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OA/ID Number: 18930

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China Ban '95

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Section:
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1

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January 28, 1993, Thursday, Final Edition

SECTION: METRO; PAGE B4

LENGTH: 771 words

HEADLINE: Power, Price and Availability Make Assault Weapons Popular;
Shop Owners Say Rifles Are a Favorite of Collectors, Target Shooters

SERIES: Occasional

BYLINE: Robert O'Harrow Jr., Bill Miller, Washington Post Staff Writers

BODY:

AK-47s and other assault-type weapons are favorites of gun collectors and target shooters in the Washington area, say local gun shop owners. The guns are powerful, relatively cheap and easy to buy -- especially in Virginia, where such a weapon was used to kill two men and wound three others Monday outside the CIA's Langley headquarters.

"People are intrigued by things that operate mechanically," William Printz, owner of Potomac Trading gun shop in Kensington, said about customers for the rifles. "You'd be amazed at how many people buy [such guns] for hunting It's a bargain."

But gun-control advocates say the weapons, originally designed for the military, should not be in the hands of civilians.

Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms officials said assault weapons also are often a favorite of criminals.

According to ATF statistics, assault weapons make up less than 3 percent of the 200 million guns owned by Americans. But they account for 6 percent to 10 percent of the weapons used in crimes, an agency spokesman said.

Monday's victims were in their cars at a stoplight on Dolley Madison Boulevard (Route 123), waiting to turn into the CIA complex. A man climbed out of his car, walked between the two lanes of stopped vehicles and began firing, witnesses said. He is still at large.

Based on shell casings found at the scene, police have identified the weapon used as one of three types of AK-47-style rifle. Witnesses described the gun used by the killer as similar to semiautomatic assault weapons that can be purchased at many area gun shops.

Susan Whitmore, a spokeswoman for Handgun Control Inc., which has lobbied to ban the sale of assault weapons, said the shooting reinforced arguments that there is no legitimate reason for such guns to be sold to private citizens.

"They are killing machines, designed for combat. They are designed to mow down human beings as quickly and effectively as possible," Whitmore said. "These aren't being sold to Joe Average Hunter. You don't see hunters going into the woods to spray deer. These appeal to very disturbed people."

James Baker, chief lobbyist for the National Rifle Association, said yesterday that calls for bans on assault weapons are misguided because a "minuscule percentage" of the hundreds of thousands of assault rifles in the country are used by criminals.

Baker said Monday's killer just as easily could have used a handgun, a type of weapon used far more often than rifles in the commission of crimes. "We don't believe we ought to base our criminal laws on the choices of a homicidal maniac," Baker said.

Gun shop owners insist that incidents such as the CIA shootings distort the real story about who owns assault weapons and how they are normally used.

Many of the owners are weekend "plinkers" who go out to empty fields and shoot targets, said Steve Richards, owner of Potomac Arms Corp. in Alexandria. Other gun owners, including lawyers, doctors and other professionals, like to collect them, he said. "They'll last forever," Richards said.

Among the favorite assault weapons are the AK-47-type rifles. Usually made in China or Russia, the guns are dependable and have magazines that hold as many as 30 rounds, he said. They cost \$ 300 to \$ 700.

Since an import ban was imposed in 1989, they have been a bit harder to find, shop owners said. Importation of the rifles was banned after the shooting deaths of five children in a California schoolyard. Gun dealers are allowed to sell guns already in the country.

A more popular version now is the SKS, a Chinese rifle that sells for as little as \$ 90 in area gun stores. It is essentially the same gun as the AK-47, shop owners say, but doesn't have a removable magazine and can shoot 10

rounds. Who buys such guns?

"Pretty much everybody," said Robb Roudabush, owner of Old Town Armory in Alexandria. He said the SKS is popular with deer hunters on a budget. "It's an accurate fire. It's inexpensive and it's effective on deer."

Before the 1989 ban, U.S. companies were importing about 130,000 AK-47-style rifles a year, said Bob Lesmeister, manager of the National Association of Federally Licensed Firearms Dealers.

The weapons are still available in most gun shops, and in Virginia they can be purchased and taken home the same day. In Maryland, buyers must wait seven days before taking the weapons home. No licenses are needed in either state. Such weapons are illegal in the District.

Printz said many people don't even shoot their guns. "They buy them to look at," he said.

Staff writer Pierre Thomas contributed to this report.

GRAPHIC: ILLUSTRATION, ASSAULT RIFLE FATAL SHOOTINGS, TWP; CHART, CAMILLE ROSE

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH