

Seminar held on 16th September 1998

## Illegal Arms in Albania and European Security

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**Speaker : Chris Smith**

One of the primary catalysts for the spread of illegal weapons is the weakness or lack of state control over borders. The flow of small arms and light weapons along so-called "pipelines" serves to destabilize entire countries or regions by making recourse to armed conflict more attractive, entrenching opposite sides, and causing massive movements of peoples fleeing from conflict. Dr. Chris Smith discussed this topic in light of the regional and international implications of illegal weapons diffusion triggered by the collapse of the Albanian state in early 1997 and subsequent measures proposed to address this problem. His talk was based on the results of field research commissioned by the Foreign Office of the United Kingdom.

The current situation in Albania, where the government exercises effective control only in the capital, Tirana, has its short-term roots in the collapse of the pyramid savings schemes which began in January 1997. The subsequent riots and civil unrest had, by March 1997, removed the entire region south of the Shkumbin River from central government control. During this period, an estimated 750,000 - 1 million light weapons were stolen from government armories (the OSCE estimates a figure of 1.5 million). The state lost approximately 80 per cent of its weaponry stock, in addition to 1.5 billion pieces of ammunition.

According to Smith, the rapid loss of state control can be attributed to two main factors. First, Albania's shift from the Soviet to the Chinese "orbit" in the 1960s engendered changes in its defense policy and posture which involved taking as a primary

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article of faith in defense planning the principle of a "peoples' war". This resulted in weapons being cached throughout the country for use by militias in the event of an invasion. Not only were weapons dispersed, but people connected to the army or militias had a "working knowledge" of their locations. Following the uprising these weapons were considered as almost the only form of recompensation available for the loss of savings.

Second, the attempt of the government to collect stolen weapons has not succeeded owing to the well entrenched public expectation that the weapons will be bought back by the government or an international organization at the rate of \$300 per AK-47. While the government did discuss a buyback programme, it concluded that since the weapons were originally state property, there was no reason why they should be bought back.

In addition to weapons, the guarding of munition dumps (quite apart from the ammunition that was stolen) has proven very problematic as a result of the legacy of the peoples' war doctrine. These dumps contain shells, antipersonnel mines, anti-tank mines, and ammunition for assault rifles, and many are located near schools, villages and busy roads. Consequently there has been a lot of theft, and injuries have resulted from the explosion of several dumps. Although it has not received the same attention as the light weapons issue, it is a serious problem nonetheless.

Because of widespread poverty in Albania, there is an incentive therefore to steal from unguarded ammunition dumps. Explosives are looted and sold across the border, where they retail at around USD 150-200 per kilo in Greece, while scrap metal retails in the former Yugoslavia at about USD 150 a kilo. There are also indications that chemical weapons may also have been stolen, despite the fact that Albania has signed the CIBT. While these were most likely riot control CS gas, Chris Smith nonetheless thinks that the possibility of chemical weapons availability deserves serious attention.

In 1997 Operation Alba (a multinational operation to guarantee the delivery of humanitarian aid to Albania) ignored the fact that so many weapons had been lost, something Smith considers

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symptomatic of virtually every peacekeeping operation over the past five years (ONUMZ, UNAVEM, etc.). According to him this reflects a habitual inability to tackle the weapons collection issue head-on and presents many lessons to be addressed by the international community in the context of peacekeeping reform.

### **Illegal Weapons Leaving Albania from the North**

In 1997 the state initially lost control of the south, and then subsequently the north (the divide is the Shkumbin river). As borders became porous following the erosion of state control, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) and key clans entered and looted arms caches in the north, trading amongst themselves. In addition, illegal arms bazaars exist in Tropoje; there AK-47s retail for approximately \$300 and a general purpose machine gun for approximately \$1,500. Between March 1997 and February 1998 a large amount of illegal weapons flowed into Kosovo, though many weapons used in the recent troubles had already been cached in the expectation of a conflict with the Serb security forces.

Chris Smith related his understanding that northern Albania is now virtually free of weapons at this point, the majority having entered Kosovo, and an indeterminable number into Macedonia.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the UCK is now finding sources of illegal weapons in Albania very hard to come by and it is thought they are seeking weapons from other sources, particularly Germany.

### **Illegal Weapons Leaving Albania from the South**

According to Smith, the essential question in southern Albania is the proportion of total weapons that crossed into the EU versus those that remained. Looting in the south was predominantly carried out by individuals whose weapons were later purchased by organized crime. While the lucrative transport of refugees by organized crime has traditionally been accompanied by

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drugs, prostitution and guns, the attempted departure of thousands of people in 1997 from Albania to Corfu and Italian ports revealed little evidence that large amounts of weaponry were going from Albania into Italy or Greece.

