

The call for tough arms controls

Voices from Afghanistan



Jenny Matthews/Oxfam

Summary

‘Still people are being threatened by the guns. Many people own guns; you can’t talk freely, because the commanders will say, “You just need one bullet”.’

— Man, Faizabad¹

Afghanistan has one of the highest concentrations of guns per person in the world. There may be up to 10 million small arms circulating in a country which has a population of 23 million. The human consequences are not just measured in deaths and injuries. The culture of the gun has become deeply embedded, and the presence of firearms has a fundamental impact on democracy, development, and security.

The guns arrived in three waves since conflict began in 1979. In the following years, both the Soviet Union and the USA poured in weaponry. Factional fighting among the *mujahedin* (‘fighters in a holy war’) and then the rise of the Taliban movement brought arms to all sides in the 1990s. Since 2002, the new government has continued to receive arms from abroad to help build up an effective Afghan National Army.

People from all sides have been responsible for violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. These have included targeting and killing civilians and other persons not taking active part in hostilities, torture and ill-treatment, abductions, hostage-taking, extra-judicial executions, and rape. Even now, international organisations report recent and ongoing cases of abuse. Up to two million people are thought to have died since 1979, and hundreds of thousands more are disabled by their injuries.

Guns were delivered from around the world – including the USA, Russia (and the Soviet Union before it), the UK, France, India, and Pakistan. Usually, the suppliers had a specific interest in a particular outcome in Afghanistan. Black-market arms dealers, whose only interest was the potential profit, provided further supplies.

These weapons – millions of tons of guns and ammunition – fuelled each new stage of the conflict. Now, some disarmament has taken place, but many leaders of armed groups still possess weapons and use them to abuse and threaten people and to steal property. As in so many crises, ordinary people have paid the price.

In November 2005, representatives of the Control Arms campaign interviewed some of these people from across Afghanistan about

what has happened to them since 1979, so that their voices can be heard alongside the technical arguments and diplomatic negotiations of the disarmament debates due to take place at the United Nations in 2006.

Alongside their stories, we present some of the established facts about the arms transfers that took place. The implication is clear: irresponsible arms transfers have resulted in human suffering. The solution is also clear, as the final section of this report shows.

We discovered that although people were prepared to talk about the events of ten years ago, most people were reluctant to discuss the impact of current violence and insecurity. This reluctance is indicative in itself.

Warlords and armed groups pressured and threatened many ordinary Afghans in order to influence their voting in presidential elections in 2004 and parliamentary elections in 2005. Many Afghans have said that the ever-present shadow of the gun is hampering the process of institution-building. They still cannot lead normal lives in safety, given the increase in armed crime that is affecting much of the country. Nearly two thirds of Afghans now believe that disarmament is the most important way to improve security.²

Weapons transfers to Afghanistan continue, as the international community helps to build a new Afghan National Army (ANA) and a reformed National Police (ANP). It is vital to ensure that both can provide Afghans with security. But it is also true that some individuals in the security services have links with former militias or current criminals. Arms exporters must ensure that weapons sent to Afghanistan are not used illegally by members of the security services, or transferred onwards to other armed groups.

There is no single solution. Ex-combatants must be disarmed, demobilised, and reintegrated into their communities, as UN programmes, with mixed results, have been attempting to do. Alternative sources of livelihood must be provided, so that the gun is not the only means of survival. Foreign governments must remember their part in arming Afghanistan's warring sides in the past – and their responsibility now to ensure that arms supplies do not fall into the wrong hands. In short, the rest of the world must take responsibility for the arms that it supplies. To do that, governments should agree a new international Arms Trade Treaty (ATT).

2006 presents a major political opportunity to begin to do this:

- The Review Conference for the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons, in June and July 2006, must agree clear principles for the international transfer of these arms, based on existing international law, to prevent them getting into the wrong hands.
- The Conference's Preparatory Committee, taking place in New York in January 2006, must set the stage for this.
- Then, the UN General Assembly's First Committee, meeting in October 2006, must finally start a process to negotiate an Arms Trade Treaty.

The proliferation of conventional arms is too severe to be ignored any longer. Responsible arms exporters and arms-affected states must not be held back by the few states that want to impede progress. In 2006, they must begin negotiations to agree an Arms Trade Treaty.

1 The real impact of irresponsible arms sales

'The consequences of the conflict are very obvious. Our economic condition is pathetic, our agriculture is destroyed, we don't have schools, roads, clinics.'

— Villager in Ashterlai district, Daikundi province



Christian Dennys/Oxfam

Leyla comes from Bamyan province and now lives in Kabul.

'One night in 1358 [1979–80] our village was attacked by planes from the communist government. My son, Musa, and my daughter, Siddiqa, were killed. About 30 people from our village were killed.

'After that we remained in Waras. My husband and son joined the *jihad* against the government. We became refugees in 1365 [1986–7]. Shortly after we arrived in Kabul, my husband was killed.

'Later on in 1372 [1993–4], my son was killed while fighting for the Jabha Milli [National Front].'

After the Soviet invasion in 1979, the Soviets carpet-bombed villages, and the Afghan secret police were responsible for mass arbitrary arrests, and 'disappearances'. Anti-personnel mines were laid in large swathes of land. Twenty per cent of the population, more than five million people, fled the country. Eventually, two to three million would also be displaced within their own country.

Resistance came from a variety of tribes, defectors from the armed forces, Maoists, royalists, intellectuals, and Islamist groups. As the resistance grew, the Islamist groups received increasingly large amounts of assistance from abroad and were able to attack not only the Soviet army and the Afghan government, but rival resistance groups as well.

The resistance relied heavily on support from communities, some of it obtained through coercion. There were increasing reports of commanders forcibly taking food, money, and men. In-fighting between the resistance groups became more vicious. By 1989, more than five and a half million Afghans were refugees.³

Although the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, they continued to support the Afghan government, led by President Najibullah, with huge inputs of weaponry. Fighting between groups of *mujahedin* ('fighters in a holy war') intensified as they began to plan for the post-communist government. In 1992, they entered Kabul.

The civil war, 1992–1996

The *mujahedin* divided up the government ministries between them, creating a rotating presidency. But conflict between these groups broke out, ushering in a period of instability for civilians, with human rights abuses across the country including killings, arbitrary detentions, torture, and rape.⁴ Rahmudin, from Kandahar, describes what happened: 'When Rabbani became president, there was no control over the commanders, who started fighting each other. A large number of people were killed, maimed, or made homeless. Our young generation got involved in theft, the use of drugs, and other criminal acts.'

A villager from Khordak Takhta, Punjab District, Bamyan Province, describes what happened in the same period in 1992: 'This area was controlled by two factions. There were differences between them, and the clashes sometimes resulted in fierce battles. The first month of the fighting coincided with planting the crops. As the fighting continued, the people were not able to irrigate the land that they had managed to cultivate.

'Two of the villagers sustained injuries, and a woman became mentally ill. The wounded have recovered, but those who stayed in the area had to help the warring factions to dig trenches, provide and cook food, and transport ammunition.'

A woman from the same village described how, as one faction retreated and the other faction occupied the village in its place, 20 militants broke into her house to capture her son Naseem. 'As soon as they found him, they started beating him severely. I fell on to my son and cried for mercy, but they kept on asking why we had given shelter to the fighters belonging to the other faction.'

Once the government was in power in Kabul, some factions, under increasing military attack from other factions in the government,

withdrew to the hills around Kabul. In 1992, forces from those factions that had withdrawn began bombarding the capital with rockets, levelling large areas of the city and killing thousands of civilians.

The coalition governments that were created between 1992 and 1996 did not survive long. The country was fragmented into effective mini-states.

During the resistance to the Soviet-backed government, the *mujahedin* had ethnic diversity among their commanders and soldiers. This changed as the civil war went on. Commanders often believed they could not count on the loyalty of any but their own kin. Ethnic dimensions of the conflict led to massacres of Hazaras in Kabul in the 1990s; it was impossible to form national coalitions or governments. Thus the weapons transfers that fuelled the fighting also contributed to an increase in ethnic divisions.

The rise of the Taliban

In 1994 a new group, the Taliban, emerged in Kandahar. With assistance from Pakistan, they made swift gains against the fractured groups fighting the civil war. They captured Herat in 1995, Jalalabad and Kabul in 1996, and Mazar-I Sharif in 1998. They attacked civilians and were responsible for reprisal killings, massacres, indiscriminate bombings, summary executions, torture, and rape.⁵

Zaiga (right) had left her home in Maidan (Wardak), a mountainous province next to Kabul, in the early 1990s because the fighting was making it too difficult to earn a living from the land. She was living in Kabul when the Taliban took over. 'The Taliban carried guns, and they put a lot of pressure on the people. Though they did not use their guns very often, we were afraid. They tortured people.'

Several anti-Taliban forces came together in an unlikely alliance. They too were responsible for serious abuses, including summary executions.⁶ With



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the shifting of frontlines that had remained relatively stable in some areas for years, the conflict spread and began to affect areas that previously had seen little fighting.

An interviewee from Ashterlai district, Daikundi Province, described the impact of fighting in 2000. One faction 'attacked the area in order to take control of it and extort money from the people. Twenty-two people were killed, and another 30 were injured. During the attack, people suffered widespread looting and were forced to leave their homes, as a result of which crops dried. Money was extorted from the people. They were kidnapped and taken to the mountains for ransom.'

Another interviewee from the same district added: 'People suffered tremendously. People left their homes, their sheep were killed, even girls were taken by armed people at gunpoint. The militants use Kalashnikovs, Pika sub-machine guns, rocket launchers, and BM1s. Some of them, or even most of them, still have guns.'

Since 2001: continuing insecurity

The collapse of the Taliban in late 2001 was followed by a settling of scores: massacres were reported in the north, along with the displacement of several hundred thousand people. During 2002 and 2003 the security situation was precarious but largely calm, as local power holders reasserted themselves under the new government.

However, since 2003 security in some areas has markedly deteriorated. According to Said Rahmudin in Kandahar, 'The conflict still continues, but in different forms. People are still killed, kidnapped, and robbed.'

Political violence, assassinations, and intimidation by illegal groups is undermining human security and development in several areas in the south and east. Meanwhile, there have been worrying reports of cases of people from government being involved in the drugs trade and engaged in corruption. International aid and efforts to reform the judiciary have yet to deliver results, as progress of the reforms is slowed down by violence, and by the arms that fuel it.

Zaiga told Oxfam, 'Now the security is good in Kabul, but in the rural areas it is bad. People are still being killed, kidnapped, or disappeared, and nobody hears about it.' Altogether since 1979, between one million and two million people have died violent deaths in Afghanistan.⁷

The effects of conflict continue

'The situation is still not satisfactory. Warnings are still issued in schools at night, reminding us of severe consequences for sending our children to schools. Even bombing has taken place in some schools. The security situation has worsened.'

— Resident of District 2, Kariz Bazaar, interviewed in November 2005

Landmines were used by all sides: by *mujahedin* groups to guard their territory; butterfly mines air-dropped by the Soviets in mountain passes; and, most recently, improvised devices used against the government and international community.

It is thought that since 1979 more than 200,000 Afghans have been killed or injured by landmines and by triggering unexploded ordnance (UXO); a further 80 people are killed by them on average each month. Landmines and UXO affect more than 724 sq km of land, half of which is agricultural or provides access to safe water supplies.⁸

A survey conducted between March 2001 and June 2002 found that, of the 1,636 individuals treated for injuries caused by landmines, grenades, bombs, mortar shells, and cluster munitions from December 2001 onwards, more than 80 per cent were civilians.⁹

Most of Afghanistan's 48,000 communities have been affected by the conflict, whether by providing men to fight, or sheltering displaced people, or suffering the economic consequences of the fighting. Afghans have been increasingly isolated in economic terms, unable to sell their produce abroad, and cut off from technological advances.

Only five other countries have worse Human Development Indicators than Afghanistan. Its development has more in common with countries in sub-Saharan Africa than with its neighbours. Life expectancy is 45 years for men and 44 years for women – whereas women outlive men in almost all other countries around the world. Afghanistan has the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world (1,600 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births). Badakhshan in the north-east has the worst ever recorded rate of 6,500 maternal deaths for every 100,000 live births.

Basic health-care facilities are lacking, as well as basic knowledge of health matters among the population. Diseases such as malaria, TB, typhoid, and cholera are widespread. There is little understanding of basic hygiene, and even if people have had training they often cannot afford soap.¹⁰

Though the Taliban's restrictions on women are no longer in force, increasing insecurity means that the limits on women's movements –

and on their ability to access health and education services – are very strong, greater than those already imposed by traditional culture. In Zabul and Uruzgan provinces, which are currently racked by insecurity, it is estimated that only one in 1,000 girls attends school. Nationally, 57 per cent of women are married before they are 16 years old, and 72 per cent of married women under the age of 50 do not know of any means of contraception. In the words of one young woman in Kabul: 'Girls cannot go freely here. If the situation gets worse, my father says we should not go to school. We do not feel safe.'¹¹ Fears of child kidnapping are rife, and Amnesty International has documented the appalling risks that women face of being abducted and raped at gunpoint.¹²

The ability of many Afghans to develop themselves is hampered by a lack of essential basic skills. Only 28 per cent of Afghans above the age of 15 are literate: 13 per cent of women and 43 per cent of men. While schools tried to operate during the civil war and the Taliban period, they were rarely able to provide consistent teaching, and in most cases children grew up without an education. Of Afghanistan's four million school-age girls, about 34 per cent currently attend primary school. Of the girls attending primary school, only 9 per cent progress to secondary school.

Twenty-five years of war have encouraged the belief among some that violence and fear are the best ways of holding on to power. Many Afghans told the Control Arms campaign that they are still very concerned about the presence of large numbers of weapons in the hands of people who are guilty of violent attacks and abuse.

2 Where did the guns come from?

'There are so many weapons in Afghanistan, it's as if they have been planted like a crop.'

— Woman, Mazar-e-Sharif¹³

Two and a half decades of conflict have brought weapons into Afghanistan from all around the world. It has been estimated that there are at least 10 million small arms within the country, worth between \$6bn and \$8bn.¹⁴ Weapons – and particularly small arms – have fuelled the conflict during all its various stages. Even now, faltering steps towards democracy are hindered by the ubiquity of guns and the culture of violence that their proliferation has created.

Most of the weapons transfers took place for political and economic reasons, as external actors sought to influence events in Afghanistan for their own ends. But the people who suffered were the Afghan population. Most deaths were caused by small arms, as were hundreds of thousands of disabling injuries.¹⁵

The most significant arms transfers took place during the 1980s, as Afghanistan became one of the last Cold War battlegrounds. There were three sources for these transfers: foreign governments, small-scale manufacturers in the region, and black-market suppliers. The first category was by far the most significant.¹⁶

The Soviet Union's involvement in Afghanistan's civil war took the form of sending forces and constant deliveries of military supplies. The *mujahedin* at first used small arms seized from the Afghan army, looted from police posts, or made in the gun workshops of the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan. They were also supplied by a US 'pipeline' in which arms were handed over to Afghan resistance groups in the border towns of Quetta and Peshawar.¹⁷

