up popular support through the media.

The first person Mr. Mateo contacted was the leader of the Dominican Catholic Church. Initially, members of the business community were approached for donations, many of which promised funds, little of which materialized immediately. The Church owns a television station in the Dominican Republic called TeleVida. At least two different television spots were run several times an hour. Mateo gave no less than five or six television and newspaper interviews per day, appearing on every major television channel including the internationally viewed news program produced Univision. In between media appearances, and perhaps more effective, Mateo hit the streets to generate grassroots support and enthusiasm. Each day he and an entourage toured some of the poorest and most dangerous *barrios* talking to people and asking them to participate. Eight parishes throughout the capital city of Santo Domingo were designated as drop-off points for weapons. In each church, only a priest and a small group of parish volunteers were present. For each weapon surrendered, a gift certificate was awarded worth US \$100 at a variety of participating stores offering a variety of goods. As the program was officially called '*Armas por Juguetes*', consistent with the New York City model, the majority of gift certificates were for toys. Since the cost of a gun in the Dominican Republic was much more than US \$100 this effort was not so much 'buying back' guns but rather asking people to voluntarily surrender them by offering a token of appreciation for their support of a more peaceful society. Two hundred weapons were collected in three days and the police department turned over an additional 2,000 weapons that had been confiscated over time for destruction.

### *The UN Grenade Buy-Back Initiative*

In 1995 the implementation of the Salvadoran Peace Accords had run into several bottlenecks, including the repatriation of land to ex-combatants and compensation and treatment for disabled veterans on both sides of the conflict. Because of the increasing crime levels, the newly formed government, which now included the former FMLN fighters in the form of a legitimate political party, had been forced to put the army back on the streets. There was talk of the return of death squads and the politicization of criminal gangs, in effect the restarting of civil war. In such a context the UN was reluctant to shut down its operation and the UN Security Council continued to extend the mandate of ONUSAL. The government view was that the UN had finished its mission and the remaining work was that of the government. The final extension of ONUSAL called for its termination as of 30 April 1995.

The UN did not want to leave while the vestiges of the civil war remained, especially since the increase in the circulation and availability of weapons left over from war might be seen as a failure to complete the assigned mission. It should be noted that by this time the failure to collect and destroy the weapons during the UN operation in Mozambique was well known, especially to the Security Council. As the termination date approached ONUSAL

reports to the Security Council emphasized the renewal of armed violence in El Salvador. In the final report to the Security Council on ONUSAL, S/1995/220 dated 24 March 1995, the Secretary General noted in paragraph 12 that weapon buy-back programs might be considered for El Salvador.

During this last mandate, ONUSAL's remaining military observers have closely monitored the adoption and implementation and administrative measures taken to collect military weapons in the hands of civilians or State institutions. While a limited number of registered arms are still to be collected, the main problem lies with the unknown but large number of weapons of which there is no record. The Government has reported seizing 2,000 such weapons since the beginning of 1995, but voluntary surrender has thus far been negligible. *This is a matter for concern which should be addressed promptly. Buy-back programmes such as those used in Nicaragua and Haiti might be considered.* (Emphasis added by authors).

ONUSAL requested that the United Nations Centre for Disarmament Affairs (UNCDA, now the Department of Disarmament Affairs) send an expert to El Salvador to provide them with any information and analysis on programs for weapons collection from civilians with financial and/or other incentives, particularly in the aftermath of civil wars. The government had asked ONUSAL for such information.

On 27 March 1995, Dr. Edward J. Laurance (author) went to ONUSAL on behalf of UNCDA to examine documents, make field observations and interview ONUSAL staff and government officials in regard to the feasibility of using the buy-back approach. Dr. Laurance briefed government officials who had been invited by ONUSAL on the basic principles and experience of buy-back programs as practiced in many US cities. Despite the fact that buy-back programs had recently been conducted in Haiti and Nicaragua, as of March 1995 no published information was available on the programs. ONUSAL staff members were also unaware of these programs, even though some had served in Nicaragua for the UN prior. Attending the briefing were ONUSAL Chief of Mission, his staff and senior representatives of the government, including both high level defense and police officials. Also attending were senior parliamentarians from the FMLN who served on the weapons committee of the National Commission for the Consolidation of Peace (COPAZ). The Commission was responsible for developing laws and policies for adoption by the Legislative Assembly and was particularly responsible for dealing with the crime and weapons problems outlined in ONUSAL reports.

There was a unanimous consensus that the concept should be explored further, given that the issue transcended politics and disagreements in other areas of implementing the Peace Accords. The violence committed with military weapons was viewed as apolitical and effecting all sectors of the Salvadoran population. There was also a consensus that hand grenades in the hands of criminals and street gangs called *maras* had become a particularly threatening situation, especially with the harm caused to innocent civilians. This led to an interest in starting first with the hand grenade problem.

Based on this encouraging response the UNCDA proposed a plan to develop a grenade buy-back program. This program called for five action items. The first three called for research and analysis of the buy-back experiences in Haiti, Nicaragua and the United States. The fourth was for the government to develop a situation report on the crime and weapons

situation that could assist in the planning of buy-back programs to include statistics on armed violence and the types of weapons used, black market information and public attitudes regarding weapons and violence. The final part of the plan was a workshop to be held in El Salvador that would summarize and report on the above-mentioned activities. Attendees would include representatives from the international community, government, and particularly NGOs and the national private sector, without whom such a plan would not get off the ground.

By September 1995 the UNCTAD and its parent office, the Department for Political Affairs (UNDPA) had endorsed the concept. UNDPA also received the support of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), an important endorsement since they were the primary advisors to the PNC in El Salvador and had remained in the country after the end of the ONUSAL mission. This endorsed plan was then submitted to the government through its representatives in New York.

