

How European weapons fuel armed violence in Mexico

Briefing Note



On 7 June 2023, the EU adopted its new Agenda for relations with countries from Latin America and the Caribbean, and the third EU-CELAC summit is taking place on 17-18 July 2023 with the aim to strengthen a partnership meant to be based on the shared values of democracy, human right and the rule of law, as well as to advance peace and stability worldwide⁽¹⁾. This briefing note attempts to highlight, through the telling example of Mexico, the inconsistency between the EU's claimed intentions on the one side and the reality of arms sales practices, particularly of small arms and light weapons, by European companies on the other side, which exacerbate armed violence and serious human rights violations in Mexico, as well as in the region.

From 18 to 25 February 2023, the [European Network Against Arms Trade](#) (ENAAT) and two of its national members, [Ohne Rüstung Leben](#) and [Rete Italiana Pace & Disarmo](#), took part in an International Delegation to Mexico, organised by [Stop US Arms to Mexico](#) with support of the [Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights](#) (CMDPDH).⁽²⁾

The mission confirmed that European small arms and light weapons (SALWs, mainly guns & rifles, (heavy) machine guns and ammunition) continue fuelling armed violence in Mexico and contribute to serious human rights violations impacting all of the Mexican people.

Gun violence in Mexico is estimated to have driven at least 379,000 people from their homes, killed more than 217,000 people since 2010, and forcibly disappeared over 111,000 people⁽³⁾. Between 2012 and 2021, more than two of every three homicides in Mexico were committed with firearms⁽⁴⁾, and nearly all of the weapons used in these crimes were produced in the United States and Europe. In 2021 only, 42 massive displacement episodes were registered in Mexico; in over 90% of the cases, firearms were involved. Mexico remains one of the world's most dangerous and deadly countries for journalists. Nearly 150 journalists have been murdered in Mexico since 2000 and 28 have gone missing.⁽⁵⁾ In the state of Guerrero, where violence is dire and deteriorating, 36 reporters have been forcibly displaced, three disappeared and 20 killed in the last 20 years.⁽⁶⁾

According to the 'Deadly Trade' report⁽⁷⁾, between 2006 and 2018 Europe-based arms companies exported more than 200,000 firearms to Mexico for use by state and municipal police in Mexico's 32 states; during the same period state violence and homicides have increased dramatically. More than half of the weapons sold between 2006 and 2018 came from just two companies: *Beretta* (based in Italy) and *Glock* (based in Austria). This is followed by companies from Germany, the Czech Republic, Belgium or Spain.

The municipal police involved in the enforced disappearance of 43 students in Ayotzinapa had 73 Beretta assault rifles. The FN Five-seveN gun is popular among 'narcos' and known as the 'cop-killer'. Heckler & Koch illegally sold thousands of assault rifles to Guerrero, Jalisco, Chiapas & Chihuahua states

European weapons have been used by the police in multiple serious human rights violations, including the enforced disappearance of the 43 students in Ayotzinapa; the municipal police involved at the time had 73 *Beretta* assault rifles. *Beretta* weapons also find their way into the illegal market, for example between 2010 and 2020, more than 2,700 illegal firearms recovered by the Mexican army were identified as Italian.

Mexican authorities also reported having recovered 180 *FN* weapons from crime scenes across the country: the three main models were precisely the main models received by the police, in particular the *FN Five-SeveN*. This model has the ability to pierce bulletproof vests from a distance of 200m, which explains the interest of the police but also why it is widely used by organised crime and 'narcos' (drug dealers), where it is known as the "cop killer".

One of the most known cases is *Heckler & Koch*. Between 2006 and 2009, *Heckler & Koch* exported more than 10,000 G36 assault rifles and spare parts to Mexico. The rifles were destined for police units in different Mexican states. Due to human rights concerns, four states (Guerrero, Jalisco, Chiapas and Chihuahua) were not supposed to be supplied with weapons according to the official German arms export licences. However, since 2010, journalists, human rights and peace activists revealed that nearly half of all exported G36s ended up in exactly these states. This ultimately led to the criminal conviction in 2019 of former *H&K* employees due to illegal arms exports. One case which shows the devastating consequences of these scandalous arms transfers is the Ayotzinapa case. Police forces in Iguala, Guerrero used G-36 rifles in the attack on students of the Ayotzinapa Normal School in September 2014.

These are just a few examples of the impact of European weapons on the human rights situation in Mexico ; there are more cases in the 'Deadly Trade' report and certainly still many more unknown, given how difficult it is to document such cases and identify the weapons. It is also important to underline that these weapons do not only make direct victims, but also many indirect victims, in particular family members as we have experienced throughout this mission, and in the very long term as the suffering and the social and economic consequences continue impacting throughout generations.

In the last few years, there has been a significant reduction in the number of licences/authorisations and their value since 2018 according to official data from European governments. However, the Mexican state reports under the Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) provide interesting details.

From 2019 to 2021, the latest year with available data, a total of 40,644 SALWs have been sold legally from Europe to Mexico, but in 2019 and 2020, the majority was for "civilian" (private) use, such as hunting, sporting use or for home protection, and for which export requirements are less stringent than for military grade equipment. 16,249 (40%) were for military use and public security.

From 2019 to 2021, Mexico imported a total of 125,670 firearms, rifles and machine-guns of Europe-owned brands. Less than a third (40,644) were directly exported from Europe. The rest went through non-EU countries, mainly the US

The ATT reports of Mexico also show that most of the European weapons legally entering Mexico actually go through third countries, either through re-export, through the retail market, or through plants in third countries, in particular the US: for the same period (2019-2021), the Mexican government reports having imported a total of 125,670 firearms, rifles and machine-guns of Europe-owned brands, whatever the channel.