In 1986, the USA started to provide Stinger surface-to-air missiles for the *mujahedin* to shoot down Soviet aircraft. The Stingers demonstrate that arms transfers can have unintended consequences – and can be diverted from their first intended recipient. At least 1,000 were estimated to have been sent by the USA to Afghanistan. Between 200 and 600 may never have been returned to the USA. Some were illicitly transferred to Iran, while the others remain at large, possibly in the hands of anti-US groups, including Lebanon's *Hezbollah* which is thought to have received weapons from Afghanistan's *mujahedin*.¹⁸

Saudi Arabia provided significant financial support for arms transfers through Pakistan. As well as running the arms pipeline, Pakistan

itself provided weapons in the early stages, including FN FAL and Lee Enfield rifles.¹⁹

Even after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, Moscow continued to supply arms and ammunition to Kabul. As the Soviets began to reduce their military presence in Afghanistan, they massively increased the amount of military equipment and other support for the Kabul regime. In 1990, Moscow supplied the Afghan government with 54 military airplanes, 380 tanks, 865 armoured personnel carriers, 680 anti-aircraft guns, 150 R-17 rocket launchers, and more than 500 SCUD missiles. Western sources estimated the value of Soviet aid at \$250–300m per month, or at least \$3bn a year.²⁰ The USA, meanwhile, continued to support the armed groups in their fight against the pro-Moscow government of President Najibullah.²¹

Superpower interest in Afghanistan declined after the *mujahedin's* rise to power in 1992. But as factional fighting continued along increasingly ethnic lines, the emerging Central Asian states supported different groups within Afghanistan. Uzbekistan, for example, provided support for General Dostum's forces in order to secure Uzbekistan's border with Afghanistan. Dostum's airforce sometimes used Termez airbase in Uzbekistan for refuelling.²²

Ahmad Shah Massoud, the Tajik leader from the Panjsher valley, had more diverse sources of backing, including Iran, Uzbekistan, India, and Russia²³. This fact became politically significant when he became the leader of the only significant group to hold territory resisting the Taliban.

As the rise of the Taliban polarised the warring groups into two main fronts – the Taliban and the Northern Alliance – the demand for weapons continued. Both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance received support from abroad. The Taliban were subject to a UN arms embargo from 1999.²⁴

The Taliban received small arms from sympathisers within Afghanistan and from areas that they captured and disarmed. They also received supplies from Pakistan, which was a supply route for arms to the Taliban from other countries. These included Saudi Arabia, which is reported to have arranged a series of huge arms deliveries from Ukraine to the Taliban at the end of 1997 and beginning of 1998. More than 50 flights of arms and ammunition were reportedly flown from Kiev to Peshawar in Pakistan, and then transferred overland by truck to Kabul.²⁵

Iran, on the other hand, supported the Northern Alliance, again because of its own perceived strategic interests. In late 1995, Iran reportedly flew large quantities of arms and ammunition, some of them from India, through the city of Mashad, close to its border with

Afghanistan, to Bagram, near Kabul. Other reports say that (along with Russia) Iran provided 60 plane-loads of weapons to the Taliban's opponents in June 1997. Later shipments were provided in early and mid 1998.²⁶ In October 1998, three trains that were supposed to be carrying humanitarian aid to Afghanistan were stopped in Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan and found to be loaded with 700 tonnes of arms destined for the Northern Alliance. The Iranian embassy in Kyrgyzstan was named as the owner of the cargo.²⁷

Russia's fears that the radicalism of the Taliban would spread northwards led to a renewed interest in Afghanistan, and support for the Northern Alliance in the form of arms and ammunition. Russia's Central Asian neighbours co-operated in these overland transfers because they too feared the destabilising influence of the Taliban.²⁸

The USA is also reported to have provided arms for the Northern Alliance in this period.²⁹ Other countries provided smaller quantities of weapons, again for their own strategic reasons. India, for example, sent weapons in co-operation with Russia and Iran to anti-Taliban forces, in order to balance Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan. China sent Chinese versions of the American M-16 assault rifle to the anti-Taliban forces, because it did not want the Taliban ideology to spread to Muslim separatists on its territory.³⁰