Despite these efforts by the UN to develop a plan that recognized the sensitivity of a weapons collection program after a formal UN peace operation, the plan was never accepted by the government. No formal reason was given but it appears that previously mentioned conflict over the role of the UN in El Salvador was responsible. The UN had not left the country, as the Security Council created a new but minimally staffed mission (MINUSAL), which continued to report that the peace process was not complete. Despite a consensus on the efficacy and need for a weapons collection effort, especially one executed by citizens and the government, it was still seen as an excessive interference in the domestic security affairs of the country.

### **The Goods for Guns Program**

It was in the context presented above that a group of citizens was created to do something specific about the weapons situation. The President of this group David Gutierrez Miranda spoke of the beginnings in his testimony to the UN Panel of Experts on Small Arms in January 1997:

Recognizing the magnitude that the problem of crime had reached in our country in the last four months of 1995, a group of citizens, including leaders of the business community, saw the need to look at what our role would be in the search for quick solutions to this situation....Aware of the current situation we formed the Patriotic Movement Against Crime (Movimiento Patriótico Contra la Delincuencia- MPCD), in November of 1995 and immediately established a comprehensive plan of action and organized ourselves in different committees that would facilitate operations.

According to MPCD Executive Director, Sonia Jule, the organization was formed for three key reasons. First, the Association of Distributors (consumer goods) of El Salvador (ADES) members were continually having their delivery trucks assaulted by men armed with military-style weapons. Second, ADES members were becoming increasingly concerned with the security of their employees in transit between work and home. Third, ADES was looking to collaborate with government and civil society to reverse the growing violence affecting all Salvadorans. The loss of a trailer full of consumer goods might mean the loss of thousands

of dollars for a distributor, while the loss of an entire paycheck- or life for that matter- has even graver consequences for the common worker and his or her family (Interview with MPCD staff, July 1998).

During the first four months of 1996 MPCD explored the ways and means of approaching the subject and getting people involved in combating the problem of crime. These activities were carried out in coordination with the Ministries of Public Security, Justice and the Interior and the Direction of the PNC. The primary objective in this phase was to insure that the authorities carry out their duties and efficiently apply the legal dispositions available to combat crime. No specific thought had been given to a weapons collection program, and MPCD had no knowledge of the gun buy-back concept.

In April 1996, MPCD was notified by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of El Salvador, one of its most important guild affiliates, had been contacted by the Archbishop of San Salvador, Monsignor Fernando Saenz Lacalle. He had been contacted by the Archbishop of the Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic stating that the founder of the 'Toys for Guns' program, Mr. Fernando Mateo had shown interest in coming to El Salvador to initiate a similar program, since it had achieved satisfactory results in the Dominican Republic in January 1995. Mateo arrived in El Salvador near the end of April and met with the MPCD. He gave the MPCD a detailed report of the execution and results of this program in the city of New York in 1993 and of its recent experience in the Dominican Republic.

Mateo was anxious to conduct such a program immediately. But MPCD wanted more time to analyze the applicability of such a program in the specific context of El Salvador. By the April 1996 MPCD had decided to conduct a weapons collection program and agreed on the following course and sequence of action:

- Develop Strategic Plan
- Seek the support of the Rotary Club of El Salvador, Catholic Church, Legislative Assembly, public security and defense authorities
- Designate a fundraising committee
- Design paperwork, forms, publicity, campaign materials and logistical details
- Seek the participation of the Association of Salvadoran Advertisers (AMPS) and that of all other modes of national mass communication
- Contract the services of a respected auditing firm
- Design a system for storage, transport and elimination of armaments
- Estimate the quantity, and designate the final destination, of the weapons to be collected and destroyed
- Erect a peace monument (location, design and construction)

It was decided to follow the program goal espoused by Mateo and the program in the Dominican Republic. Namely, the program would not be a 'buy-back' in the sense that the MPCD was purchasing weapons. Rather, citizens would be compensated for contributing to the development of a peaceful and secure future of El Salvador. MPCD President Gutierrez is often asked what percentage of the weapons circulating has been collected. His response

reflects the program goal- it is the act of turning in weapons that is important. As long as citizens continue to turn in weapons, the program will be successful. [BICC: *Report 12*, 1997 #128] In the words of Gutierrez:

“We made a decision to tell the world that we have decided to live and work in such a way as to consolidate the absolute peace which our people have called for, and in this way, act today for a future filled with love and hope, for our children, for the generations to come, and so that our friends in other countries may feel welcome and safe to visit our country. Our path is one which takes us from the end of an armed conflict to a state of peace in El Salvador, and represents an achievement by society, for society.” [Gutierrez, 1997 #61]

### *Coordination with government*

As shown above, from the beginning the MPCD program was closely coordinated with the government. One reason for this was the fact that the organizations involved were those that reflected the interests of the middle and upper classes of El Salvador. The government had to listen to this group. These groups represented the key supporters of the ruling ARENA party of then President Armando Calderon Sol. Secondly, MPCD decided to focus on military-style weapons, something that clashed with the before-mentioned passage of a law on firearms, ammunition and explosives, which prohibited civilians from possessing weapons exclusive to the military. Since this law would be an obstacle an obstacle in the implementation of any Goods for Guns program, it was necessary to attain a temporary legislative decree that allowed all citizens to bear illegally held military-style arms, only and strictly, for the purpose of turning them in on the previously established dates at designated collection sites. After extensive lobbying by MPCD, the Legislative Assembly issued Decree 819, which allowed MPCD to implement, in strict keeping with the law, the Goods for Guns program.

At the first collection session on 21-22 September 1996, citizens turned in not only firearms, but also ammunition, grenades, explosives and other articles not contemplated in the legislative decree. For that reason, MPCD initiated new discussions with the legislature to amend the original decree. This facilitated collection of the previously authorized firearms, ammunition, explosives and similar devices exclusively to the FAES and any other type of weapon not prohibited by the law and permitted for civilian use.