There are two reasons for this. First, organized crime wish to keep control over stocks of weapons in Albania in the absence of incentives to sell outside; furthermore, the policing of both Greek and Italian borders has improved dramatically. Second, Italian organized crime are instrumental in controlling the flows of light weapons into Italy owing to their desire to keep them out of their own backyard; they most likely do not want additional attention from the police or for rival mafia gangs to acquire serious weaponry. On the other hand, a considerable amount of cooperation exists between organized crime groups in Italy and southern Albania; in Chris Smith's view the Albanian mafia are beginning to challenge the Italian mafia on their own ground, thus making serious inroads into southern Europe.

While in 1997 Corfu was the easiest and most direct route for refugees to take, the influx is now much less, partly due to the Greek security forces and a vigorous policing policy in the straits between the two countries. The land border between Greece and Albania, though, is more porous, and it is known that local inhabitants are involved in trafficking in weapons on a relatively small scale (approximately half a dozen a fortnight). Overall there does not exist great demand for weapons in Greece, with the exception of Crete.

What distinguishes Europe from other regions Smith has investigated such as southern Africa, Afghanistan, and so forth, is the difference between *concealable* and *unconcealable* weapons. At issue are weapons of war, designed and produced to be used in wars and not for criminal purposes. Where the state is strong and law and order exists, it is impossible to walk around with an AK-47; in Europe, therefore, there is only demand for concealable weapons. While security forces retain control, Smith expects such demand levels to remain the same. He does not believe that there will be a tremendous demand for weapons of war which are unconcealable. Despite the existence of demand in a gray area

between Uzis, for instance, and concealable weapons such as handguns, which will most likely increase, he does not believe there will be a tremendous demand except for a few isolated cases.

### **Measures to Address Weapons Availability in Albania**

Smith then turned to a discussion of the UN mission to Albania. The *Report on the Evaluation Mission to Albania* (June 1998) suggests that the UN will sponsor and organize a program which is effectively an arms amnesty in return for a development programme in the district of Gramshi. That area is both lawless and suffers from 30% unemployment. The UN is proposing a package funded by the UNDP and the World Bank that will involve building 90 kilometers of road, employing 2,000 people, setting up a small-scale processing plant, a furniture making factory, and so forth. According to him, the main problem with the UN mission is the context in which the report was produced. While the idea of development in exchange for a weapons amnesty programme is a good one, Smith believes that it is unlikely to succeed in the absence of law and order.

Given this predicament, Smith then examined alternative approaches to dealing with the arms problem. In his view, the central question that must be addressed is how to distinguish between weapons required by criminals as tools of their trade and weapons required by people who feel that the state cannot guarantee law and order. In Gjirokastra, for example, the police are actually licensing people in possession of illegal weapons who are considered trustworthy or live locally and in the region. In Smith's opinion, while individual criminals will never surrender or license their weapons, individuals who legally acquired weapons to protect property, business, their family and themselves might be susceptible to a licensing process. The benefits of a successful licensing process would be the identification of the location and ownership of weapons. Subsequently, the internationally verified restoration of law and order, and the resulting monopoly of force by the state could then lead to a revoking of weapon licenses.

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Once the location and ownership of such weapons are known, those failing to turn in their weapons would be considered guilty of possessing an illegal weapon. This is one way, according to Smith, by which weapons that were lost could be brought back under control.

Chris Smith recognized, however, the difficulty in legalizing illegal weapons; what might work conceptually might not work politically. In his opinion a slightly less contentious approach could be a root and branch reform of the security forces in exchange for a delayed amnesty. The logic would be the same, the main issue being to address the widespread belief that the state is unable to guarantee security. Nonetheless licensing illegal weapons and a security sector reform as a part of rebuilding the state are different approaches. If the state can be rebuilt from the bottom up, and the security forces reformed and professionalized, both in the context of international verification, one could expect an amnesty. The second approach, while politically more feasible, is considered by Chris Smith as the weaker; the first has greater potential despite the political difficulties it would create.

### **Brief Presentation by Margarita Gega, Chargée d'Affaires of the Permanent Mission of Albania**

Mrs. Gega began by describing the series of measures the Albanian government has enacted in order to disarm the population. These include: a proclamation of amnesty for all who returned their weapons until 21 August 1997; and the organization, in conjunction with NGOs, of a number of sensitization campaigns in addition to measures to ban the illegal flow of arms across Albanian borders. The government has also cooperated with international organizations, resulting, for instance, in the UN evaluation mission under Mr. Jayantha Dhanapala, Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs, and a pilot programme in the Gramsh district.