Guns from the arms bazaars of northern Pakistan found their way into both Taliban and Northern Alliance hands. Illicitly transferred weapons include AK 47, AKM, AK 74, Lee Enfield.303, CZ vz-61 rifles; PPSH41 and AK 74U sub-machine guns; RPK, RPD, RP-46, M-38/46, Brno, Grenov, PK, DSK, ZK-1, Simonov SKS machine-guns; Makarov and Tokarev pistols; RPG-2, RPG-7, SPG-9, RCL B-10 and AT-1 Snapper ATGW anti-tank weapons; recoilless 75mm and 82mm artillery; 82mm M37 mortars; and AGS-17 and DShK close-support weapons.³¹

Many countries poured weapons into Afghanistan. In November 2005, the Control Arms campaign investigated the origin of some of the weapons collected in Afghanistan by the UN's disarmament programme. Whilst in no way an exhaustive list, it revealed that arms had come from Hungary, Bulgaria, Albania, Kazakhstan, Iran, and China amongst others, some of which may have been produced and transferred to Afghanistan as recently as 2003.³² The weapons included PKM machine-guns from Hungary, PKG machine-guns from Kazakhstan, and RPG-7 rocket-propelled grenades from Iran and, alongside the ubiquitous AK-47, China³³.

The Taliban was linked to the 11 September 2001 attacks on the USA – through its support for *Al-Qa'idah* – and arms shipments to the Northern Alliance increased. Since the establishment of a new

Afghan government in December 2001, other countries have continued to supply weapons to official government bodies such as the Ministry of Defence, and also to pro-government militias in various parts of the country.

Table 1³⁴ shows some of the information that is available from customs data and government-provided information on weapons transfer to Afghanistan in recent years.

Table 1: Some arms transfers to Afghanistan, 2003–2004

Year	From	Weapons transferred
2003	Albania	600 Kalashnikovs, 10,000 rounds of ammunition, mortars – unknown number, machine guns – unknown number
2003	Bulgaria	400 Kalashnikovs, 8 machine guns, 300 mortar rounds, 8 mortars, 27 RPG launchers, 900 grenades and 120,000 rounds of small arms ammunition
2003	Bosnia-Herzegovina	'Cannon, mortars and others' worth \$8,148 and small arms ammunition worth \$101,662
2003	Croatia	\$17,078 of rifles and machine guns and \$1,260,997 of small arms ammunition.
2002	Czech Republic	\$5,888 of parts and accessories for small arms and light weapons
2003	Czech Republic	\$517 of parts and accessories for small arms and light weapons
2002	Denmark	DKK 165,000 of equipment in the category 'bombs, torpedoes and missiles'
2002	Finland	\$9,812 of small-arms ammunition
2003	France	\$2,263 of equipment in the category 'sporting and hunting shotguns'
2002	India	\$9,372 of equipment in the category of 'bombs, grenades, ammunition, mines and others'
2003	Italy	\$1,072,359 of equipment in the category of 'revolvers and pistols'
2003	Korea	\$124,610 of equipment in the category of 'sporting and hunting rifles' and \$9,618 of small-arms ammunition
2003	Pakistan	\$22,339 of small-arms ammunition
2003	Poland	\$371,000 of equipment in the category of 'cannon, mortars and others' and \$664,000 of small-arms ammunition
2004	Poland	\$100,000 of equipment in the category of 'mortars, howitzers and artillery shells'

2003	Russia	\$38,195 of equipment in the category of 'sporting and hunting shotguns'
2003	Turkey	\$35,098 of equipment in the category of 'sporting and hunting shotguns'
2002	UK	8 sub-machine guns, 8 pistols/revolvers, unknown quantity of small-arms ammunition, unknown quantity of accessories for small-arms ammunition
2002-2004	USA	\$224,632 of equipment, including pistols and revolvers, cartridges and explosives, parts and accessories of rifles, carbines and other military weapons, and non-military rifles.

