

Amnesty International (London)

Africa: Global Arms Trade Treaty - a Beginners' Guide

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INTERVIEW

It all started in the early 1990's in a small office in central London, where a group of Amnesty International and NGO activists and then lawyers spent days trying to find a legal route to stop the lethal consequences of the uncontrolled arms trade - an Arms Trade Treaty or ATT.

Nearly a quarter of a century on - these things take time - a weaker version of that first proposal is before the United Nations, and just a few steps away from becoming an international treaty which could change the lives of millions.

Amnesty International's arms expert Brian Wood explains how the uncontrolled flow of arms is ruining millions of lives, decimating entire communities and why the negotiations taking place this month at the United Nations in New York are potentially historic.



Photo: Siegfried Modola/IRIN

The availability of arms is cause for concern.

The international trade in arms was estimated to be worth around 100 billion US dollars in 2012 alone, up from 80 billion US dollars a couple of years earlier so it's growing fast.

And if you add on all the related services, including military and construction for example, its worth is of around 120 billion US dollars.

It is a trade of very dangerous, very deadly products, designed to kill and maim. Because it's not controlled very strictly and very carefully, millions of people are getting maimed and killed.

So, how many people are dying each year due to arms?

It is estimated that roughly half a million people are killed every year with firearms. People are killed in the battlefield as well as by state repression and criminal gangs.

Many other millions around the world die because they are being denied access to health care, water or food as they are trapped in conflicts fuelled by the uncontrolled flow of arms. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, it is estimated more than five million people have died indirectly because of the armed conflict since 1998.

And of course it's not only a question of death. For every person that is killed in an armed conflict, you have to count the many more that are injured and tortured, abused, forcibly disappeared and taken hostage through armed conflict and armed violence.

The problem is absolutely massive and it can destroy every area of people's lives and livelihoods.

Who is particularly affected by the uncontrolled flow of arms?

Women are greatly affected, in ways that often are invisible and not talked about very much.

In Guinea, for example, we heard the story of a woman who was raped by a soldier while another one was holding a gun to her head. This sort of violence can happen on a massive scale.

You can also see a disproportionate effect on children and young people. In some countries, children are recruited into the armed forces and to armed groups and forced to fight.

Who is responsible for this situation?

The five permanent members of the UN Security Council - the United States of America, Russia, China, France and the United Kingdom - are the largest arms traders. Germany, Israel, Italy, Sweden, South Africa, Spain, Belgium and Ukraine are also large arms traders.

And you have the large importers of arms, including India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and others.

What about businesses, aren't they responsible too?

It's true that a lot of the arms trade is carried out by commercial entities, by companies and service providers, arms brokers and dealers and those who transport the arms as well as the companies that make them.

It is quite a big industry but the primary responsibility always rests with the governments and the states. Only they can regulate, or even prohibit, the trade. The problem is that over time the design and enforcement of laws have simply not been good enough.

What is the Arms Trade Treaty and how can it make a difference?

The ATT at the moment is a draft text that aims to create common standards and common rules to better regulate the international flow of arms so as to reduce human suffering.

There are so many laws and regulations across the world and so many loopholes that the arms trade treaty is vital is to create common standards, common rules and to get states to completely reform their control systems and to work together to bring the trade under very strict regulation.

How would it be possible to ensure governments will respect the treaty?

All we can do at the moment to convince states is to agree to an annual reporting system with frequent meetings between heads of states where they can put pressure on each other to find out whether they are acting responsibly.

If they accuse each other of violating the treaty, it would require a mechanism for arbitration and mediation, or the matter would come under the International Court of Justice.

Eventually, what we want to see is a body that can mount investigations. Arms go missing a lot - particularly small arms and ammunition.

There was a big conference last July to agree on a treaty, why didn't it happen?

The reason why it wasn't agreed is that the conference would be run under the consensus rule - in the UN that means that no one state seriously objects to something.

On the last day, the US government said they had some technical problems with the text, then Russia followed suit, as did China and a small group of countries who are against the idea of an arms trade treaty. They managed to block things procedurally so the whole thing timed out.

