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How DTRA/SCC-WMD is Minimizing the Risk of Catastrophic Accidents Across the Globe

The U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency and the U.S. Strategic Command Center for Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction are taking measures to reduce the number of accidents caused by conventional weapons. More accidents are occurring with the proliferation of small arms and light weapons; DTRA wants to significantly reduce those accidents and the risks of their occurrence. In doing so, DTRA’s SA/LW Program organizes and conducts seminars on the practices for physical security and stockpile management throughout the world. Its goal is to educate countries through seminars on proper management of stockpiles and to ultimately assuage the risk of those weapons becoming available to insurgents.

by Anne Marek | DTRA/SCC-WMD |

On April 6, 1994, two man-portable air-defense missiles, or MANPADS, struck an aircraft in mid-air carrying the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi, causing the plane to erupt into flames and crash into the grounds of the Rwandan presidential palace. The crash killed both presidents and propelled one of the bloodiest conflicts of the late 20th century, including a Rwandan genocide that killed more than 800,000 people. Responsibility for the attack remains disputed, but the method—MANPADS, commonly referred to as shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles—demonstrates the tragic and destabilizing consequences that can occur when conventional weapons and munitions fall into dangerous hands.

During the Cold War (1945–1991), millions of small arms and light weapons—pistols, machine guns, shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles and rocket-propelled grenades—were manufactured and shipped around the world. Since then, many of these weapons have fueled local and international armed conflicts and supplied low-level terrorists and non-state actors with the ability to cause widespread casualties and economic disaster. The United Nations estimates that conventional firearms kill more than 500,000 people worldwide every year, with the bulk of these deaths occurring in conflict zones of developing regions. MANPADS have hit at least 40 civilian aircraft since the 1970s, and these weapons continue to pose a threat to commercial aviation.

DTRA’s SA/LW Program

The Defense Threat Reduction Agency’s SA/LW Program plays a critical role in reducing SA/LW across the globe. The branch assists foreign governments with improving security, safety and management of state-controlled stockpiles of SA/LW, MANPADS and conventional ammunition. SA/LW experts provide foreign governments with assessments, technical advice and orientation seminars on the best international practices for physical security and stockpile management. By securing and managing these stockpiles, the DTRAs SA/LW Program limits the availability of weapons and ammunition to terrorists and insurgents.

“Nobody has been killed by a nuclear weapon or dirty bomb in 50 years, but people get killed by small arms and light weapons on a daily basis. These weapons are much easier to acquire, conceal and transport. They are the everyday tool of a terrorist.”

~ Brett Wise, SA/LW Internal Relations Specialist and SOUTHCOM/PACOM Desk Office

DTRA helps reduce regional exposure to destabilizing cross-border weapons transfers and minimizes the risk around the world of catastrophic accidents caused by improperly storing weapons.

“The whole world is affected by the proliferation of small arms and light weapons. If it’s not a concern for tracking and tracing, it’s a concern for import and export control, or it’s a concern for illegal trafficking,” says SA/LW Branch Chief Larry Schultz. “The channels used to smuggle drugs and other illegal substances are the same channels used to smuggle weapons and ammunition.”

DTRA’s on-site Inspection Directorate first became involved in PSIM, following a deadly ammunition explosion in Guyana in 2008. Prior to this accident, the agency’s focus centered primarily on arms-control treaties and activities in the former Soviet Union. However, after the Guyana event, DTRA, with its experience in conducting military missions in sensitive environments, was asked to provide technical expertise to the U.S. Department of State to help foreign nations safely secure and store stockpiles of arms, ammunition and explosives.

Over the next few years, DTRA developed and conducted orientation seminars to assist nations with securing national SA/LW and ammunition stores. In 2006, DTRA was designated the executive agent for supporting SA/LW destruction initiatives, providing assistance to countries wishing to improve the security of their stockpiles of small arms and ammunition. Since then, the agency’s SA/LW expertise has continued to grow significantly as the types and number of missions have developed and evolved.

DTRA’s SA/LW Outreach

Currently, program requests come from a number of sources: U.S. Embassies, U.S. regional combatant commands (European Command, Central Command, Northern Command, Africa Command, Southern Command and Pacific Command), the U.S. Department of State, host nations and multilateral organizations. For each request, DTRA conducts a thorough, routine coordination process that seeks concurrence from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, appropriate staff offices and the partner country’s U.S. Embassy. Through additional coordination with the United Nations, NATO, the Multinational Small Arms and Ammunition Group, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and other nations’ arms-control and