Some of these arms transfers are relatively small. None of them are inherently irresponsible. Afghanistan's new security forces do require arms. But given that the government in Kabul does not yet exercise full control over parts of the rest of the country, with militarised ethnic, political, and tribal factions continuing to exercise power at local level through the use or threat of force, and an on-going insurgency, there is a serious risk that some arms transfers will not help to control the insecurity but contribute to it.

There is evidence that former commanders have found their way into Afghanistan's national police³⁵ and army.³⁶ A number of police, recruited from militias, are reported to retain ties with other commanders. Their background does not bode well for the creation of a respected police force or an effective army, both of them vital for a new, secure Afghanistan. And it raises the concern that some of the arms destined for the government's security services might fall into the hands of human rights abusers.³⁷

In one example, a group north of Kabul has been integrated into the police – while retaining its former militia structure. In February 2005, a report by the International Crisis Group declared that some of these forces have been involved in drug smuggling on the roads north of Kabul.³⁸ The government must ensure that no groups or individuals in its security services are using force for their own ends, or for other criminal purposes. Until this happens, the process of building sound institutions and public trust will continue to be hampered.

3 What needs to be done?

‘There is no difference between the forces of the Taliban and the *mujahedin* and all the others who carry guns. Only the faces and the clothes have changed.’

— Man, Herat³⁹

This report tells the stories of a number of people who suffered appallingly because guns were transferred to a country that was already mired in violent conflict. But these are just a few stories. Every year, hundreds of thousands of men, women, boys, and girls are killed because of the uncontrolled proliferation of arms; many more are maimed, tortured, or forced to flee their homes. Their stories would fill too many books to read.

Of course, action must be taken at the national level, in Afghanistan and in other countries whose societies have been ripped apart by violent conflict. Ex-combatants and members of armed groups must be disarmed, demobilised, and reintegrated into their communities. Under difficult circumstances, the UN’s programmes have – with mixed results – been attempting to do this. And there must be attempts to provide alternative livelihoods so that the gun is not the only means of survival.

However, the rest of the world must take responsibility for the supply of weapons. The international arms trade is dangerously out of control. Irresponsible arms transfers fuel human rights abuses, prolong wars once they break out, increase their lethality, and add to the immense human cost.

The primary responsibility for controlling the flow of arms rests with governments – all governments, whether they are manufacturers or not, that export, re-export, or transit arms. States do have the right to buy weapons for legitimate self-defence and responsible law enforcement. But all states are also obliged to ensure that arms transfers are not used for violations of human rights or international humanitarian law, or to hold back development.

Despite the suffering and poverty fuelled by irresponsible arms transfers, there is still no comprehensive, legally binding international treaty on the conventional arms trade. The current system of transfer controls is full of gaps and inconsistencies that are exploited by the arms dealers and brokers.

A new international Arms Trade Treaty (ATT), based on principles of international law and international humanitarian law, would create minimum global standards for arms transfers, preventing those that are likely to be used to fuel conflict, to violate human rights, or to

hinder development. It would reduce the human cost of arms proliferation and prevent unscrupulous arms dealers from finding the weakest point in the supply chain.

The ATT would not have prevented Afghanistan's years of conflict. But if it had existed and been effectively enforced, it would have prevented the supply of arms to different factions which are known human rights abusers, including factions who were once seen as allies and were then seen as enemies. If the ATT existed *now*, governments would have to ensure that their supplies to the government security forces did not fall into the hands of human rights abusers.

The list of governments in support of the principles behind the ATT is growing.