We then had to get governments to agree to another conference to re-start the negotiations. And the conference to finalize and agree the text will take place this month in New York.

The treaty won't be perfect, it only covers transfers of arms between countries and not domestic internal gun sales, and of course the treaty is not going to resolve the problem of the misuse of guns, but it's a start, it will be a historic landmark and fill in a gap in the global legal system that compromises everybody's safety and security.

An arms transfer is a shipment of weapons and ammunition from one country to another but China wants to exclude "gifts" and the US wants to exclude ammunition.

What will happen at the United Nation's meeting in March?

Between 18 and 28 March, there will be nine days of negotiations. States will go through the proposed text of the treaty, paragraph by paragraph. The final proposal will be put to the conference, and, if no one state has big objections, it should be adopted. If not the UN General Assembly can vote it through.

So by the end of the conference or soon after, we should have an arms trade treaty, which would be a massive historical step. Then states would have to ratify it and bring it to their national legislation. Whether the treaty will have adequate rules still depends on political will and therefore what global civil society can do to generate that will.

THE WORLD'S FIVE BIGGEST ARMS DEALERS

China

Accounts for an estimated 3 per cent of the global conventional arms trade.

Key customers

Often developing countries with poor human rights records, including Algeria, Angola, Bangladesh, DRC, Guinea, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kenya, Libya, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Zimbabwe.

Irresponsible arms transfers

Supplies ammunition for small arms to Sudan, used by security forces and militia in Darfur. Supplied rockets and anti-vehicle mines to Libya under Colonel Mu'ammār al-Gaddafi, and ammunition, rocket-propelled grenades, mortar bombs and mortar launchers to Zimbabwe.

France

The value of France's conventional arms exports ranks third globally behind the USA and Russia.

Key customers

Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, Greece, other NATO partners, Middle Eastern, North African and other Francophone countries. France and Russia have recently started co-operating on defence and exchanging naval equipment.

Irresponsible arms transfers

Generally supportive of strict arms transfer criteria, but has supplied arms to countries where serious human rights violations could be committed, including Libya under al-Gaddafi, Egypt and Chad, and Syria between 2005 and 2009.

Russia

Russia is the world's second largest arms trader by value of exports, and an influential ATT negotiator.

Key customers

India, Syria, Algeria, Myanmar, Venezuela, Sudan and many African states. Having fallen behind in key technologies, it is now seeking sophisticated partners and new markets.

Irresponsible transfers

Ten per cent of all Russian arms exports are believed to go to Syria, making it Syria's largest arms supplier. Transfers include anti-tank missiles and MIG jet fighters. Russia supplies helicopter gunships to Sudan, used to attack civilians in Darfur and Southern Kordofan.

UK

The value of the UK's conventional arms exports consistently ranks third, fourth or fifth globally.

Key customers

The USA, India, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, other NATO partners, other countries in the Middle East, North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa.

Irresponsible transfers

The UK generally supports strict criteria for arms transfers, but has supplied arms to countries with a high risk of serious human rights violations, including Sri Lanka.

UK national legislation is being reviewed following evidence that it supplied small arms, ammunition, munitions and armoured vehicle equipment to Libya under al-Gaddafi, small arms to Bahrain and law enforcement equipment to Yemen.

USA

The USA is by far the world's largest arms trader, accounting for around 30 per cent of conventional arms transfers in terms of value. Its position on the ATT is therefore key.

Key customers

The USA supplies arms to more than 170 countries. It has restricted arms transfers to Myanmar, China, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe and countries subject to UN arms embargoes. However, it has supplied arms to countries including Sri Lanka, Bahrain, Egypt and Yemen, where they risk being used for serious human rights violations.

Irresponsible transfers

The USA is Egypt's main arms supplier, selling small arms, ammunition and chemical agents for riot control, despite the violent crackdown on protesters. It also supplied Yemen with small arms, chemical agents and armoured vehicles, and Bahrain with small arms.

It provides Colombia's security forces with arms, military aid and training, despite their persistent human rights violations.

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