

Review: 'Do we need our arms trade?'

Written by Trevor Trueman

Saturday, 24 March 2012 13:58 - Last Updated Wednesday, 04 April 2012 14:02

This first cooperative venture of The Chase and Malvern Hills Amnesty International groups was a great success. Sixth formers from the school ran the event with skills usually associated with professional conference organisers, from visual displays, ticket sales, and car parking stewardship to IT aids for the speakers and home-made biscuits, cakes and refreshments. Special thanks to Georgia, Lucy, Helen, Maddie, Izzie and all of the team at The Chase.

The proceedings were began by sixth formers Georgia Duncan-Gill and Lucy Jordan introducing the four expert speakers. The Director of Amnesty International UK, Kate Allen, set the scene for the campaign for an effective international Arms Trade Treaty, which has involved pressure groups for 20 years and will come to fruition in July, when the UN spends one month writing the treaty.

Kate told us that trade in dinosaur bones and bananas is subject to controls but, despite over half a million deaths per year in armed conflicts - more than one for every minute, the trade in arms is unregulated.

Chris Rosedale, a PhD researcher and member of the steering committee for Campaign Against the Arms Trade, treated the audience to a stunning array of facts and figures and explained how CAAT campaigns on government subsidies to the arms industry, its influence in university research and on the misinformation it disseminates about the benefits to the UK economy and employment.

Chris revealed the alarming complicity of the UK in equipping despots in Libya (a 'key market' for the Blair government - we later bombed the very tanks that UK firms repaired), Egypt, Bahrain and other unsavoury regimes.

He reported that export licences for weapons have increased under the coalition government and recalled that the MP for Mid-Worcestershire, Defence Minister Peter Luff, stated the government had 'no embarrassment' about promoting arms sales.

The UK taxpayer subsidises the arms industry with £700 million per year - £10-13,000 for every

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one of its employees, which surprisingly comprise only 0.2% of the UK workforce. The trade accounts for only 2% of UK exports. The industry is capital intensive and several times as many jobs would be created if the same skills were used in other fields such as green energy. Chris alerted us to the entrenchment of the arms industry in our social imagination and the widely held notion of it being the cutting edge of engineering.

Brian Johnson-Thomas, in between contracts as a UN Security Council weapons expert, exposed the hypocrisy behind modern conflicts in which western countries were involved and pointed out that they were being fought over resources. The invasion of Afghanistan was to protect an oil pipeline from Russia. The invasion of Iraq was for oil. The bloody mayhem in Congo is for minerals. He produced graphic video and material evidence of the reality of war, including a small landmine which could blow off a foot, available for barely more than a pound.

Loss of life has been far greater following the intervention by the West in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya, than it was before. Brian called for more than an arms treaty. A new world order, with pre-emptive negotiations to avoid conflicts was needed.

The fourth speaker was Guardian columnist and Executive Director of War on Want, John Hilary, who explored the arms trade and militarism, and their effect on development and global justice. After 60 years of campaigning by War on Want, the arms industry in Britain was still growing exponentially and now stood at £40 billion per year in the UK. The whole UK budget deficit could be wiped out if we de-escalated to the military spending of Spain.

The top importer of British arms is India, despite appalling poverty still threatening the lives of millions. John corroborated Brian's comments and noted that the main global aggressors were not the traditional 'bad guys' but western powers - USA, UK and France - waging illegal wars for resources. The USA had stated its foreign policy objective of fighting 'anti-access forces' i.e. any country which dares to deny it unfettered control of global resources.

John briefly mentioned the new computer-game warfare of drones, piloted from a remote console. Sharing technology with Israel, which has 'road-tested' its devices in the Lebanon and Gaza, the UK now launches drones from Lincolnshire. Contrary to the sanitised information which government give about the selectivity of this smart technology, to achieve the successful assassination of 14 Al Qaeda targets, there has been a staggering death toll of 700 civilians - a fifty to one ratio; five times worse than the sad 10:1 in modern conflicts in general, which is a reversal of the ratio in conflicts 100 years ago.

As John pointed out, although we have a right to be represented in our political system, only by our own actions will anything be achieved. Demanding a robust Arms Trade Treaty must be but a part of a wider campaign against the prominence of the arms industry in the national mindset.

Profits from the necessarily corrupt practices in arms deals are stashed in offshore accounts which benefit from the UK's lax banking laws. Another focus would be to withdraw our money from the main High Street banks which finance the arms industry - Lloyds, Barclays, HSBC and the Royal Bank of Scotland. There are ethical alternatives.

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During the second part of the programme, when the panel of experts fielded questions and comments from the audience, Kate Allen pointed out that conflict was averted by negotiation between Maoist rebels and the government of Nepal, encouraged and aided by Amnesty and other non-state actors. But examples of this were all too rare and Brian bemoaned the short-sighted view of present world leaders

One alternative approach in our campaigning, which was suggested by the audience in the plenary session, was to work with professional engineering bodies to promote peaceful use of their skills and expertise, removing the elitist association with arms manufacturing.

A moving poem, *Five Ways to Kill a Man* by Edwin Brock, was read by sixth former Rowan Standish-Hayes, Worcestershire's newly appointed Young Poet Laureate, and rounded off the event with a suitably sombre and contemplative tone.

As the audience left, concerned but better informed, 116 signatures were added to a petition to David Cameron asking for his vocal and unequivocal backing to an effective Arms Trade Treaty.

Finally - take a moment to do some long division. The USA has spent \$3 trillion on its military adventure in Afghanistan. That amounts to \$10,000 per year for every one of the 30 million women, children and men in Afghanistan, for each year of the ten-year occupation,. As John Hilary pointed out, Afghanistan has the lowest life expectancy in the world (44 years) and one in eight women die of pregnancy-related diseases.