### *Weapons collection as part of a broader strategy*

From the beginning the Goods for Guns program was part of a larger concern with crime. It was also occurring in the larger context of other programs designed to deal with armed violence. The development of the PNC was a major part of this, as the international community (e.g., UNDP) was assisting in programs designed to develop expertise in weapons tracing, seizure, collection and destruction techniques. By January 1997, the PNC had succeeded in improving security in the two major areas where weapons, especially hand grenades, were being used- urban market places and public transportation (Interviews with PNC officials, January 1997).

There is no evidence that the program was formally linked with larger public social and economic development programs funded by external assistance. The program was conceived and implemented by the business community, designed to create a climate more conducive to the development of the private sector economy in El Salvador. Although some funding was secured from the governments of Canada, Norway, Mexico, Sweden, Luxembourg and the OAS, half of the funding came from the government and the national private sector, there were no formal links to the international community.

MPCD has since expanded its activities to include lobbying the central government and legislature on proposed reforms to the law on arms and munitions (see forthcoming section on outcomes) and the penal code.

### *Timing and Duration*

Goods for Guns was designed as a multi-phased program from the beginning. This fit with the longer-term objectives of raising awareness and fostering citizen participation in combating crime. The program was designed around collection weekends that were preceded by extensive publicity. As of the writing of this chapter, 23 weekends have taken place between 21-22 September 1996 and 19-20 June 1999. The philosophy of the MPCD leadership was one of 'build it and they will come'. Several weekends were conducted with deficit financing. While the MPCD did make several marginally successful efforts to collect weapons in the country's interior, almost all of the collection efforts took place in the capital. The Catholic Church has consistently provided the Cathedral in the heart of the city and Christ the Redeemer Church on the outskirts as weapons collection sites.

### *Storage and destruction*

Given the sensitivity of collecting military-style weapons whose possession was against the law, extensive procedures were developed by the government to receive, store and destroy the weapons collected. The Logistics Division of the Ministry of Defense developed a set of procedures that called for the public destruction of arms that were collected. These procedures were much more than technical procedures. Objectives listed in the decree included:

- Effectively cutting the flow of weapons into the black market through collection and destruction
- Influencing public opinion in favor of the programs' continuity
- Publicizing the primary aim of the MPCD's Goods for Guns program as facilitating and providing incentives for the civilian population to exchange firearms and explosives exclusive to the FAES

In addition to the military the PNC also participated in this phase of the operation. A very detailed set of procedures for the transportation and destruction of explosive materials collected by MPCD were developed by PNC Weapons and Explosives Division, charged with transporting and destroying all the explosive material. These procedures also recognized the larger goals of the program.



### *Collection and destruction procedures*

The original planning for the Goods for Guns program acknowledged that a previous effort by the government, immediately following the Peace Accords, had failed to produce any weapons. One of the reasons was that the collection sites were military posts. Therefore, from the beginning churches were used as collection sites.

Each collection site relies on the participation of a minimum of nine people, a total of eighteen for both sites (Godnick, 1998):

- 1 MPCD representative and three assistants in charge of the overall operation;
- 1 representative from the Rotary Club that serves as auditor;
- 2 officers, out of uniform, from the PNC one of which is an expert in explosives and the other who codes and signs for the arms turned in;
- 1 firearms expert from the Ministry of Defense, also not in uniform, who secures the arms turned in and determines their individual value;
- 1 PNC officer in uniform, usually posted within one city block of the collection site in case of emergencies, but not so close as to scare off people turning in weapons.

The sites operate simultaneously from 8 am to 4 pm. The procedure for turning in a weapon is as follows:

1. Citizen turning in a weapon is welcomed and the value of the arms is provided by the arms expert from the Ministry of Defense.
2. The program participant is given a choice of vouchers for supermarkets, drug stores or clothing based on the value of the weapons. An individual can turn in as many weapons as he or she owns.
3. The MPCD official records the serial numbers of the firearm and the serial numbers of the vouchers given in exchange for that weapon. No personal information is asked of the person turning in a weapon. The entire exchange is anonymous. The person turning in the firearm is free to go with the vouchers in hand. Cash is used to compensate persons turning in grenades or mines, but not firearms.

At the end of each day of collection the PNC arrives in a large pick-up truck to receive and sign for the weapons, ammunition and explosives collected. These materials are temporarily stored at the PNC Finance Division. On Monday morning following each weekend of collection the MPCD gives a press conference in the PNC storeroom, accompanied by representatives of the PNC and Ministry of Defense, reviewing the weekend's results and physically demonstrating all of the weapons collected. The second author was present for one of these conferences on 13 July 1998. After the press conference is over the PNC transfers control of all weaponry to the Ministry of Defense for destruction.

All firearms collected are cut in half with an oxy-acetylene torch or the barrel is filled to render the weapons unusable. They are stored in large shipping containers provided by the Ministry of Defense. The containers are secured with two different keys, one held by the

Ministry and the other by MPCD. In order to open the containers both parties must be present. The weapons are not melted down or scrapped rather they are maintained in a condition that allows them to be recognized as weapons for later incorporation into a peace monument.

By law the destruction of explosives is the responsibility of the PNC. The technical aspects require detonating the explosives in a timely fashion because of the risks presented by storing them at high temperatures over time. Generally, the explosives have been detonated in holes in the ground, each a meter deep and 50 cm wide. The choice of where the explosives will be detonated requires the PNC to find a location and obtain permission from the local municipal authorities, community groups and final clearance from the governmental agency whose mission is to protect the environment (CEMA). CEMA ensures that there will be no negative impact on the local community. After such approval the PNC detonates the explosives. If the community has the need to build a road, bridge or other construction that requires explosives this can be arranged with the PNC serving two purposes at once.

