Amnesty International ARMS CONTROL

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Reckless arms trading devastates lives. Weapons and ammunition are produced and sold in shockingly large quantities.

Twelve billion bullets are produced every year. That is almost enough to kill everyone in the world twice. Every day, thousands of people are killed, injured and forced to flee their homes because of gun violence and armed conflict.

A global Arms Trade Treaty (ATT) imposing strict rules to regulate international arms transfers has been in force for over five years, yet global arms trading is still on the rise and continues to fuel human rights abuses. This is because some of the largest arms exporters like Russia and the USA have not ratified the treaty. And even countries that have ratified the treaty fail to comply with it, and transfer weapons and munitions to places where they risk being used to commit serious violations of international humanitarian law, including possible war crimes.

Civilians typically bear the brunt of modern conflict. Weapons such as artillery, mortars, guided bombs and missiles destroy hospitals, homes, markets and transport systems, pushing survivors into poverty. People's lives are destroyed. This is the cost of an unregulated arms trade industry.

Irresponsible arms trading affects those living inside and outside areas of armed conflict and political instability. Gun violence is a daily tragedy that impacts people around the world, the vast majority of whom are not living in conflict zones. Globally, more than 500 people die every day because of violence committed by firearms**.**

That's why Amnesty is campaigning to stop the unregulated flow of all weapons, whether that be an unregistered hand-gun in the United States or combat aircraft in Yemen or Syria.

Case Study – Saudi coalition in Yemen

The war in Yemen continues to destroy the lives of civilians years after Huthi forces took over the country's capital Sana'a in 2015. Shortly after the fall of Sana'a, a Saudi-led coalition intervened to restore the country's UN-recognized government.

Since the outbreak of the conflict, civilians have borne the brunt of the violence in Yemen. As well as causing thousands of deaths and injuries, the parties to the conflict have exacerbated an already severe humanitarian crisis resulting from years of poverty and poor governance causing immense human suffering.

Gross human rights violations have been committed by all sides in the conflict. The Saudi-led coalition has carried out numerous indiscriminate and disproportionate air strikes in civilian areas, hitting homes, schools, hospitals, markets, mosques, weddings and funerals. Similarly, Amnesty International has documented cases of Huthi forces indiscriminately shelling civilian areas and using imprecise weapons.

The conflict in Yemen has largely been fuelled by a collection of countries that continue to supply arms to the Saudi-led coalition forces. These sales already amount to more than US$18 billion since the beginning of the conflict.

Given the substantial risk that these arms will be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law, states are strictly forbidden under the Arms Trade Treaty – as well as EU and domestic law – to continue supplying arms to Coalition members for use in Yemen.

Amnesty International is campaigning to stop these arms flows. As result of intense pressure from activists around the world, many countries across Europe have announced suspensions of future weapons sales. However, many of the largest arms exporters, including the UK, France and the USA, continue to flout international law and their own domestic legislation by continuing to supply military equipment to Saudi Arabia and other Coalition members.

The Arms Trade Treaty

After more than 20 years of campaigning by Amnesty International and partner NGOs, the Arms Trade Treaty became international law on 24 December 2014.

Any state that is a party to the treaty must obey strict rules on international arms transfers. The Treaty was designed to stop deadly weapons from getting into the hands of people who will use them to commit human rights violations, including genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.

More than 100 countries have joined the Treaty, and there are over 30 more who have signed the treaty which is the first step towards becoming a party to the ATT.

The Treaty can help save lives, but only if it is properly implemented, and if states are held accountable when they breach it.

The International Arms Industry

It is estimated that the total value of the global arms trade is at least $95bn. While states, as the licensers of arms transfers, play a key role in the trade, the defence industry is deeply involved in all aspects of the supply of weapons around the world.

Every year corporate actors supply large volumes of military equipment to some of the most violent and unstable parts of the world. This equipment is often used unlawfully in the context of armed conflicts and in political unrest marred by serious human rights violations.

In September 2019, Amnesty contacted 22 arms companies asking them to explain how they meet their responsibilities to respect human rights in their business. None of them were able to provide an adequate response.

Many defence companies continue to profit from the sale of arms which are used to commit serious violations of human rights or humanitarian law.

In any situation where it is impossible to avert the risks that arms will be used to commit human rights abuses, companies should stop supplying weapons altogether.

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Amnesty International UK marked the 4th anniversary of Yemen conflict by driving a 1/6th scale replica Eurofighter Typhoon jet with Paveway IV missiles around UK Parliament – the same weapons used by Saudi Arabia to carry out air strikes in Yemen that are still being sold by UK.

Indiscriminate Weapons

It is illegal to use weapons that are inherently indiscriminate, cannot be directed at a specific military objective or whose effects cannot be limited as required by international humanitarian law. This is because their use makes it almost inevitable that civilians and civilian infrastructure (homes, hospitals and schools) will be harmed or destroyed.

Cluster Bombs

Cluster bombs and munitions can contain hundreds of submunitions, which are released mid-air, and scatter indiscriminately over an area measuring hundreds of square metres. They can be dropped or fired from a plane or launched from surface-to-surface rockets.

Cluster submunitions also have a high “dud” rate which means a high percentage of them fail to explode on impact. This unexploded ordnance poses a threat to people years after the bomb was dropped.

The use, production, sale and transfer of cluster munitions is prohibited under the 2008 Convention on Cluster Munitions, which has more than 100 states parties.

Anti-personnel Landmines

Anti-personnel landmines are explosive devices designed to automatically detonate when someone approaches them. They are usually triggered when stepped on or via a trip wire. Landmines can lie waiting for decades, meaning that they can still maim, injure or kill people years after the conflict has ended.

Once triggered, the blast can destroy multiple limbs, projecting debris that showers the victims with fragments that can cause deep wounds.

It is impossible to know how many mines are in the ground worldwide, because they can remain undetected until the moment they detonate. However, the scale of the problem can be measured by the number of landmines that have already been discovered and disabled. 53 million mines have been destroyed since the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention was adopted in 1997. While this is undoubtedly a remarkable accomplishment, there is still work to be done. As of November 2018, 56 countries have identified areas that are at a high risk of being contaminated by anti-personnel mines.

As a member of the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Amnesty International urges all governments to ban the use, production, stockpiling, sale, transfer or export of anti-personnel landmines and become party to, implement, and monitor the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty.

Nuclear Weapons

Nuclear weapons are the most destructive, inhumane and indiscriminate weapons ever created; both in terms of the scale of the immediate devastation they cause and the threat of a uniquely persistent, pervasive and genetically damaging radioactive fallout.

On 7 July 2017, the United Nations adopted the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, a treaty that outlaws nuclear weapons, ushering in a new era of nuclear non-proliferation and abolition.

Amnesty International supports the work of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons to help get states to become party to this treaty and monitor its implementation.

Chemical Weapons

Chemical weapons are defined as chemicals that are used to cause intentional harm or death through the use of toxic properties. This not only includes the toxic chemicals themselves, but also equipment such as mortars, artillery shells and bombs specifically designed to inflict harm through the delivery of those chemicals to inflict harm. These weapons are banned by the Chemical Weapons Convention that entered into force in 1997.

Case Study: Chemical Weapons in Darfur

In 2016, Amnesty uncovered evidence suggesting that the Sudanese government was using chemical weapons against its own people. Using a combination of satellite imagery, photos of injuries and more than 200 in-depth interviews with survivors, the investigation found that at least 30 chemical attacks had been carried out in Jebel Marra, one of the most remote parts of Darfur. Some 200-250 people died as a result.

Victims of the attacks suffered from horrifying injuries, including loss of vision, respiratory problems, bloody vomiting and diarrhoea, blisters and rashes. To make matters worse, most of the people exposed to these dangerous chemicals – many of them children – had no access to adequate medical care.

Killer Robots

Killer robots, or autonomous weapons systems, are no longer the stuff of science fiction.

Some countries – including China, Israel, South Korea, Russia, the UK, the USA – are already developing weapons with increasing autonomy, taking humans out of important life and death decisions. These weapon systems raise various moral, legal, accountability, and security concerns.

Killer robots without human control would lack the human judgment necessary to apply the law when using force. They could make tragic mistakes and jeopardize civilian lives. Allowing robots to have power over life-and-death decisions also crosses a fundamental moral line.

It’s unclear who, if anyone, would be held responsible for unlawful acts of killer robots: the programmer, manufacturer, commander or police officer. The use of fully autonomous weapons without meaningful human control could create an accountability gap if the weapons are designed to make their own determinations about the use of force, making it difficult to ensure justice, especially for victims.

Amnesty and its partners in the Campaign to Stop Killer Robots are calling for a new, binding international instrument that ensures meaningful human control is retained over the use of force by prohibiting the development, production, and use of fully autonomous weapons**.**

What is Amnesty doing about the arms trade?

Using a global network of activists who specialize in human rights issues related to the arms trade, Amnesty continues to put pressure on governments and companies until they stop selling weapons illegally. Amnesty’s digital verification and weapon experts work to identify munitions and other remnants of weapons so that we can trace them back to their original source; while Amnesty International’s legal experts have supported efforts to stop irresponsible arms supplies through the courts.

Amnesty International and other human rights NGOs are supporting the Campaign against the Arms Trade in a legal challenge to stop the UK government from supplying arms in Yemen. In June 2019, the UK Court of Appeal found that the UK government’s decision to continue licensing exports of military equipment to Saudi Arabia was unlawful. As a result, the UK government was forced to stop issuing new licences for arms exports to Saudi Arabia.

In a much-needed step towards corporate accountability in the defence sector, Amnesty supported a joint communication to the International Criminal Court by the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights (ECCHR). The communication calls for an ICC investigation into the role of European arms companies in aiding and abetting alleged war crimes in Yemen. The organization is also using open-source information to find imagery of weapons and vehicles being used to commit human rights abuses during the conflict and tracing them back to French arms manufacturers, as well as documenting Bulgarian, Serbian, US and Finnish small arms and armoured vehicles being used by unaccountable UAE-backed forces in Yemen.

In other work, Amnesty International has successfully campaigned for the imposition of an arms embargo on war-torn South Sudan; documented arms embargo violations in Libya; and civilian casualties that resulted from US drone strikes in Somalia.

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