2006 presents a major political opportunity to build on this momentum:

- The Review Conference for the UN Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons, in June and July 2006, must agree clear principles for the international transfer of these arms, based on existing international law, to prevent them getting into the wrong hands.
- The Conference's Preparatory Committee, taking place in New York in January 2006, must set the stage for this.
- Then the UN General Assembly's First Committee, meeting in October 2006, must finally start the process of negotiating an Arms Trade Treaty.

The proliferation of conventional arms is too severe to be ignored any longer. Arms transfers still fuel atrocities in Afghanistan and many other countries. Responsible arms exporters and arms-affected states must not be held back by the few states that want to impede progress. In 2006, they must begin negotiations to agree an Arms Trade Treaty.

Notes

¹ Human Rights Research and Advocacy Forum (2004) *Take the Guns Away: Afghan Voices on Security and Elections*, September 2004, available at www.afghanadvocacy.org

² *Ibid.*

³ Amnesty International (2001) *Afghanistan: Making Human Rights the Agenda*, AI Index ASA 11/023/2001, p7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p10.

⁷ Included in this figure is the Soviet Army, which officially states that it lost 15,000 soldiers during the ten-year occupation. Observers state that the figure is probably closer to 100,000.

⁸ Halo Trust website, November 2005; and interview with an official from UNMACA, the UN mines agency.

⁹ Small Arms Survey (2005) *Small Arms Survey 2005: Weapons at War*, p272, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International Studies.

¹⁰ Interview with Oxfam GB beneficiaries in Badakshan.

¹¹ Human Rights Research and Advocacy Forum, *op. cit.*

¹² Amnesty International (2004) *Afghanistan – Abduction and Rape at the Point of a Gun*, AI Index ASA11/013/2004.

¹³ Human Rights Research and Advocacy Forum, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Bobi Pirseyedi (2000) *The Small Arms Problem in Central Asia: Features and Implications*, p.13, New York and Geneva: United Nations, United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p13.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp14-15.

¹⁸ Small Arms Survey (2004) *Small Arms Survey 2004: Rights at Risk*, p.89, Geneva: Small Arms Survey, Graduate Institute of International Studies.

¹⁹ Bobi Pirseyedi, *op. cit.*, p17.

²⁰ Barnett Rubin (2002) *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan: State Formation and Collapse in the International System*, p149, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, second edition.

²¹ Bobi Pirseyedi, *op. cit.*, p17.

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- ²² Gilles Dorransoro (2005) *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan, 1979 to the Present*, pp260-5, New York: Columbia University Press.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p236 and p255.
- ²⁴ Small Arms Survey (2004), *op.cit.*, p128.
- ²⁵ Bobi Pirseyedi, *op. cit.*, pp21-2; and Barnett Rubin, *op. cit.*, p149.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p23.
- ²⁷ Small Arms Survey (2004), *op.cit.*, p323.
- ²⁸ Bobi Pirseyedi, *op. cit.*, pp24-5.
- ²⁹ Small Arms Survey (2004), *op.cit.*, p128.
- ³⁰ Bobi Pirseyedi, *op. cit.*, p26-7.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, pp27-8.
- ³² Weapons were photographed in Afghanistan in November 2005, and their origin was sourced from serial numbers and other evidence by the UK's National Firearms Centre in December 2005.
- ³³ Chinese AK-47s are called Type 56s and are also produced under licence in Albania; it is not possible to tell whether these particular weapons were manufactured in China or Albania.
- ³⁴ Figures taken from the NISAT database.
- ³⁵ International Crisis Group (2005) 'Afghanistan: Getting Disarmament Back on Track', Asia Briefing No.35, pp 6-8, Kabul, 23 February 2005.
- ³⁶ According to a personal communication from a security expert in Kabul, November 2005, some formations of the Northern Alliance that were planned to be demobilised as part of the DDR process have instead been transferred into the national army.
- ³⁷ Human Rights Research and Advocacy Forum, *op. cit.*
- ³⁸ International Crisis Group, *op.cit.*, pp 6-8.
- ³⁹ Human Human Rights Research and Advocacy Forum, *op. cit.*

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