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2006: Critical year for achieving Arms Trade Treaty

Reports on the impact of arms transfers to Haiti, Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone by Control Arms Campaign: Oxfam International, Amnesty International and International Action Network on Small Arms

Governments must kick start negotiations on an international Arms Trade Treaty this year, the Control Arms Campaign said today as the UN launched its first major review of small arms controls in five years.

Existing arms controls are powerless to protect innocent civilians, according to three reports on the human cost of arms transfers to Haiti, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Sierra Leone launched today by the Campaign.

This week's UN meeting in New York will prepare the ground for a landmark UN conference on small arms controls in June.

"In 2006, the world has a choice. Either it continues to ignore the massive human cost of arms proliferation or it finally acts to control the arms trade," said Barbara Stocking, Director of Oxfam. *"No one but a criminal would knowingly sell a gun to a murderer, yet governments can sell weapons to regimes with a history of human rights violations or to countries where weapons will go to war criminals."*

There is no comprehensive international agreement governing the transfer of arms. By contrast, there is a legally-binding global treaty governing the transfer between countries of items such as dinosaur bones and old postage stamps.

The Control Arms Campaign is calling on all UN member states at this week's meeting to prepare the ground for a set of global principles to govern the sale of weapons as a building block towards a Treaty.

"Haiti, Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone manufacture very few arms, yet they have been flooded with weapons, which have been used to kill, maim, displace and impoverish hundreds of thousands of people. Time and again, peacekeeping efforts have been undermined by the failure of governments to introduce effective arms controls. For the sake of millions of men, women and children who live in continual fear of armed violence, world leaders must seize this historic opportunity to begin negotiations on an Arms Trade Treaty," said Denise Searle, Amnesty International's Senior Campaigns

Director.

In Haiti, armed violence raging in the capital Port-au-Prince has increased uncertainty that credible and peaceful elections can be held in the coming months. The first presidential elections since President Aristide fled in February 2004 were postponed this month for the fourth time.

Yvonne, a 29-year-old Port-au-Prince resident interviewed in the Haiti report described an attack on 18 August 2005:

"A group of bandits came to my home. They had machine guns, a lot of guns. They beat and raped me. We didn't have violence like this before. Bandits are killing people, and the police are killing people. Women are raped all the time."

In Sierra Leone, a UN arms embargo imposed during the 1991-2002 civil war was easily flouted, according to the report. The current patchwork of ineffective arms controls means that unscrupulous arms dealers quickly found a way round the embargo.

"Civilians in Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo and Haiti, and in many other countries, have endured a wave of killings, rapes and kidnappings and the unregulated arms trade has fuelled these atrocities. These victims cannot personally lobby the politicians who will decide whether to crack down on irresponsible arms deals, but their voices, and those of hundreds of thousands of people whose lives are devastated by armed violence every year, must be heard," said Rebecca Peters, Director of the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA).

Background

The Control Arms campaign is a joint initiative by Amnesty International, Oxfam International and the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA). It aims to reduce arms proliferation and misuse and to convince governments to introduce a binding arms trade treaty.

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