



SEESAC ARTICLE OF INTEREST

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24 May 06	Illegal Firearms Take Their Toll	Sources BIRN: Balkan Insight
<p>Several hundred people from the Skopje municipality of Cair on May 24 voiced outrage over the fatal shooting of two teenagers and a man in his twenties, with a protest march under the slogan "Say NO to weapons".</p> <p>Brothers Enis and Enxhin Ismaili, 17 and 14, and Inishi Rametula, 20, were killed on May 19 in a midnight shootout between two armed gangs in Cair. Six others were injured.</p> <p>Police said the dead youths were innocent victims, caught in crossfire.</p> <p>Ironically, the shooting occurred days before the start of the Global Week of Action Against Arms in Macedonia, which the NGO Civil First launched in May to promote tighter gun control.</p> <p>Xhabir Deralla, of Civil, said the incident was just the latest in a long line of recent fatal shootings in Macedonia.</p> <p>"Firearms have become part of the daily lives of Macedonian citizens," he said at the campaign launch on May 23. "Over the past few years, Macedonia has become an increasingly violent and dangerous society, in which drawing a gun has become a trivial matter."</p> <p>Television footage that showed images of locals in shock and the families of the slain youths in mourning reminded viewers of the continuing danger posed by the huge number of illegal arms.</p> <p>Although security has improved overall in recent years and police are more efficient than before in tracing and seizing illegal weapons, experts fear the problem remains serious.</p> <p>They say the last deaths are just one indicator of the enormous amount of weapons that remain in illegal hands.</p> <p>Blagoja Markovski, chair of the NGO Balkan Security Forum and a former commander of the last major voluntary disarmament operation in 2003, said Macedonia needed to face reality, "We should not run away from the fact that Macedonia has a serious problem with illegal weaponry."</p> <p>Macedonia has carried out two operations to collect illegal weaponry in the last decade.</p> <p>In September 2001, NATO peacekeepers gathered 3,300 firearms from Albanian rebels after the end of the six-month conflict between the latter and Macedonian forces.</p> <p>In 2003, the UNDP supervised another operation for the voluntary surrender of unlicensed weapons, which netted more than 7,000 pieces of arms.</p> <p>However, the police believe between 80,00 and 120,000 items of illegal weaponry are still out there - most held in former crisis regions, but in other areas, too.</p> <p>Vladimir Pandilovski, of the National Arms Association, which deals with licensed weaponry, agrees with the police estimate. He said the problem was not only the quantity, but the quality, of this illegal weaponry.</p> <p>"We are talking about military weapons designed to attack and create a large number of casualties," he said.</p> <p>Pandilovski explained that this type of weaponry first came into circulation during the Balkan conflicts and wars of the</p>		

1990s and was now in criminal hands.

"Mostly its Kalashnikov automatic rifles, machine guns, bombs and grenades," he added.

Its importance to the criminal fraternity is not in doubt. "Only two or three per cent of violent criminal offenses have been committed with legal weaponry," said one police officer. "Legal weapons are rarely abused."

The shootout in Cair also involved Kalashnikovs, a type of weapon used in many other recent incidents.

In June 2005, the government adopted a strategy to curb the misuse of small arms and light weapons. It involved increasing border control to prevent arms trafficking and directing police efforts towards detecting and seizing illegal weapons already in the country.

Borislav Pesevski, of the interior ministry, said the police were now more efficient in combating illegal weaponry.

"Last year police seized over 900 pieces of weapons, which is 65 per cent more than the year before," he said. "The number of murders committed with firearms has also declined."

But Pandilovski said although statistics showed a recent fall in the number of firearms-related casualties, the death toll from these weapons was still above the European average.

"The number of casualties in Macedonia ranges from 13 to 25 persons per million, while in Germany the figure is only one murder per every million – which is similar in France and England," he said.

This is why most experts are calling for a new operation to round up illegal weaponry.

The 2003 initiative collected 7,000 pieces but Blagoja Markovski said it had not been enough.

"One operation was far from completing the process," said Markovski. "We need a series of similar operations carried out on a regional level, because the illegal weaponry is a joint problem."

Alain Lapon, UNDP project manager in Macedonia, also backed a new voluntary disarmament campaign.

"It is never a bad idea to think about a new operation to allow those possessing unregistered weapons to get rid of them, because not everyone having illegal weapons is a criminal," Lapon told Balkan Insight.

Both police and experts point out the need to increase public awareness of the danger of possessing arms. This is not always easy in the Balkans, where there is a tradition of keeping weapons at home.

Pesevski said the police were regularly carrying out operations to raise people's awareness, "Without their help, we can not resolve the problem."

The good news is that the public mindset does seem to be changing. Lapon, of UNDP, says back in 2003, surveys showed only 30 per cent of the public said they would never buy a gun. "By December 2005 this number had risen to 67 per cent," he said.

Xhabir Deralla, organiser of the Global Week of Action Against Arms, agrees that the public is unhappier than ever with the current situation. They are "determined to halt violence on the streets", he said.

Artan Grubi, head of Wake Up!, the NGO that organised this week's protest in Cair, shares that line. The latest tragedy "could happen to anyone", he said. "It is time to show we have had enough, and really say NO to weapons."