
Executive summary

Turning the page: small arms and light weapons in Albania, is a report of the findings of research conducted on small arms and light weapons and security issues in Albania from April to September 2005 by the London-based non-governmental organisation Saferworld.

The report is a contribution towards the development of a co-ordinated policy response to the outstanding SALW problems facing the Republic of Albania following the crisis of 1997 during which hundreds of thousands of weapons were looted from government stockpiles. It charts the achievements of the Albanian Government and international and civil society organisations in combating SALW to date and identifies the challenges that still lie ahead. The report's main findings were reviewed during a series of meetings with a wide range of officials from the Albanian Government and international organisations and also at an inter-ministerial roundtable in October 2005. The final report reflects comments received during these consultations. A separate briefing paper containing the research team's recommendations for enhancing SALW control in Albania exists as an accompanying document to this report and was submitted for use by the Government of Albania.

The report's main findings are as follows:

Perceived impact of small arms and light weapons (SALW)

- Although the direct impact of SALW on crime and public health was a major concern in the late 1990s, the number of casualties attributable to firearms misuse has consistently declined since then
- One third of Albanian citizens think that it is acceptable to possess a gun when the law is not enforced, when there is political instability or because others have them. Other common motives for weapons possession include the fear of political instability and a perceived need for revenge
- Despite progress in tackling blood feuds, their continued occurrence and importance in Albanian society is an issue of concern and a significant driver for the use of weapons
- Property disputes, jealousy, alcohol and depression are the reasons most commonly cited in the Albanian media for people resorting to the use of firearms
- Most Albanians are aware that the possession of weapons carries dangers; however this knowledge does not represent enough of an incentive for many illegal gun owners to surrender their weapons during government-run amnesties. This indicates that many Albanians have now become accustomed to the presence of weapons in their homes and communities

- Most murders in Albania are committed using firearms, and the majority of these occur within families
- Young males in their teens and twenties are the group most likely to be involved in the misuse of SALW
- SALW are often used to commit acts of domestic violence and, according to women's groups, domestic violence is a serious problem that is not given adequate recognition by law enforcement and justice agencies
- Media reports indicate that on occasions police officers and private security guards have misused weapons provided by their employers while off-duty
- Historically poor record-keeping by the police, hospitals, coroners' offices and courts hinders comparative analysis and the development of evidence-based policy responses to SALW problems. Methods used to compile information also vary, and the quality of official records of firearms-related injuries differs across the country

Distribution of SALW within Albania

- By working in collaboration with international organisations and civil society, the Albanian Government has helped to pioneer new approaches to weapons collection such as the 'weapons in exchange for development' approach which has since been taken up worldwide
- Despite nearly a decade of SALW collection activities during which some 200,000 weapons have been retrieved from civilians, it is estimated that a similar number of illicit SALW (some 200,000 units) still remain in civilian hands
- There is a widespread perception among the general public that politicians and businesspersons have ready access to SALW
- Aside from weapons displayed by the police and army, SALW are most commonly visible to the public during celebrations
- The continued reorganisation of the Albanian Armed Forces makes it difficult to identify both the number of weapons required for service at any time and the number of surplus units currently held in stores. Nevertheless, it is estimated that the military currently holds some 80–140,000 units of surplus SALW
- An illegal private security market exists alongside a state-regulated market. In the illegal market individuals make themselves available as security for hire thereby undercutting registered private security firms
- Under the current legal framework private security guards are permitted to use assault rifles in their work. Assault rifles are inappropriate for such purposes and the Ministry of Interior has plans to restrict their use in the future
- Despite Ministry of Interior regulations regarding the storage of weapons and ammunition at home, there still appear to be cases in which Albanian gun owners store these items in an unsafe manner

Stockpile management and security

- The Albanian Armed Forces have significantly reduced the number of storage depots in the country from 167 in 1998 to 57 in 2005, thereby improving stockpile security. However, although many Ministry of Defence storage depots employ stockpile security procedures there is no single site which fully conforms to the standards required for effective stockpile security and management
- The Ministry of Defence currently classifies half of all its ammunition depots to be at high-risk of detonation as a consequence of historic overstocking and the relocation of old stocks. This poses a significant public health threat, particularly in view of the fact that dwellings are sometimes built dangerously close to stockpiles and storage sites, in contravention of planning laws