#### *Documentation, transparency and publicity*

Each weapon received is documented individually and every form is signed by representatives from the MPCD, Rotary Club, PNC and the Ministry of Defense. On each of the forms the serial number of the weapon and the voucher are recorded to note the value of exchange that took place. Each of the four signatories receives a copy for internal records and auditing purposes. All of the forms and paperwork provide a paper trail that ensures the transparency and legitimacy of the Goods for Guns program. Much to the dismay of the PNC and the Ministry of Defense, weapons recovered that correspond to serial numbers from their inventories are not returned to their institutions. They are destroyed with the rest of the weapons. This was an agreement made with the MPCD at the outset. Since the exchange is anonymous no prosecution of the persons surrendering weapons can take place. However, all weapons that were once part of government inventory are noted and reconciled with the government accounting of property.

The collaboration of the AMPS has allowed for a strong publicity campaign throughout the twenty-three rounds of weapons collection. The week running up to the round of collection the MPCD began to advertise daily in the country's two largest print newspapers, *El Diario de Hoy* and *La Prensa Gráfica*, with the news of the upcoming event. In rural areas the message was disseminated through the radio at lunch hour when many people listen to the national news. In all of the Goods for Guns weekends peasants from far away places arrived to turn in weapons after hearing the announcement on the radio. Television has also been used, mostly on the day preceding the round of collection.

#### *Incentives*

The incentives for turning in weapons were vouchers for supermarkets, pharmacies and shoe stores. The exchange values provided are listed in the table below, in US dollars:

**Table 2: Exchange Values for the Goods for Guns Program**

Old or deteriorated pistols or rifles	60-85
Pistols, .22 caliber rifles and semi-auto rifles	60-175
Automatic rifles such as AK-47, M-16, Galil, etcetera	350
Grenade launchers, rocket launchers, and mortars	115
Grenades and mines	3 (cash exchange)

Source: Patriotic Movement Against Crime (MPCD), July 1998

During the first rounds of Goods for Guns US\$ 15 was given for grenades and mines, but the large quantities of these artifacts made it impossible to sustain this level of reward. MPCD receives ammunition but does not provide compensation. It is received as a donation.

In some of the earlier rounds other options for vouchers were available including sporting equipment, appliances, and clothing stores. In prior collections in the interior vouchers for sewing machines and agricultural tools were also provided. It is important to note that the MPCD does not purchase the weapons rather it compensates the person turning in his or her weapon for the gesture of peace and goodwill. In some cases where individuals brought in a weapon or device of no value or danger whatsoever MPCD compensated the person for their travel expenses to the site.

#### *Scope of collection*

A wide variety of citizens have participated in the twenty-three rounds of collection. It should be noted that weapons were not turned in as part of the disarmament of militias or similar groups. Rather, in the case of El Salvador, weapons had proliferated so widely among the citizenry that many people had them in their possession for any number of reasons. Because the surrender of weapons takes place on anonymous terms very little testimony and information is gathered from the program participants. However, Godnick was able to observe the process sufficiently to provide the following examples:

- A middle-aged woman came in with a heavy shoulder bag containing five rocket launchers in perfect condition.
- A young man came straight from his soccer game with his uniform on and 35 40 mm grenade launcher projectiles in his backpack.
- A peasant man accompanied by his wife and children turned in two .22 caliber rifles in order to buy medicine for his infant daughter.
- A wealthy man, friend of one of the program volunteers, turned in four AK-47 assault rifles he had stored in his closet for several years.

#### *Program Results and Evaluation*

The following table lists the total arms collected as of the end of the 23<sup>rd</sup> round of Goods for Guns held on 19-20 June 1999:

**Table 3: Weapons Collected by MPCD 1996-99**

Pistols and short arms	1,354
Long arms including assault rifles	3,043
Grenades	3,180
Grenade launchers	44
Law Rockets	290
Detonator cord	84
Detonators	1,042
Blocks of TNT	277
C-4 explosive	147
Mines	55
Mortars	4
RPG-7 rocket-propelled grenades	6
SAM-7 surface-to-air missiles	1
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>9,527</b>
Magazines	3,157
Ammunition	129,696
<b>Total</b>	<b>142,380</b>

Source: Patriotic Movement Against Crime (MPCD), August 1999

No systematic polling of the population has taken place in regards to the efficacy of the Goods for Guns program. The only evidence available is the steady stream of citizens that continue to turn in weapons during the three years that the program has been in existence. By far the most impressive aspect of the Goods for Guns program is the camaraderie between the different collaborators and the expression of goodwill by those turning in their arms.

In its report on the MPCD program, the British American Security Information Council (BASIC) concluded that “private and state initiatives similar to that sponsored by the MPCD have had a psychological as well as practical impact in El Salvador; the perception that a weapon is necessary for protection and self-defense has diminished. In a recent survey around 15 percent of San Salvador’s citizens polled supported the view that owning a gun might be necessary for self-protection. Nevertheless, there is still a widespread concern over the levels of gun ownership, especially in the capital where 52,270 people carry weapons. [BASIC, 1997 #57].

The *Tutela Legal del Arzobispado de San Salvador* (Archbishop’s Office for Human Rights) has qualified the Goods for Guns program as a positive experience in that citizens have been persuaded to surrender instruments of death and violence. However, the *Tutela Legal* does not think the program is efficient and the money spent on program administration and incentives could be better spent elsewhere. They point out that El Salvador is not less armed now than it was at the end of the conflict that rather- in terms of pistols, revolvers, rifles, carbines and semi-automatic rifles- 48,620 more new firearms have been legally imported into the country than those turned in during Goods for Guns. These figures do not take grenades and other military equipment into account. The following table lists the Ministry of

Defense figures on legal firearms imports from 1 January 1996 to 1 June 1999 [*La Prensa Gráfica*, 28 June 1999 #118]:

**Table 4: Legal Firearms Imports to El Salvador 1996-99**

	1996	1997	1998	1999	Total
Pistols	10,853	9,984	12,934	4,293	38,064
Rifles	5,942	2,802	4,609	1,860	15,213
Total	16,795	12,786	17,543	6,153	53,277

The argument can be made that most of these weapons are not designed to military specifications, thus less lethal, and are bought and sold legally. However, add to this the unknown quantity of weapons in the black market and it is easy to see that El Salvador is still a society armed to the teeth. If the MPCD's original and only goals were to remove a specific percentage of weapons from circulation in El Salvador than this could be considered a failure, but this was not the case. Regardless, it casts doubts about the feasibility of continuing with the Goods for Guns program as is without any restraint on the legal arms market, especially when one takes into account that the war ended almost eight years ago.

