

Small Arms and Disposal/Destruction Programs

Properly disposing of or destroying surplus or obsolete small arms and light weapons is important because:

- **Surplus or obsolete weapons are often stored improperly, making them a public safety threat to the communities in which they are located.**
- **Surplus or obsolete weapons are often vulnerable to theft and diversion by criminals and other violent actors.**
- **Small arms destruction and disposal programs are a cost-effective and relatively simple way to reduce the threat posed by surplus and obsolete small arms and light weapons**

Surplus small arms and light weapons often pose a public safety threat to the communities in which they are stored, and a proliferation threat to the international community. Many surplus weapons are haphazardly stored in depots that are poorly designed and maintained. A small fire in such a depot can start a deadly chain reaction that sends missiles, shells, and other munitions raining down on the surrounding neighborhoods. In May 2004, a hastily discarded cigarette in the 275th depot near the Ukrainian town of Melitopol set off a series of explosions that killed five people and caused hundreds of millions of dollars in damages.

Surplus weapons are also vulnerable to theft and diversion, the extent of which ranges from low level pilfering by poorly paid soldiers to diversions of large, government-approved arms shipments. Many of these stolen and diverted weapons end up in the arsenals of insurgents, criminals, and other violent actors.

Preventing accidents involving theft and diversion of surplus small arms and light weapons requires that these weapons be quickly identified as surplus and properly disposed of. Selling these weapons is the preferred means of disposal for many governments, but legitimate, responsible buyers are often difficult to find. When a legitimate buyer cannot be located, responsible governments often destroy their surplus weapons.

Destruction can take many forms: cutting, melting, burning, crushing, encasing in cement, ocean dumping, etc. Each method has advantages and disadvantages, depending on the quantity, type, age and location of weapons; the political context; and available resources. For example, open air burning—which can be done on-site, is inexpensive, requires little expertise, and has symbolic significance—may be the preferred method for destroying weapons collected from ex-combatants in a post-conflict context. This method would be less appropriate for disposing of the massive government stockpiles that litter many former Warsaw Pact countries, which require facilities that can quickly destroy large quantities of mixed weaponry.

In recent years, donor governments have established several destruction assistance programs. NATO provides such assistance through its Partnership for Peace program, using donations from member states to fund destruction efforts. Some countries also fund bilateral destruction assistance programs, the largest of which is coordinated by the U.S. State Department. Since the late 1990s, these programs have facilitated the destruction of millions of surplus small arms and light weapons worldwide.