Steps in a Small Arms and Light Weapons Request

1. SA/LW experts meet with host government.
2. Host government requests assistance.
3. SA/LW team performs assessment of host government’s munitions, weapons, storage and safety.
4. Assessment results are reported to the local U.S. Embassy.
5. The local U.S. Embassy reports assessment findings to the host government.
6. SA/LW team reports results to U.S. Department of State for funding consideration.
7. SA/LW team shares best practices with host government to correct problems.
8. Host government may implement best practices with or without funding or U.S. assistance.
doesn’t have problems.”4 For instance, a place is nice to visit doesn’t mean it have to remind people that just because Officer Brett Wise. “Sometimes we Command/Pacific Command Desk Relations Specialist and Southern Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA). the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Weapons Removal and Abatement in may receive funding from the Office of conventional weapons to the building of ranging from the destruction of con- wide. DTRA-recommended solutions, and seminars in 60 countries world- conducted PSSM assessment missions mediated many U.S. bilateral and mul- terial weapons or dirty bombs, physical security and stockpile management is a large part of what this agency does,” says SA/LW Deputy Branch Chief and European Command/Central Command Desk Officer John Schmitt. “Stockpile management of explosives can help prevent catastrophic events like Khobar Towers and the Oklahoma City bombing.”5 The program’s success is not with- out its challenges. Three of the pro- gram’s desk officers break down the six geographic combatant commands. Together, with a staff of 11, they must brief every defense attached and every security officer that enters host countries. Program desk officers must prepare personnel for what to expect when they arrive and educate them on how the SA/LW Program can assist their country with physical security and stockpile management. They must gain the trust and respect of the host country to allow them to enter the country and assess the host’s weapons and munitions. “We can’t just come in and say, ‘We want to look at all your stockpiles and possibly destroy some of them,’ because they don’t always understand why,” says Wise. “So we go into their country in a cooperative manner and tell them that we know they are the true experts of what they need for their own defense purposes. We explain that we just want to make sure that whatever they have is being se- cured properly, but that’s not always easy to do.” In 2008, DTRA approached Tanzania through the U.S. Embassy to offer an assessment of the facility in the Mbagala district of Tanzania, which had long been identified as a con- cern. However, Tanzania did not take advantage of the op- portunity. The following year, an ammunition explosion at the facility killed 26 people, injured hundreds more and de- stroyed more than 7,000 homes. DTRA offered to help the coun- try secure its facilities, but Tanzania again declined. Two years later, an army munitions bunker housing aging ammuni- tion exploded in Mbagala near the international airport. The explosion killed at least 20 peo- ple and wounded more than 100.”6 Unfortunately, this happens,” says SA/LW Africa Command Desk Officer Chandra Brown. “We offer our assistance to coun- tries, and they don’t take it. They have so many other factors

"Table 1. Destruction activities funded and administered by the U.S. Department of State.

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<th>Total Assessed (Since 2001)</th>
<th>Total Destroyed (Since 2001)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total MANPADS</td>
<td>26,607</td>
<td>32,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total SA/LW</td>
<td>1,657,500</td>
<td>1,500,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Ammunition (Tons)</td>
<td>2,686,296</td>
<td>90,000</td>
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In November 2010, DTRA U.S. Strategic Command Center for Combating Weapons of Mass Destruction Director Kenneth Myers joined U.S. Senator Richard (Dick) Lugar (R-Indiana), Assistant Secretary of Defense for Nuclear, Chemical and Biological Defense Programs Andrew C. Weber, and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Global Strategic Affairs Ken Handelma, in leading a mission to Burundi where experts from the Departments of State and Defense are working closely with the Burundian Government to destroy weapons and ammunition stockpiles through the Lugar-Obama SA/LW Destruction Program. The program is a by- product of the Nunn-Lugar Global Cooperative Threat Reduction effort that has suc- ceeded in securing, storing and eliminating weapons of mass destruction for more than two decades. “Whether we’re dealing with conven- tional weapons or dirty bombs, physical security and stockpile management is a large part of what this agency does,” says SA/LW Deputy Branch Chief and European Command/Central Command Desk Officer John Schmitt. “Stockpile management of explosives

Africa weapons storage facility, summer 2010.

SA/LW Deputy Branch Chief Larry Schultz assesses an ammunition storage site in Central America, summer 2010.
for instability—coup, changes in leadership and natural disasters—that they don’t always see us as a priority. But when they do agree to schedule a meeting with us, and they don’t cancel… when they listen to what we can do for them and seem to want to make a difference… when they actually work to make tangible improvements themselves or follow up with the State Department for assistance… that’s what I view as a success.”

In March 2011, a SA/LW team deployed to the Democratic Republic of the Congo was preparing to conduct a seminar at a base attached to the DRC presidential palace when 60 armed rebels stormed the compound in a violent attempt to assassinate President Joseph Kabila of the DRC. In a hail of gunfire, numerous soldiers and rebels were killed; the compound was closed for investigation, and the SA/LW team was forced to relocate the seminar. “We were teaching our seminar to the participants from the base that was attacked,” says SA/LW Africa Command Technical Advisor Ben Cacioppo. “With everything that had just happened, it was difficult to get their mindset back onto some of the things we were talking about … but we talked about the tragedy and what could have prevented it to re-focus them on why we were there.”

Although the global effort to secure SA/LW has increased, the threat posed by these weapons persists. Large ammunition stockpiles accumulated during the Cold War continue deteriorating around the world, and many countries, especially those without strong diplomatic ties to the United States, do not request assistance until an accident occurs. “One of the most difficult things about this program is that we can’t do an assessment until they invite us in,” says Brown. “When they do invite us in, we prefer to do our assessments first, but when that is not possible, we can use our seminars as a lead into the assessments. That way, we are informing countries that aren’t familiar with us, and don’t know why we’re there or what we’re really after, before we do the assessment. Basically, we’re trying to earn their trust and build relationships where we can.”

In coordination with multinational organizations and the arms control and verification agencies of like-minded nations, the SA/LW Program assists nations with stockpile management and building lasting relationships with the countries where it conducts missions. “It’s an education process worldwide,” says Schmitt. “It’s free for these countries for us to come in (and that’s what we try to sell them on), listen to what we have to say and if there’s a problem, we tell them how to fix it. For the most part, the solutions we offer don’t break the bank, but if you think about how much human suffering and economic turmoil that an accident in one of these places may create, our program is a real value.”

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