It is important to note that beyond the weapons collected there are significant intangible benefits of the Goods for Guns program in the area of civil society and governmental collaboration toward a common goal of reducing crime and violence. The lack of reliable statistics on firearm related crime, injury and death within El Salvador, especially outside of the capital, makes it difficult to evaluate the impact of Goods for Guns on violent crime. As the PNC matures this information should become more readily available. From a public health standpoint, at minimum 9,527 weapons collected, and more than 100,000 rounds of ammunition, represent thousands of accidents that did not happen and consequently more money can be spent on providing preventive health services to poor Salvadorans.

It would be naïve to believe that organized criminals and gangs would turn in their arms to a program that compensated weapons exchange for mostly non-cash incentives at below black market value. However, the MPCD and Goods for Guns have been successful in drawing attention to the fact that guns are designed to hurt and kill people. The collaboration with the PNC has helped to create a public security dialogue that has resulted in a more dedicated effort to confiscate weapons in the black market and implement progressive community policing efforts. Although the PNC is far from perfect it is a significant improvement for its predecessor. As of May 1999, the Salvadoran people qualified as the PNC the second most trust worthy public institution in the country behind the Office of the Ombudsman for Human Rights and ahead of the military and judicial system [IUDOP, 1999 #62].

The MPCD also established a level of credibility and notoriety that permitted the institution to affect the passage of the new law on arms and munitions passed by the Legislative Assembly in June 1999. This law is far from perfect, and might even be considered pro-firearms by some, but it is a step toward increased control and scrutiny of weapons in society.

In conclusion, the MPCD Goods for Guns program has:

- Removed thousands of military-style weapons from circulation, comparable in quantity to the UN Phase I effort, thus preventing their continued circulation in an already saturated black market
- Demonstrated its autonomy and ability to mobilize resources from the public and private sectors within El Salvador
- Provided a systematic and well-documented set of procedures that can provide a model for programs to be developed in other countries
- Fostered relationships built over time between the private sector, civil society, media, government, police and military
- Demonstrated the possibility of conducting a public relations campaign on a national scale with the support of the media

## WEAPONS COLLECTION IN GUATEMALA

### Introduction

In December 1996, the government of Guatemala and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit (URNG) signed a formal peace agreement, ending a 36-year civil war that left 100,000 dead and a further 40,000 'disappeared'. Under the agreement the URNG pledged to give up its weapons as part of the reconstruction process [BASIC, 1997 #57]. As was the case in neighboring El Salvador, a United Nations observer mission was created to monitor the implementation of the agreement. However, the Guatemalan conflict was different in that fighting was confined to mostly rural areas with primarily indigenous populations and the distribution of military arms across society was not as broad. The majority of Guatemalans live in the capital where there were no combat activities and the URNG never established a stronghold. In contrast, the FMLN made several definitive attacks on the Salvadoran capital. Only after the conflict was over did the citizens of Guatemala City really feel the effects of thirty six years of war that trained thousands of men in the use of weapons. By the end 1996, Guatemala's homicide rate was estimated at 58 per 100,000 inhabitants placing the country just behind Colombia and El Salvador in the Latin American region [CIEN, 1999 #58]. In some departments of Guatemala, Escuintla and Izabal for example, the homicide rate climbs to an alarming 115 per 100,000. According to the Ministry of Defense's Department of Control of Arms and Munitions (DECAM), Escuintla is the department outside of the capital with the highest numbers of legally registered firearms (Interviews with DECAM, May 1998 and November 1999). Interestingly, these regions of Guatemala that have experienced the greatest increase in lethal violence are not the primarily Mayan-populated, post-conflict zones with the lowest socio-economic indicators. This phenomenon puts into question the hypothesis that extreme poverty and lack of formal education are the primary causes of lethal violence in Guatemala.

It is generally accepted that the distribution of weapons to Guatemalan civilians was nowhere near as extensive as was the case in El Salvador and Nicaragua. The war was geographically isolated and the weapons distributed to civilian patrols were fairly well controlled by the military. At the same time, the URNG was not very well equipped in relative terms and much smaller than the FMLN in El Salvador and the *Contras* in Nicaragua [Isacson, 1997 #64]. This does not mean that less weapons circulate in civilian hands in Guatemala than in neighboring countries rather that the modes of acquisition have varied and that the thousands, if not millions, of weapons circulating illegally are concentrated in the hands of certain groups. Generally speaking, Guatemala's Mayan peoples, who make up 60 percent of the nation's population, do not possess firearms. This, however, might be changing as insecurity increases in the country. Most of the indigenous people who possess firearms were most likely forced by one side or another to participate in the conflict. For these reasons stated above, any attempt toward a Phase II effort will have to be different from the Goods for Guns program in El Salvador.

However, there are some similarities with the Salvadoran post-conflict situation. Violence with military weapons, especially grenades, is common. The *maras* mentioned earlier have proliferated in Guatemala City in part thanks to the territorial expansion of El Salvador's gangs to Guatemala and Honduras in addition to the increased deportation of youth offenders from US cities such as Los Angeles. The crime rings that combine arms

trafficking with extortion, kidnapping and the drug trade operate in a similar manner to those in other Central American countries and appear to integrate former combatants and ex-military officials. Legal firearms sales also continue to be strong in numbers in Guatemala, as in El Salvador. Since the signing of the Peace Accords more than 51,000 firearms have been sold legally in Guatemala through licensed dealers (Interviews with DECAM, May 1998 and November 1999).

