

DISARMAMENT: U.S. Ramps Up Arms Supplies to Repressive Regimes

Thalif Deen

UNITED NATIONS, May 25, 2005 (IPS) - *The United States has accelerated arms sales to some of the world's most repressive and undemocratic regimes since the Sep. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, according to a new report from leading arms trade researchers.*

The report, from the Arms Trade Resource Centre at New York-based New School University's World Policy Institute, says the increase in sales and military grants is a payoff to countries that have either joined what the White House calls its "war on terror" or have backed the United States in its military occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan.

A majority of U.S. arms sales to the developing world also go to regimes "defined as undemocratic by our own State Department" or foreign ministry, says the study.

According to the report, U.S.-supplied arms are involved in a majority of the world's active conflicts, including Angola, Chad, Ethiopia, Colombia, Pakistan, Israel, and the Philippines.

The study cites the recent decision by the administration of President George W. Bush to provide new F-16 fighter planes to Pakistan while pledging comparable high-tech military hardware to India -- thereby providing U.S. arms to both sides in a long brewing conflict among two nuclear-armed rivals.

And the tens of millions of dollars in U.S. arms transfers to Uzbekistan -- where more than 160 anti-government demonstrators were killed last week -- "exemplify the negative consequences of arming repressive regimes," it says.

According to the study, countries defined as "undemocratic" in the State Department's annual human rights report also are major recipients of U.S. military aid or U.S. weapons systems.

These include: Saudi Arabia (1.1 billion dollars in 2003), Egypt (1.0 billion dollars), Kuwait (153 million dollars), United Arab Emirates (110 million dollars), and Uzbekistan (33 million dollars).

"Arming repressive regimes while simultaneously proclaiming a campaign against tyranny undermines the credibility of the United States and makes it harder to hold other nations to high standards of conduct on human rights and other key issues," said Frida Berrigan, co-author of the study, 'U.S. Weapons at War 2005: Promoting Freedom or Fueling Conflict?'.
'

The largest U.S. military aid programme -- labeled Foreign Military Financing (FMF) -- increased by as much as 68 percent from 2001 to 2003, rising from 3.5 billion dollars to nearly 6.0 billion dollars.

Under FMF, recipient nations get outright U.S. grants on condition these funds are used only for the purchase of U.S. weapons systems, thereby ploughing back the money to the multi-billion-dollar U.S. defence industry.

The only two countries that are exceptions to the rule are Israel and Egypt, close U.S. allies who are permitted to use FMF funds to buy weapons from their domestic armaments industries, according to the U.S. Defence Department.

The biggest FMF increases went to countries engaged as U.S. allies in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. These included Jordan (525 million dollar increase from 2001 to 2003), Afghanistan (191 million dollar increase), Pakistan (224 million dollar increase), and Bahrain (90 million dollar increase).

All of the increases, both in arms sales and FMF, were in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States.

Two dozen nations including Afghanistan, Algeria, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Uruguay either became first-time recipients of FMF during this period or were restored to the programme after long absences.

As a result, the number of countries receiving FMF assistance increased from 48 to 71 between 2001 and 2005 -- a 47.9 percent increase.

Natalie J. Goldring, executive director of the security studies programme at the School of Foreign Service at Washington-based Georgetown University, said the Bush administration has failed to demonstrate any link between open-ended weapons transfers and success in fighting terrorists.

"This report indicates that the opposite may well be the case. By lifting controls over weapons transfers, we are more likely to increase the risks of these weapons falling into our adversaries' hands," Goldring told IPS.

She said that U.S. law prohibits weapons transfers to countries that systematically abuse the rights of their citizens. Enforcing these laws would produce dramatic improvements in U.S. arms transfer policy. But the Bush administration has failed to do so, she added.

Berrigan of the World Policy Institute said that no single policy is more at odds with Bush's pledge to "end tyranny in our world" than the U.S. role as the world's leading arms exporting nation.

"Although arms sales are often justified on the basis of their purported benefits -- from securing access to overseas military facilities to rewarding coalition partners, these alleged benefits come at a high price," she added.

The study says that in times of crisis, like the tsunami that killed more than 300,000 people, the U.S. public has been very generous.

"And they assume their government is as well. While the United States doles out billions of dollars in foreign aid every year, Washington tends to favour military aid and weapons sales over other forms of aid, de-prioritising humanitarian, health and development aid, even though these types of foreign aid have long-term constructive impact," it adds.

The Bush administration's arms trade policies mirror the approach of 30 years ago, when then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger traveled the world, "treating arms transfers as if they were party favours," Goldring said.

"These policies are short-sighted and may well create the very threats they are intended to combat," she added.

Weapons manufacturers are profiting from an upsurge in contracts to produce U.S.-supplied weapons, Goldring said, "but these transfers place current and future U.S. military personnel at risk of attacks from American weapons that have fallen into the wrong hands. Once transferred, we have little control over these weapons."