The main European arms companies have manufacturing plants in the US (Beretta, Glock, Sig Sauer, FN America...) or have bought US companies (Colt CZ) They can circumvent European arms exports control systems

Indeed the main European firearms companies have established manufacturing plants in the United States, among them *Beretta* (Italy), *Glock* (Austria), *Sig Sauer* (Germany) and *FN America* (Belgium), from where they can send weapons to Mexico without having to abide by EU norms. Yet those plants are still European through the holdings they belong to, and profits end-up in European pockets, even public ones in the case of *FN*. Others like *Colt* have been bought by Europe-based holdings.

To add on, European-brand firearms are also sold to private individuals on the US retail market every year, and many are then being trafficked across the border into Mexico. Between 70 to 90% of guns recovered at crime scenes in Mexico can be traced back to the U.S.⁽⁸⁾ This means that the number of European-brand weapons present in Mexico is much larger than the official figures reported by our governments. European-brand firearms can have devastating consequences on both sides of the border. In the last 40 years, in 45% of school shootings in the US, the perpetrator carried a European brand weapon⁽⁹⁾.

During this mission we raised our concerns with European representatives in Mexico, namely the Belgian embassy and the EU delegation (A meeting with the German embassy was not possible and the meeting with the Italian embassy had to be cancelled from our end). The general outcome is one of limited if not complete lack of interest in addressing this issue, unless it is connected with drug trafficking affecting Europe directly. European governments and the EU are conveniently getting rid of responsibility for weapons going through the US market or illicit trafficking, and generally transferring responsibility about tracing and control to Mexican authorities despite knowing the levels of corruption, collusion and lack of capacities.

Faced with the multiplicity of channels through which European arms enter Mexico, it is of particular importance that arms companies are held accountable throughout the entire value chain of their activities, including downstream. The very nature of the armament sector makes this trade particularly complex and opaque, the reason why the arms industry must fully fall under the scope of the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence (CSDD) directive, currently under negotiation.⁽¹⁰⁾

The case of Mexico is emblematic of the fact that the current arms export control systems are far from guaranteeing a responsible arms trade. The EU Council position on the CSDD Directive, calling for excluding arms companies from its scope in the case of licensed arms exports, is all the more shocking that the Mexican government itself is calling for considering the arms industry as a risky sector in the international scene.

European countries and companies alike do have a responsibility to decide whether or not to fuel the dramatic level of violence in Mexico which is impacting all levels of Mexican society, but in particular local communities, journalists and human rights defenders.

Europe is conveniently transferring responsibility to the US market and Mexican authorities; yet by continuing to send firearms and ammunition to Mexico, we are accomplices of those crimes against the Mexican people.

By continuing to send small arms, light weapons and ammunition to Mexico, whatever the channel is, both EU countries and companies are conscious accomplices of those crimes against the Mexican people.

Recommendations to the EU and the Member States:

- EU member states should stop exporting small arms and light weapons, including civilian firearms, to Mexico, as the EU Common Position prohibits export of small arms to nations where they would prolong violent conflict or be used in human rights violations, and asks to consider the risk of diversion. These conditions clearly exist in Mexico and justify suspending exports until the situation improves.
- EU countries should hold accountable EU-based holdings which own firearms companies in the US, or any other non-EU country, to abide by the norms of the Common position including for their non-EU plants, in order to curb the flow of European-brand firearms to Mexico, and remain consistent with their commitment for a responsible legal trade of SALWs taken in the 2018 EU Strategy⁽¹¹⁾
- The European parliament and the EU Council should ensure that the entire value chain of the arms sector be included in the due diligence obligations set out by the CSDD Directive being revised, regardless of whether these activities, products or business relations are subject to national export controls in EU Member States.

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For more information about the February 2023 International Delegation mission:

Read the full report of the International Delegation of February 2023:

<https://stopusarmstomexico.org/international-delegation-report/>

Watch the video ‘[US and Mexico: the same guns are killing us](#)’, and all the [testimonies of the Mexican people and members of the International Delegation](#)

(1) EU-CELAC background brief: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/65859/20230714-eu-celac-background-brief.pdf>

(2) International Delegation press release: (25/02/23): <https://stopusarmstomexico.org/delegation-statement-25feb2023/>

(3) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kpEkw8PUn4&list=PLMwQNaHQ-zRq8QHG2hSQL-XvxDUMJh-Yk&index=13>

(4) CMDPDH. La Guerra interiorizada: de los crímenes internacionales a la vida pública de México (2006-2021). January 2023, p. 4. Available at: <https://cmdpdh.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Informe-Guerra-Interiorizada.pdf>

(5) <https://rsf.org/en/country/mexico>

(6) Report of the International Delegation: <https://stopusarmstomexico.org/international-delegation-report/>; this was before the killing of Nelson Matus Peña on 15 July 2023

(7) A research conducted prior to the COVID crisis, and meant to be the basis of the Delegation mission first planned in 2020: <https://stopusarmstomexico.org/deadly-trade/>

(8) <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2022/02/stopping-toxic-flow-of-gun-traffic-from-u-s-to-mexico/>

(9) <https://interaktiv.tagesspiegel.de/waffen/europaeische-waffen-amerikanische-opfer/>

(10) [https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2022/0051\(COD\)&l=en](https://oeil.secure.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/popups/ficheprocedure.do?reference=2022/0051(COD)&l=en)

(11) EU Strategy against illicit Firearms, Small Arms & Light Weapons and their Ammunition JOIN(2018)17