

UK Working Group on Arms

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NGOs call on EU Governments to clamp down on arms brokers

On Thursday 25th November, the EU Council of Ministers Working Group on Arms (COARM) will meet in Brussels to discuss the pressing yet neglected issue of arms brokering. The UK Working Group on Arms¹ is urging EU Governments to adopt a comprehensive licensing system to control the gun-runners who supply arms to conflict areas and human rights crisis zones with impunity. According to the Working Group: “*it is essential that EU Governments do not side-step the issue of arms brokering which risks undermining the EU’s declared policies on arms exports*”.

As a major new report, *The Arms Fixers*, released this week shows², EU-based arms brokering and shipping agents have transferred significant quantities of arms, mostly small arms and light weapons, to regions of conflict and human rights crisis zones. These agents bypass EU arms export controls by arranging arms transfers directly from third countries into regions in conflict, or to destinations where systematic human rights violations are taking place, such as Congo-Brazzaville, Eritrea, Rwanda and Sierra Leone.

Most EU Governments do not regulate the involvement of their nationals or residents in the brokering and trafficking of arms, when the arms transfers take place from outside the EU. In the first half of 1999, the German Government tabled proposals for common controls on arms brokering agents to be adopted by EU Member States. Since then however, progress has been virtually non-existent.

Much more limited proposals to control UK arms brokers were set out in the UK Government’s July 1998 White Paper on Strategic Export Controls. But despite the ‘arms to Africa’ affair, which last year exposed the failure of UK controls in this area, action to clamp down on gun-runners does not appear to be a priority for this Government.

The UK Working Group calls on all EU Member States to expedite the introduction of a licensing system for arms brokering agents, as an essential adjunct to the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports agreed in June 1998. This should include:

1 For the purposes of this briefing the UK Working Group on Arms comprises Amnesty International, the British American Security Information Council, Christian Aid, International Alert, Oxfam and Saferworld.

2 *The Arms Fixers – Controlling the Brokers and Shipping Agents* by Brian Wood and Johan Peleman
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