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# Small Arms/Light Weapons and Physical Security in Misrata, Libya

During November 2011 DanChurchAid performed a small arms/light weapons field assessment in Misrata, Libya. In this article, DCA outlines this assessment and explains why SA/LW risk education is a valuable and appropriate response to this situation.

by Adam Forbes [ DanChurchAid ]



Children are at risk from small arms and light weapons. They are naturally curious and do not know they should not touch weapons.

All photos of courtesy of Paul Jeffrey.

The proliferation of small arms and light weapons is a common civil-war legacy, often thought to exacerbate post-conflict insecurity and instability within a country and beyond its borders.<sup>1</sup> SA/LW proliferation is a potentially sensitive and dynamic issue for international nongovernmental organizations to address; this issue becomes more difficult in the immediate aftermath of war and major uprisings.

The 2011 uprising in Libya and the accompanying influx of SA/LW into civilian communities prompted DanChurchAid to evaluate the SA/LW situation in Libya.<sup>2</sup> A recent field assessment undertaken by DCA in Misrata determined that, within the areas visited and at the time of the assessment, SA/LW were not contributing to insecurity in the political or criminal sense. However, DCA found that SA/LW

did represent an immediate threat to personal security and should be the legitimate focus of humanitarian efforts to reduce the risks to civilians.

## SA/LW in Misrata

Misrata saw some of the heaviest fighting in the 2011 Libyan uprising. Under the Moammar Gadhafi regime, few people were authorized to own small arms apart from some hunters and farmers. However, the events of 2011 caused the civilian population to acquire a large and unknown number of SA/LW via combat, stockpile seizure or the black market.

At a macro-level, Misrata was secured in late 2011. Interviews with authorities and community leaders suggest that crime rates are negligible, and the inevitable maneuvering of local political factions is peaceful and nonviolent. DCA found that a considerable amount of social control exists to regulate individual behavior around SA/LW and mitigate some of the potential negatives of weapons ownership. A number of sources pointed to heavy regulation. The brigades, known as *khatiba*, reportedly have a large number of SA/LW. One hundred eighty-six brigades of approximately 50 members each are registered with the Misrata Military Council. During the uprising, prospective weapons owners were required to enroll with a brigade and register their firearm. This data for most, if not all, SA/LW would greatly benefit any future attempt to collect and control these weapons. Brigades exert some control as they only allow their members to carry their weapons “on duty” (e.g., staffing a checkpoint) and they plan to centralize members’ SA/LW into stockpiles.

Religious leaders are another source of control. Speaking on radio broadcasts and during Friday prayer, the Imams condemned the practice of celebratory gunfire. It is largely due to their influence that the practice has become less common; this influence was evident by the virtually gunshot-free, public



People are holding onto SA/LW for multiple reasons: for protection, as trophies and to mitigate uncertainty over the future.

celebrations following the death of Mutassim Gadhafi (son of Moammar Gadhafi) in October 2011. Lastly, communities self-regulate, and if someone fires a weapon in or around a home, vocal and forceful criticism ensues, which carries great weight in a tight-knit society.

## SA/LW Risk Education

During the assessment DCA found that SA/LW-related incidents threaten physical security in Libya. The results led the DCA team to conclude that SA/LW risk education is the most appropriate and effective method for organizations to assist the transitional authorities and civil society. Future interventions involving physical security and stockpile management in Libya need assessment as the context evolves.

SA/LW risk education is based on observing risk-taking behavior and forming the appropriate messages to encourage behavioral change. These messages are then turned into materials (e.g., training curricula, posters or plays, and programs delivered via radio) and transmitted through a relevant medium (e.g., peer-to-peer education, radio broadcast or community leaders).

Through interviews with civil society, transitional authorities and international NGOs (notably Handicap International), DCA found the following examples of risk-taking behavior. Statistics are not available, however, because no one, foreign or domestic, systematically collects data on SA/LW-related injuries in Misrata.

## Risk-taking Behavior

**Celebratory gunfire.** Numerous reports cite people being wounded and killed during bouts of celebratory gunfire. Growing recognition of this danger and the strong advocacy of Imams and transitional authorities against the practice significantly decreased its frequency.

**Mishandling ammunition.** In addition to hearing numerous reports, DCA witnessed children playing with ammunition, fuzes and grenades. Teachers report that children bring ammunition to school and try to remove the gunpowder. Ammunition is often thrown into fires for its explosive effect. Only a few days prior to this assessment, a young girl was seriously injured because her brother was playing in this way.





Children are particularly vulnerable to the excess of SA/LW in Libya.

**Alcohol-induced misuse.** Judiciary authorities stated that of 10 incidents of post-conflict shootings currently under legal investigation, seven involve alcohol. On 25 October 2011, a drunk man killed a *khatiba* member at a checkpoint in the Kasar Ahmed district. In another case, neighbors entered into a violent dispute with a hero of the uprising who repeatedly shot into the air when intoxicated. Neighbors killed the man because he was dangerous.

**Children playing with small arms.** Firearms, unless securely stored, represent a particular threat to curious children. Grenades and other explosive devices pose a threat to the entire household regardless of how they are stored. While many men insisted they knew of and practiced safe-storage techniques, the majority of women interviewed believed their husbands and older sons were still unfamiliar with firearms and said the men frequently left weapons unattended and loaded. Notably, some households lack appropriate storage containers. Reports of accidents are rare but occur nonetheless. Although parents undoubtedly tell their children not to touch SA/LW, a discrepancy exists between safety messages and a

wider culture in which weapons are celebrated as a means of defense and of defeating the regime. This is evidenced in television, public events and public discourse in general.

