

UN's Big Five Facilitate Arms Transfers to Human Rights Violators

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UNITED NATIONS – The five permanent members of the Security Council – the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China – are accused of facilitating the transport of conventional weapons and cluster munitions to countries where they could be used to commit human rights violations and war crimes.

The pointed accusations come from the London-based Amnesty International (AI) which singles out recent arms shipments by transport companies and airlines registered in the five nations.

These weapons shipments “pose a substantial risk of being used to facilitate serious violations of international human rights...” says a new AI report released Monday.

Brian Wood, AI’s arms control manager, says “lax controls on arms shippers and flyers who increasingly move conventional arms around the world are not confined to jurisdictions with weak arms export and import laws”.

He said to save lives and protect human rights, the Arms Trade Treaty, currently under negotiation at the United Nations, must address the role of transporters and other intermediaries in the arms supply chains – not just specify what states’ export and import licensing procedures should be.

Dr. Natalie J. Goldring, a senior fellow with the Center for Peace and Security Studies in the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University, told IPS although U.S. President Barack Obama has begun to reverse the damage from policies on arms transfers by the administration of former President George W. Bush, “much more needs to be done”.

The U.S. government claims to have stronger standards for arms transfers than other countries, she said. But, she explained, “While this may be true on paper, in reality, the United States regularly transfers weapons to countries that its own State Department lists as violating human rights standards.”

Goldring said the new Amnesty report highlights the need to set global standards for arms transfers.

“Many participants in the ongoing preparatory committee meetings on an arms trade treaty have paid lip service to this idea,” Goldring said referring to the current negotiations on a new international treaty to curb the flow of illicit small arms.

The talks, which began last Jul. 12, are expected to conclude Jul. 23.

The preparatory committee will have three meetings during 2011 and 2012, followed by a major conference scheduled for 2012, which will negotiate the final treaty.

“But the real test will be whether the draft treaty sets consistent, high standards that respect international human rights and humanitarian law,” said Goldring.

The world’s major arms suppliers have been consistently accused of providing weapons to countries with non-democratic governments or politically repressive regimes accused of human rights violations.

These include Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Indonesia, Kuwait, Rwanda, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda and Yemen.

Some of examples highlighted in the AI study include deliveries of cluster munitions and their components on ships registered in the UK, and managed by UK and German shipping companies. The weapons were transported from South Korea to Pakistan between Mar. 2008 and Feb. 2010 for use by the country’s army.

“These deliveries took place despite the UK and Germany having committed to comprehensively ban the transfer and use of cluster munitions,” says the report titled ‘Deadly Movements: Arms Transportation Controls in the Arms Trade Treaty.’

The AI report also cites the example of machine gun/anti-aircraft gun parts from Bulgaria flown on a regular Air France passenger flight from Sofia to Charles de Gaulle airport, Paris, in Sep. 2008. The shipment was then flown to Nairobi with the final destination listed in the transport documents as Kigali, Rwanda.

There was a clear and substantial risk that machine gun/anti-aircraft gun parts procured by the Rwandan government might be diverted.

Such weapons were used in the fighting taking place in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where more than 220,000 people had been displaced and serious violations of human rights were perpetrated, AI said. The Bulgarian, French and Kenyan governments - which permitted the export and transit of the arms shipment through their territories - failed to stop the transfer, the report said.

Goldring told IPS that U.S. representatives continue to claim that it is important to reach decisions on the proposed Arms Trade Treaty through consensus.

“In theory, this sounds like a nice idea, but countries need to agree in order to move forward. In reality, this means that any one country can halt progress, even when all of the other participants are in agreement,” she noted.

Its also unfortunate, she pointed out, that the countries participating in the current Arms Trade Treaty negotiations have chosen to conduct much of their work behind closed doors.

Representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been blocked from the most recent sessions of the preparatory committee, and are scheduled to be excluded from many of the meetings this week as well.

“Excluding the non-governmental organisations means that much of the expertise on these issues is outside the room, rather than inside,” she said.

“To be credible, these negotiations must be conducted in an open and transparent manner,” Goldring declared.

The chair negotiating the treaty, Ambassador Roberto Garcia Moritan of Argentina, announced last Wednesday that civil society groups would no longer be allowed to be present during crucial discussions.

In a statement released last week the Campaigners of the Control Arms Alliance voiced their protest against NGOs being shut out.

The decision to close the meeting came as a surprise as numerous member states had made earlier statements on the importance of openness and transparency in the process.

Denis Mizne, Director at Sou da Paz in Brazil said that some states want to hide behind closed doors because they don’t want people to see how much they are prepared to protect trading interests at the expense of protecting the people that bear the brunt of illicit arms deals.

“This was a major let down during the first week of negotiations,” he added.

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