Mrs. Gega then outlined some of the problems and challenges that confront disarmament efforts in Albania. These include

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the lower socioeconomic status of most weapons holders, which should be addressed within the context of measures such as education, gun buybacks and employment. She also acknowledged that the problem of disarmament is closely tied to the resolution of the Kosovo question, and noted the Albanian government's support for Security Council resolution 1160 on the arms embargo in the former Yugoslavia. To this end, the government cooperates closely with international teams in the monitoring of the Albanian-Yugoslav border, and desires to conclude treaties banning the illegal flow of weapons in the region.

In response to Mrs. Gega's presentation, Chris Smith commented that the Albanian government, despite its difficulties outside Tirana, is doing as much as it can to address the issue domestically and to liaise with international organizations to ensure the emergence of an environment conducive to investment in weapons collection/destruction and development programmes. Despite the existence of critical statements towards the Albanian government in his presentation, Smith expressed the conviction that the spirit in which it was researched is accepted as positive to the Albanian state and people.

### **Brief Presentation by Henry van der Graaf, on the follow-up to the Dhanapala Mission Report**

Mr. van der Graaf, who was asked by Mr. Dhanapala to conduct a follow-up mission to Albania, examined the feasibility of the suggestions made on the basis of the Dhanapala mission. In this context, lengthy discussions were held with the Tirana government, main NGOs, and relevant international organizations. The mission also held discussions in the Gramshi district (which has a population of 40,000 divided into 10 communes and 91 villages) with commune and village leaders on the pilot project. Mr. van der Graaf agreed with Chris Smith that without law and order, there could be no possibility of collecting weapons. In order to bolster law and order in the Gramshi area, the understaffed and under-equipped police force must be strengthened. Overall the

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mission found that there is a need for a public awareness campaign both on a district and nationwide scale and that as long as the situation remains the same disarmament will take a long time (this was also the case in the north).

In addition to discussions with local political parties that revealed a broad consensus on the seriousness of the problem and optimism with regard to the results of a development programme, the police commissioner guaranteed that 10,000 weapons could be voluntarily returned in exchange for basic social services such as education and health. A financial assessment of the project revealed a projected cost of \$3-4 million for the district. The mission also suggested that the weapons collection project should be integrated into the larger development projects of the government and donor countries, who have already pledged more than \$600 million. Although it remains a high-risk program, Mr. van der Graaf expressed the opinion that it should be implemented and started as soon as possible. Fundamentally, the main challenge to the programme is one of management and the willingness of the various actors to undertake it. Finally, Mr. van der Graaf mentioned the need to capitalize on the momentum that has been generated thus far, and suggested that one possible way to deal with collected weapons would be to destroy them.

### Questions and Answers

**Q.:** Having argued that the demand in Europe for weapons would be limited to concealable weapons, is arms trafficking in military weapons through Europe to other regions an issue? Were cost-effective measures for prevention discussed, or was this included as part of the European Union's Code of Conduct?

**A.:** International crime and terrorism tend to utilize weak and collapsed states as easy areas in which to operate and as long as the situation remains the same in Europe, no such developments are likely to occur. The only proviso is that during the EU's expansion,

its borders will not only move eastwards but the Schengen agreements will lift restrictions on internal freedom of movement, potentially facilitating arms flows.

**Q.:** While the two methods proposed to tackle weapons availability—the licensing process and the security sector reform—are interesting, what is the relationship between the two processes and should they be considered as mutually exclusive? A licensing process would be most effective within the context of a security sector reform.

A.:

When looking at solutions one has to assume a given level of progress on the part of the state regarding the ability and capability of the security forces and the resources available to them. There needs to be a link between licensing and security sector reform, and a comprehensive approach to the former. Smith's preference for the licensing process solution is due to the large numbers of war weapons that have diffused among the population, and the greater ability of this process to reacquire them as opposed to forceful reacquisition.

**Q.:** What about the fate of surrendered weapons, would it be safer to destroy as opposed to merely disable them?

A.:

Surrendered weapons are rarely decommissioned (one notable exception being South Africa), and a trade exists in reactivating disabled weapons.

**Q.:** What are the links between weapons availability and the demand for such weapons, and which factors could influence this relationship? Could Mr. Smith comment on the perceived weakness of early warning prevention?

A.:

Smith affirmed that it is not only the availability of weapons but also the social, economic and political conditions that lead to a marked increase in the demand for such weapons by non-state actors. Availability is closely linked to weak states and underdevel-

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opment in general, macro-issues which cannot be ignored when examining the light weapons dynamic. With regard to early warning systems, the cost of weapons as one possible indicator of conflict, while another, the emergence and availability of unconcealable weapons on the open market, relates to the strength of the state. Unfortunately, a robust intellectual framework within which to understand all the dimensions of the small arms/light weapons issue does not exist; such a framework needs to be developed in order to place these questions in their proper perspective.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Research on the transfer of illegal weapons into Macedonia has resulted in contradictory information. It is simply not known whether the border was sealed or policing increased in time.