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Workers Solidarity Movement
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World hunger and the international arms trade
1996

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ARMS DECOMMISSIONING is in the news. The IRA is being asked to give up its weapons. So are the Loyalist hit squads. The ways and means commission, chaired by the US senator George Mitchell met to investigate the thorny issue of paramilitary arms decommissioning. As it did so, both the US and British governments were continuing with their long-standing plans to upgrade and expand their own armed forces. This year alone the British Government will spend £6.3 billion on the procurement of new weaponry, either as replacements or as additions to its present force. Meanwhile, the US government is set to spend nearly £40 billion in a similar drive.

These figures seem very large and they are. Britain, for instance, has increased its spending on weapons by nearly 10% on the previous year, 1994. In July alone it put in an order to buy 67 Apache Attack helicopters from the USA. This might sound unbelievable but it is just the tip of the iceberg.

Apart from buying arms, British and US firms (along with the French) are the only ones to have registered a massive increase in arms sales in the past few years. This, it must be

emphasised, is since the end of the Cold War. Between 1985 and 1989, the USA supplied 30% of the world's arms; now it supplies just under 48%. Similarly with Britain. Between 1985 and 1989 it supplied just over 10% of the world's arms; now it supplies just under 15%!

This situation is rarely reported on and, if one looks closer, it is easy to see why. In both the USA and in Britain, some of the top companies in the economy are arms manufacturers: British Aerospace, Boeing, Lockheed, General Electric and Westinghouse to name but a few. Many of these companies make massive profits from arms. Take the firm, British Aerospace (BA). According to its financial records, 64% of all the money BA handles comes from defence contracts – in total just over £5 billion. If this company didn't sell arms, its shares would plummet as would the shares of many other companies across Europe and the USA.

What countries are the arms being sold to? Firstly, a considerable amount of armaments are traded between rich countries. For instance, Britain will buy its Apache Attack helicopters from the USA. Alternatively, it could have bought the new fighter-helicopter under development in Europe known as The Tiger. Similarly, the USA buys a certain amount of its arms from Europe.

Secondly, and most importantly, arms are sold to what are called poor countries. For instance Pakistan spent 110 times more on weapons in 1990–91 than it did on education and health together. Similarly with Myanmar (210 times), Angola (200 times) or Nigeria (40 times) – to name but a few. Together with France, China and Russia, Britain and the USA supplied 86% of all weaponry sold to poor countries in the period 1988–92. Most scandalous of all, perhaps, is the fact that many of these countries sold their weapons on as part of their aid for development.

It is often said that poor countries need these arms for self-defence. But even a routine analysis shows this to be untrue.

The United Nations Development Report counted 82 armed conflicts in the world between 1989 and 1992 (only wars where 1000 or more are killed are counted!) Of these 82, nearly 79 took place within borders — two examples being India's war in Kashmir and the civil war in Afghanistan. The reality is that most arms are turned on ordinary people by forces in the government or close to it. Rwanda is a case in point. Right up to and after the slaughter began, both South Africa and France were selling weapons into the conflict — everything from small arms to mortars to light artillery! It was largely civilians who were killed in that conflict.

There is huge money to be made in weapons — that is the basic fact about arms manufacturing. In 1994 alone, the developing world spent close to £90 billion on weapons. Yet the United Nations has estimated that just £11 billion of this money would pay for all the primary health care needs in all countries that are considered to be developing countries today. This includes catering for all the immunisation requirements in these countries and for the removal of all serious malnutrition, as well as providing safe, clean drinking water for everyone.

Apart from high profit margins, defence manufacturing is also highly subsidised and protected by individual governments. Across Europe today a huge number of projects are up and running. Some involve co-operation between private defence companies and various governments. Others involve joint work between different governments. For instance, at present France is working on almost 40 joint projects with Germany in relation to common defence programmes. These have the approval of both governments and may, in time, be run as part of the Western European Alliance — which Ireland is being invited to join. Last July, France launched the iHelios 1ai photo-reconnaissance satellite. Plans are currently under way for a joint consortium to build Europe's first independent spy capability. This project alone will cost £3.5 billion!

When did Europe ever vote for this? Do you remember voting for an independent spy capability for Europe? Who are we going to be spying on? Why? Towards what end? While huge money is being wasted, these issues are being decided on by the very people who will gain financially from these projects – business. More than ever the real terrorists need to be identified: Major, Clinton and Chirac.

Decommission the arms!