

Britain's Weapons' Exports: It's thriving, but lethal

Britain's decade of arms exports puts the lie to any notion of an ethical foreign policy under Blair

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Global Research, May 31, 2009

The Guardian 31 May 2009

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#)

Three months before his election in 1997, Tony Blair wrote in BAE Systems' newsletter that his government would champion arms exports and a "strong defence industry". That, despite the hoopla surrounding the idea of an "ethical" foreign policy, was always the prime minister's ambition. A decade on, a new set of figures reveals the devastating extent to which he has succeeded. Yesterday's report by the NGO Saferworld documents the £45bn worth of arms delivered by Britain in the past 10 years, making us the world's second-largest arms exporter. In the past three years, arms have been exported to 19 of the 20 countries identified in the Foreign Office's annual human rights report as "countries of concern". The Colombian military and its paramilitary allies have killed thousands of people in the country's civil war. Yet last year Britain exported armoured all-wheel-drive vehicles, military communications equipment and heavy machine guns, alongside a military aid programme. Indonesia has received more than £400m worth of military equipment since 1997, while using British military equipment for internal repression on a dozen known occasions.

Britain has exported more than £110m worth of military equipment to Israel during its occupation of Palestinian territories and war with Lebanon. Exports doubled in 2001, as Israeli offensive military operations were stepped up on the West Bank. Another growth market is China. Despite an EU arms embargo, Britain has managed to export £500m worth of military and dual-use equipment - nominally "non-lethal" items. These include components for tanks, components for combat aircraft, and military communications equipment.

Over the past four years, 199 export licences have been approved to the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands and the Channel Islands - territories without armies. The equipment includes small arms and ammunition, anti-riot shields, CS hand grenades, crowd-control ammunition and even nuclear, biological, chemical filters and respirators (for the Cayman Islands). It is anybody's guess where this equipment is destined. And this could be just the tip of the iceberg. Government statistics show the destination of only a quarter of all arms exports - the public are not told where the rest goes.

Government policies to tighten exports, such as banning the export of torture equipment and landmines, have been minor in comparison. The government trumpets an international arms trade treaty since it would require no further restrictions on its arms exports. Ministers have stressed that the treaty should not impinge on the "legitimate arms trade", and even that it "could benefit the defence industry".

Arms exports are thriving not because of any domestic economic benefits. Academic research shows that the public subsidises arms sales by between half a billion and a billion pounds annually – far outweighing any economic stimulus they provide. What drives the growth is that arms sales support foreign policy by strengthening relations with key allies, who are often repressive elites. But there is also a huge influence wielded by big arms corporations, as reflected in the “revolving door” between them and the Ministry of Defence. At least 19 senior MoD officials have taken jobs with arms companies since 1997, while 38 out of 79 personnel secondees to the MoD between 1997 and 2003 came from arms companies.

A truly ethical foreign policy would see the shutdown of Britain’s arms export industry. But, at the very least, it must be held up to public scrutiny and forced to halt exports to states abusing human rights.

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