On 24 November 1999 the Guatemalan PNC made a major bust of an alleged drug trafficker with links to private security companies recovering an arsenal comparable to those recovered in El Salvador and Nicaragua over the last several years [*El Periódico*, 25 November 1999 #119]. Among the dozens of weapons contained in the arsenal were fragmentation grenades, 5 AK-47 assault rifles, 6 G-3 rifles, 3 M-16, 8 .30 caliber machine guns, 2 grenade launchers, 13 pistols and revolvers and 24 camouflage uniforms. The nature of the illicit arms market in Central America means that these arms could have originated from one or any combination of the region's conflicts.

The greatest achievement of late in the control of these weapons has been the PNC's continued operations, mostly in Guatemala City. Through October 1999 the PNC confiscated an average of 50 firearms per week in the Guatemala City greater metropolitan area [*Siglo Veintiuno*, 25 October 1999 #121]. Continued progress in this area will depend on the policies of the new Guatemalan government. On 26 December 1999 the Guatemalan people, albeit with a low voter turn out, voted Alfonso Portillo of the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG) into the presidency in a clear vote of no confidence of the National Advancement Party (PAN) government that signed and began to implement the Peace Accords. The same constituents who voted in the FRG also rejected the constitutional reforms outlined in the Peace Accords in a May 1999 referendum. Portillo and the FRG are very closely aligned with former military dictator Efraín Ríos Montt who is the party's moral leader. While on the one hand the FRG has campaigned very much on a platform to improve public security it remains to be seen if the new government plans to include disarmament of civilians as part of its crime fighting policy.

### **Disarmament as part of the peace process in Guatemala**

The military observers of the United Nations Observer Mission in Guatemala (MINUGUA) monitored the disarmament of the URNG as part of the demobilization program carried out 3 March to 14 May 1997. The ceasefire between the URNG and the government had been agreed to in Oslo on 4 December 1996. Its provisions outlined the cease-fire itself, separation of forces, and the disarming and demobilization of the URNG. The disarmament process specifically called for (Boutros-Ghali, 1996):

#### *Disarming of the URNG*

Disarming shall consist of the depositing, registration and handing over to the United Nations all types of offensive and defensive weapons, munitions, explosives, mines and other supplementary military equipment in the possession of URNG forces, whether their possession or in minefields or clandestine storage anywhere.

#### *Control of armaments*



From Day 11 to Day 42 in URNG assembly points, weapons, munitions and other military equipment shall be deposited in special warehouses designated by the United Nations; combatants, however, shall keep their personal equipment and weapons as long as they remain in those locations.

Each warehouse shall have two locks; one key shall be held by the United Nations and the other by the URNG official in charge of each encampment. The United Nations shall periodically check the inventory of each warehouse. After the completion of demobilization, URNG weapons will be transferred by the United Nations to the appropriate Guatemalan authorities. URNG combatants will hand over their personal weapons and uniforms before being issued a demobilization certificate and leaving the assembly point. [United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Ghali, 1996 #56].

There were no explicit provisions for the destruction of collected arms. This was partially due to the insistence of the URNG that their demobilization be seen as a defeat (Interviews with MINUGUA staff, May 1998). The provisions were loose enough that the URNG felt confident that they could retain their weapons until they were absolutely sure of their security from retribution. As for the government, the provisions did not require the army to turn in or destroy any weapons. Given the small number of URNG combatants being demobilized, and the great interest of the international community in ending this conflict, it was reasonable to expect that the demobilization and reintegration provisions would be realized. That appears to have provided adequate incentive for the URNG to turn in their weapons.

#### *Disarmament as part of a broader strategy*

As stated above, the disarmament was very much part of the broader process of demobilization and reintegration. There were also follow-on programs after the disarmament phase, conducted by teams from the OAS, which focused on non-violent conflict resolution. Beginning in late 1996 and lasting until early 1999, and in consultation with the Guatemalan government, the Unit for the Promotion of Democracy of the OAS developed and implemented various initiatives constituting a special program of support for the peace process. These included support for the reintegration of ex-combatants, promotion of the prevention of peaceful conflict resolution and support for political, electoral and legislative reforms emanating from the Peace Accords (Interviews with OAS representatives, May 1998). It should be noted that in Guatemala, as was previously the case in Nicaragua as well, the OAS played a proportionally more important role of accompaniment to the UN brokered and monitored peace process than it did in El Salvador.

The Peace Accords also contained provisions to deal with the larger problems of weapons proliferation within Guatemala. The government committed itself to the reform of laws governing private security forces and ownership and bearing of arms. These proposed reforms call for the regulation of functioning and scope of private security companies as well as creating a role for the newly formed National Civilian Police (PNC) as monitors of their operations [United Nations Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali, 1996 #56].

The relationship of private security forces to weapons proliferation will be discussed later in this chapter. As part of the Comprehensive Agreement on Human Rights the Guatemalan government committed itself to the sponsorship of amendments to the Arms and Munitions act with the purpose of discouraging civilian acquisition and use of firearms by restricting ownership, prohibiting the possession of offensive weapons and transferring the role of maintaining national registers and warehouses from the Ministry of Defense to the Interior.

*Results of the Phase I collection effort*

The Secretary General’s report on disarmament was contained within a report on the MINUGUA observer mission (Boutros-Ghail, 1997). The overall evaluation of the program was positive noting that there were no major incidents during the disarmament phase. The URNG’s willingness to provide information on troops to be demobilized and inventories of mines and explosives was viewed favorably. Some doubts were raised when 642 of the reported 3,570 URNG combatants failed to arrive at the concentration centers for demobilization. It is assumed that the members of the URNG who did not arrive for disarmament and demobilizations kept their weapons. It also appears that the Secretary General’s favorable view of the disarmament process was based more on the efficiency of operations, lack of violent outbreaks rather than a thorough collection of military weapons and materiel in circulation. The following table lists the weapons collected from the URNG between 3 March and 14 May 1997:

Weapons Type	Number
Small arms (includes AK-47, assault rifles and light machine guns)	1,665
Crew-served weapons (includes RPGs, mortars and others)	159
<b>Total firearms</b>	<b>1,824</b>
Small caliber munitions (up to 12 mm)	534,955
Grenades	147
<b>Rounds of ammunition of various calibers</b>	<b>535,102</b>
Mines	1,390
Bombs and rockets	934
Explosives	1,720 kg
Explosive cord	380 m
Other explosive devices	3,480

Source: United Nations Observer in Mission Guatemala (MINUGUA)

*Role of external assistance*

External assistance played a key role in the disarmament process. One hundred forty five military observers from sixteen countries received, registered and stored the arms turned in by the URNG. These observers were mainly Spanish, Uruguayan, Brazilian and Canadian, in that order. Thirteen medical personnel also participated in the observer mission. MINUGUA through its Logistical Support Commission received financial and technical assistance from the OAS, US Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Union (EU), UNDP and the World Health Organization (WHO). Additionally, other governments and NGOs carried out literacy programs, medical and dental services and

vocational guidance. While these programs were more closely related to the general demobilization process, they provided some incentive for URNG disarmament.

#### *Assessment of disarmament process monitored by UN*

Within the MINUGUA mandate disarmament was a rather small component. Only the URNG weapons collection was documented. Although Civilian Defense Patrols (PAC) were disbanded by the Guatemalan Armed Forces (GAF) there is no documentation as to the disposition of their weapons. The PAC did not arm every member of its patrols, rather the assignment of one gun per five men was the norm (Interviews with OAS representatives, May 1998). It would be naïve to assume that the 1,824 firearms handed over by the URNG represented a significant portion of the military weapons in circulation in Guatemala. Very little is known about the final disposition of the weapons and ammunition turned in by the URNG. There is no public information available regarding what DECAM did once they received these weapons. Approximately 2 million weapons continue to circulate illegally within the country [ *Siglo VEINTIUNO*, 4 August 1999 #120].

Even supporters of MINUGUA's work are aware that the success of the disarmament process was not based on a thorough collection of weapons in circulation (Interviews with MINUGUA staff, May 1998). The disarmament plan in Guatemala did not call for any destruction of weapons, particularly public destruction as was the case in El Salvador for example. The disarmament was mainly about bringing the URNG in from the hills and stopping the formal hostilities, so that the political process could move forward.

In contrast to the stalemate peace constructed in El Salvador, the URNG basically surrendered under UN protection. These circumstances left the central government and the military with a great deal of power and provided little pressure for the supervised disarmament of official and paramilitary units. In El Salvador the FMLN quickly became the nation's second largest political party. The URNG did obtain political party status for the 1999 presidential elections but its base of popular support is marginal in terms of the overall electoral pie.

The Guatemalan army created two different paramilitary structures during its fight against the insurgents. The first was a network of *Comisionados* formed to control rural communities. By the early 1990s there were close to 22,000 of these *Comisionados* in the country [UNDP, 1998 #126]. More relevant to the proliferation of small arms was the creation of the PAC mentioned above. By 1985, 850,000 Guatemalan males were enrolled in these patrols, almost 25 percent of the population. In March 1993, the PAC had in their possession 16,194 firearms, mostly F-1 and F-2 rifles which are not offensive weapons. These structures have been disbanded since the signing of the Peace Accords, but there is sparse information of the corresponding disarmament of these structures that was said to have taken place.

#### *The National De-mining Commission*

The removal of mines, explosives and ordnance in Guatemala left over from the war can also be considered part of a Phase I disarmament effort. As of the writing of this chapter de-mining efforts have concluded successfully in El Salvador and continue in Guatemala,

Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Well before the finalization of the peace process in August 1995, the process of de-mining began via congressional decree (Guatemalan De-mining Commission, 1997). This eventually developed into the National Plan for De-mining and the Destruction of Explosive Devices as part of the agreement corresponding to the resettlement of displaced persons. The plan was designed and implemented by the De-mining Commission consisting of the representatives from the national legislature, Volunteer Fire Corps (CVB), National Commission for Repatriates, Refugees and the Displaced and German Project Coordination (GPC). Initially, the army and police were excluded from this effort because the people of the communities affected by the presence of explosives did not trust these institutions. For this reason the CVB was trained by MINUGUA and GPC to carry out de-mining activities.

In 1996 the German government provided the funds to commence de-mining. Eventually, the OAS became involved as part of its program for mine removal in Central America (MARMINCA) that already had activities in cooperation with the Inter-American Defense Board in Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua. The OAS broadened the program to include de-miners from the Army Corps of Engineers (CINGE) and former URNG insurgents financing risk stipends and medical insurance above and beyond the mine removal teams' salaries [*Siglo Veintiuno*, 3 August 1998 #122]. The work of the De-mining Commission has created a very competent technical and administrative infrastructure with a balance of Guatemalan national and foreign personnel.

Much of the funding and international support has come, directly and indirectly, as the result of the Ottawa Treaty and the international ban on the production, transfer and use of anti-personnel landmines. Guatemala was the first Latin American country to ratify the treaty and pass a national law prohibiting the production, transfer and use of these artifacts. Interestingly enough Guatemala does not have a significant anti-personnel landmine problem rather the zones where de-mining takes place focuses more on grenades, mortars, unexploded ordnance and other types of explosives (Interviews with OAS de-mining program staff, November 1999). Because of the regional orientation of the OAS, Guatemala was able to finance a project that was not necessarily considered traditional AP landmine clearance. In contrast to other primarily military efforts previously underway in other neighboring countries de-mining in Guatemala has also involved civil society through the CVB, National Commission for Repatriates, Refugees and the Displaced as well as the affected who communities who solicit mine and ordnance clearance via the CVB.