#### Local Outreach

As described previously, individuals, civil society and transitional authorities in Libya are already active in controlling SA/LW misuse. DCA will continue to assist local authorities, governments and NGOs as they work to mitigate risk-taking behavior among civilians through a variety of capacities, including:

**Imams.** Imams in Misrata are organized through the Council of Mosques (*Al awkaf*). The current leader, Sheikh Ahmed Dowa, met with DCA and has the authority to guide the content of the sermon at Friday prayers across all Mosques in the city. Thousands of male adults and children hear these prayers. Based on the successful work of imams to discourage celebratory shooting, the Council of Mosques is keen to work with DCA to deliver a wider range of risk-education messages.

**Teachers.** State schoolteachers and Koranic schoolteachers are excellent influencers of children's behavior and subsequently, their parents' behavior. DCA is working with schoolteachers to help provide psychosocial support to conflict-affected children and will build upon this initiative and network.

**Radio stations.** Radio broadcasts are highly influential and respected. Regular programs and drama sketches address the problem of celebratory shooting. The main station, Radio Misrata, operated throughout the conflict, and Gadhafi forces regularly attacked it due to its credibility with the local population. Interviews with women suggested that radio is perhaps the best medium for reaching mothers and wives who spend much of their time at home and are considered to be responsible for the home. Therefore, women have a key role to play in ensuring that weapons are stored safely.

**Khatiba members.** Misrata society honors as heroes the predominantly young, volunteer fighters from the uprising. They have a profound effect on teen and child behavior and are very aware of this fact. One member told DCA that "if children see us smoking, then they will smoke too." Many *khatiba* members have a negative view of SA/LW after seeing many friends killed or injured, which differs to some extent from older men who may have acquired a firearm for protection but did not witness such fighting. DCA will seek to mobilize a number of *khatiba* members to deliver SA/LW risk-education messages in schools, at parent-teacher evenings and elsewhere. *Khatiba* members display a strong sense of responsibility for the new Libya and expressed interest in this activity.

Group	Level of risk awareness	Category	Sample messages
1	Unaware	Children	Similar to Mine Risk Education – don't touch etc
2	Aware of risk, unaware of appropriate safe behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Older children</li> <li>Teenagers</li> <li>Adults unfamiliar with weapons</li> <li>Some weapons-owning males</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Never point a weapon at anyone</li> <li>Always assume that a weapon is loaded and dangerous</li> <li>Never touch the trigger unless you have thought exactly about what you are shooting and why you are doing it</li> <li>Make sure your weapon is locked away and inaccessible to children</li> <li>Separate ammunition from weapon</li> </ul>
3	Aware of risk and safe behavior but choose to ignore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teenagers</li> <li>Weapons-owning males</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is no point keeping a weapon in your house to protect your family if that weapon only makes them more afraid</li> <li>People fought and died to build a new Libya. Wouldn't you rather protect yourself from weapons in order to enjoy this new future?</li> </ul>

Table 1. At-risk groups for excess SA/LW and samples of mine-risk education messages.

**Military Council and Security Council.** At the time of the assessment, the Military Council and Security Council were the most tangible forms of authority followed by the National Transitional Council. DCA met with leaders of both councils who DCA found to be ready and willing to speak on radio programs and through other media to deliver SA/LW risk-education messages.

**Local NGOs.** Prior to the conflict, only two NGOs existed in Misrata: the Boy Scouts and the Red Crescent. They are now joined by a burgeoning number of NGOs and associations with varying levels of capacity, activity and organization. The Boy Scouts organization is active in mine-risk education and will soon begin work with Handicap International on SA/LW risk education. The Red Crescent works with the International Committee of the Red Cross on, *inter alia*, MRE. The newer NGOs often respond to the effects of the conflict on vulnerable people, particularly children. Local NGOs are a good source for delivering messages to

women as well. By training local NGOs in SA/LW risk-education methods, DCA will complement existing community outreach programs to empower women with safety advice.

#### Conclusion

Contrary to the experience of many post-conflict settings, SA/LW did not present a threat to security in terms of crime or political stability in Misrata, Libya at the time of this assessment. However, SA/LW constituted a considerable threat to personal security, which Libyan civil society, authorities and media have recognized. While the scope of this assessment did not include other areas of the country, anecdotal evidence suggests that the situation is similar in Benghazi and, to a lesser extent, Tripoli. The immediate role of DCA and other international actors is to help Libya and its elected authorities mitigate the risk of SA/LW in this transitional period and beyond, whether SA/LW are subject to disarmament, regulated ownership or a combination of both. This is a humanitarian endeavor in every sense and follows

the mine-action mission to remove the explosive remnants of war, so that survivors may enjoy peace. As one Libyan journalist noted, "What good is freedom if one is not safe to enjoy it?"

See endnotes page 81



Adam Forbes has worked in conflict-affected countries for eight years on issues including mine action, civilian disarmament, security-sector reform and community security. He managed DanChurchAid's mine-action program in Burundi and designed DCA's global policy on Armed Violence Reduction. He works for the U.K. Department for International Development as a conflict adviser.

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