

Nordics set sights on tighter gun control

Written by AFP / The Swedish Wire

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- [Norway vows not to change after attacks - but fears it must](#)

In the Nordic countries, where hunting is popular and firearms are plentiful, the twin July 22 attacks that killed 77 people in Norway have spurred lawmakers to consider tighter gun laws.

But change will not come without resistance in a region where hunting is viewed by many as a cultural heritage passed down from Viking ancestors, and sport shooting is a favourite pastime.

Finland, which has one of the world's highest gun ownership rates at 1.5 million firearms for 5.3 million people, has reopened the debate on arms control just two months after new, stricter laws raised the firearm licence age from 15 to 20 for short weapons and 18 for hunting guns.

"No one in a country like Finland needs to have a gun at home," Foreign Minister Erkki Tuomioja said days after Anders Behring Breivik shot dead 69 people, many of them teenagers, in a rampage on the island of Utoeya after killing eight others in a bombing of government offices in Oslo.

Up to June this year, Finns as young as 15 could own guns, but the law was changed after the country was rattled to the core by two school shootings within the space of a year.

In November 2007, 18-year-old Pekka Eric Auvinen shot dead eight people at a high school in Jokela, north of Helsinki, before turning the gun on himself.

And in September 2008, 22-year-old culinary arts student Matti Saari killed 10 people in a classroom in the small town of Kauhajoki before committing suicide.

Reeling from their own encounters with senseless gun violence, many Finns experienced the tragedy in neighbouring Norway as another assault on their own security and the traditionally peaceful region as a whole.

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Since then, Tuomioja has insisted that access to guns be further restricted, suggesting that "gun hobbyists and hunters could store their weapons with supervised and registered gun clubs" instead of at home.

Similar calls for stricter legislation have been heard in Norway of course, but also in Denmark, Iceland and Sweden.

But not all are in favour.

"There is no legislation that could stop a man willing, as the case was in Norway, to spend nine years of his life to prepare for his attacks," Erik Lakomaa of the Swedish National Shooting Association said in a television debate, insisting there was no reason to change the law.

With a population of 9.4 million people, Sweden counts about two million guns and 190,000 members of the national hunter's federation each permitted to own up to six firearms.

But according to Lakomaa, "the easiest way to get hold of weapons today is on the illegal market," where he suggested police should focus their efforts.

Matti Roponen, who heads the Finnish Game Management Association, agreed that tighter legislation was not the answer.

"The people who do these horrible things are not the ones who are active in gun clubs or hunting clubs. That's where responsible use is taught," he told AFP.

A case in point: 32-year-old rightwing extremist Behring Breivik obtained the guns he used for his attack through legal channels.

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Norway responded to the rampage by saying its regulations had been too lax, and police chief Oeystein Maeland called for an immediate tightening of access to semi-automatic firearms like the ones Behring Breivik used on Utoeya.

It is legal to hunt with such guns in Norway, which has a million guns for a population of nearly five million.

A committee set up before the attacks to evaluate Norwegian gun laws is set to present its findings by December 1.

There have also been calls for tighter gun laws in Denmark, under threat of attack ever since the daily Jyllands-Posten published controversial caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed in 2005.

Since the Norway attacks, Denmark's centre-left opposition, leading in polls ahead of general elections for which a date have to be set by November, has said it wants to ban reserve soldiers from storing their service weapons at home.

Denmark's 5.5 million inhabitants own about 750,000 guns.

Sweden, which has experienced several devastating shootings in recent decades, including the 1986 murder of prime minister Olof Palme and two separate cases of random immigrant shootings, already has strict gun laws.

The country is studying how better to coordinate the fight against illegal arms smuggling, Ann-Sofie Bodin, a justice ministry expert, told AFP.

In Iceland, which has largely been spared the traumatising gun violence seen among its Nordic neighbours, the interior ministry recently commissioned an evaluation of existing laws to determine if they are strict enough.

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Iceland's 320,000 inhabitants own about 60,000 guns,

But Reykjavik police chief Geir Jon Thorisson has already called for tougher regulations for weapons storage at home, and has told AFP: "We also need a ceiling on the number of weapons each person can own."