In 1998, 38 communities were 'de-mined' in the departments of Quiché, Petén, Alta Verapaz, San Marcos, Ixcán, Huehuetenango, Escuintla, Quetzaltenango, Retalhuleu and Suchitpequez. In the process 35 hand grenades, 4 mortar grenades, 6 bombs, 19 Claymore mines, 1 RPG-7 and countless metal objects were cleared from these communities [Guatemalan De-mining Commission, 1999 #60]. According to OAS officials in Guatemala hand grenades present the greatest danger to the civilian population for not only can they cause accidents when they are found and mishandled but they are also used as offensive weapons. Examples of these types of dangers are listed below:

- A woman and her six children died in the department of Petén when a hand grenade she was cleaning exploded. The children found the artifact in a soccer field while playing [*La Nación*, 22 July 1998 #123].
- Four people died and another was seriously injured when a former army sergeant threw a M26A2 hand grenade into the patio of a residence in the city of Villanueva [*Prensa Libre*, 17 May 1999 #124].
- A group of students admitted to a plan where they would throw a hand grenade into a crowded school yard while another student actually threw a grenade into an occupied bathroom as a prank [*Siglo Veintiuno*, 18 June 1999 #125].

The OAS mission's mandate to monitor and accompany the National De-mining Commission has been extended through 2001. This type of exercise could provide a valuable link between Phase I and Phase II disarmament programs especially through the participation of the CVB who provide immediate attention to the majority of Guatemalan people injured or killed in firearms and explosives.

### **Phase II: Voluntary weapons collection in Guatemala?**

The Phase I collection effort has affected the potential for Phase II voluntary efforts in several ways. First, the low-key nature of the disarmament of the URNG insured that the citizenry of Guatemala would learn little of this event and any lessons on how to disarm the civilian population for times of peace. Second, the one combatant, 'one weapon formula' insured that the many weapons held by the former guerrilla were never turned in. However, as mentioned earlier, the URNG had nowhere near the quantity of arms held by the FMLN in El Salvador, nor were there comparable numbers of combatants. The distribution of sophisticated military-style weapons to the civilian population was not as broad either and much more controlled by the military structure. Increasingly, it appears the Guatemalans who possess firearms have them because they want to. In El Salvador and Nicaragua the distribution and proliferation of weapons were so broad that many people obtained weapons through direct distribution or were left in their homes by family members.

In both El Salvador and Guatemala outside disarmers were accepted grudgingly. But in Guatemala the hostility toward them has been much greater. Phase II efforts, especially if there is any direct international participation, will be challenging in such an environment. There is also a growing division in Guatemalan society between groups that believe arming themselves is the only way to deter violent attacks by criminals and street gangs and those who believe that the growing militarization of society is only contributing to an even less secure environment. In 1998, a group known as *Guardianes del Vecindario* (GV) launched a national billboard campaign with slogans such as "Thieves and murderers prefer unarmed victims." At the same time, another pro-firearm group the Association for the Constitutional Right to Bear Arms (ACEPTAR) published a full page newspaper advertisement condemning proposed reforms to the law on arms and munitions and criticizing MINUGUA and other international institutions for meddling in sovereign domestic affairs.

In reaction to these positions NGOs and civil society organizations on the other side of the debate have begun to discuss the possibility of taking actions to curb the spread and unlawful use of small arms and light weapons. International institutions and governments have expressed interest in supporting weapons collection and destruction programs, but have been clear in stating that the initiative must come from within Guatemala and have governmental support. In November 1998, former President Alvaro Arzu's government co-hosted a conference on demobilization and disarmament in cooperation with the United Nations Department for Disarmament Affairs. Follow-up to this meeting has not produced any concrete proposals. Now that Alfonso Portillo and the FRG have taken over the presidency it remains to be seen what type of working relationship there will be with MINUGUA and other international missions.

The technical infrastructure necessary for a weapons collection program is not overly sophisticated as has been demonstrated in El Salvador and other places where these programs have been implemented successfully. Guatemala has this capacity. The CVB and other civil society organizations that participated in de-mining activities could play potentially important roles in such efforts. However, removing inanimate mines and grenades from the fields of the countryside is a task very different from that of motivating people to turn in assault rifles and pistols in exchange for some in-kind benefit. Guatemala is a larger country, in population and size with greater ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity, than neighboring El Salvador. Perhaps the best approach would be to combine the administrative and political aspects of the 'Goods for Guns' program in El Salvador with the collective incentives provided by the "Weapons for Development" program implemented by the UNDP in Albania. Regardless, the decision to implement a Phase II disarmament program will depend on the political will of the new Guatemalan president and his cabinet appointees to work with civil society toward the disarmament of the civilian population's arsenals and minds.

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#### **List of acronyms**



ADES- Association of Distributors (El Salvador)  
AMPS- Association of Advertisers (El Salvador)  
BASIC- British American Security Information Council  
CEMA- Environmental Protection Agency (El Salvador)  
CINGE- Army Corps of Engineers (Guatemala)  
COPAZ- National Commission for the Consolidation of Peace (El Salvador)  
CVB- Volunteer Fire Corps (Guatemala)  
DECAM- Department of Control of Arms and Munitions (Guatemala)  
EU- European Union  
FAES- Armed Forces of El Salvador  
FMLN- Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (El Salvador)  
FRG- Guatemalan Republican Front  
GAF- Guatemalan Armed Forces  
GPC- German Project Coordination  
IDAS- Danger and Disaster company (Belgium)  
MINUGUA- United Nations Observer Mission in Guatemala  
MINUSAL- second United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador  
MPCD- Patriotic Movement Against Crime (El Salvador)  
NGO- non-governmental organization  
OAS- Organization of American States  
ONUSAL- United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador  
PAC- Civilian Defense Patrols (Guatemala)  
PAN- National Advancement Party (Guatemala)  
PNC- National Civilian Police (the same name is used in El Salvador and Guatemala)  
UNCDA- United Nations Center for Disarmament Affairs  
UNDP- United Nations Development Program  
UNDPA- United Nations Department for Political Affairs  
URNG- Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unit  
USAID- United States Agency for International Development  
WHO- World Health Organization