- An unknown level of threat is posed by ‘mixed’ packages of loose ammunition surrendered during weapons collections that has not yet been sorted and cannot therefore be stored according to hazard type
- Despite an electronic SALW accounting system having been successfully piloted within the Ministry of Interior, armed forces units and government ministries still rely on paper-based accounting methods which are slow, difficult to compare, and sometimes inaccurate. Under these conditions any stockpile thefts would likely go undetected
- Despite the existence of general rules and procedures developed for the police and military forces on safe storage, in some cases inventory and storage procedures within private security companies appear inadequate. This allows SALW to be exchanged between guards without the necessary paperwork being completed and sometimes allows weapons to be taken home in contravention of the law

Collection of SALW and ammunition

- Successive weapons collection initiatives have occurred in Albania since 1997 with notable success, leading to the surrender of more than 200,000 illicit weapons by the public
- Ongoing cycles of weapons collection have however created several problems, including:
 - ‘collection fatigue’ among the public, police and international community
 - confusion amongst the public about the rules regarding weapons possession and collection
 - patchy enforcement of the existing legislation on civilian possession by the authorities

Destruction of SALW and ammunition

- Good progress has been made so far with the destruction of SALW and ammunition. More than 140,000 weapons and 22,000 tonnes of ammunition have been destroyed in the last four to five years
- Despite having made commitments to destroy surplus weapons to a number of international organisations and forums, including the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations, sizeable surplus stocks of weapons (something in the order of 80–140,000 units) and ammunition remain in storage, with no indication as to when or how they will be destroyed
- Toxic waste products created as a by-product of ammunition destruction have not always been managed so as to minimise their environmental impact
- Some Explosive Ordnance Destruction units within the Albanian Armed Forces have only received training in the destruction of single items, yet they carry out large-scale demolitions without the necessary knowledge or equipment. In doing so they pose a significant threat to public safety

International transfers of SALW and other conventional weapons

- Recognising that implementation of the national legislation and regulation on arms transfer control has been historically poor, the Albanian Government has moved to introduce new and improved regulation in this area. However, although a new law on the import and export of military goods has been drafted it has not yet been passed by parliament
- The degree to which Albania’s arms export control system complies with the country’s international commitments is unclear, due to a lack of government transparency in this area

- There is currently very little scope for ensuring effective post-export verification of compliance with end-user certificates, since Albania has very limited diplomatic representation worldwide

Trafficking and organised crime

- Albania participates in a number of regional anti-trafficking, border security and anti-organised crime initiatives. Successive exchanges of information on SALW trafficking through these channels have proved effective, in part because of the high-level support provided to them by the Government of Albania
- According to the Ministry of Interior, many of the illegal SALW seized by police in the course of their work were trafficked into the country rather than originating from Albanian government stocks
- The type of items trafficked into and out of Albania has changed since 2002, with fewer bolt-action rifles and AK47s being intercepted and an increasing number of missiles and mobile phone detonated bombs being seized

Justice and law enforcement

- The capacity of law enforcement agencies to combat SALW crime and illicit possession has increased over time in tandem with reforms to the national police service, including the introduction of specialised anti-trafficking units and strategies and a move to adopt community policing methods
- Under the current law on SALW possession, a significant proportion of those civilians who possess unregistered weapons are liable to prosecution. The draconian nature of this law, in a society which accepts gun ownership, deters some police officers from making arrests and some judges from handing down the sentences stipulated in the penal code. Moreover, the prison system lacks the capacity to handle the massive increase in inmates that strict adherence to the penal code would entail
- There exists a degree of confusion among citizens and some law enforcement officials over the legal basis for weapons possession and collection. This not only prevents effective law enforcement in this area, but may contribute to accusations that police officers and judges have received bribes in return for not arresting or prosecuting civilians who possess illicit weapons

Policy co-ordination, continuity and development

- The Albanian Government responded promptly and decisively to the national looting of weapons in 1997 by establishing a high-level inter-departmental commission to co-ordinate weapons collections shortly afterwards
- More recent attempts by the Government of Albania to deliver a co-ordinated response to SALW and security problems in the country have been undermined by a lack of inter-ministerial and inter-departmental co-ordination and high staff turnover within government institutions
- The effectiveness of otherwise welcome international support for SALW control activities in Albania has been reduced at points during the last decade as a result of poor co-ordination between international agencies and donors and a lack of sustained engagement
- Although it has made good progress in domestic SALW control, the Government of Albania has often taken a back seat in the development of international policy and regulations, with the result that other states have not benefited from the country's considerable experience