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Letter from Nobel Laureates for the Day of Action

Dear Sir,

European foreign ministers meet in Brussels on May 25 to finalise key elements of the EU Code of Conduct on arms exports. It is exciting to see the Code at this final stage but amendments still have to be made if it is to have a significant impact on the flow of arms from Europe to regions of conflict and regimes that abuse human rights.

Differences are emerging at this stage over some of the technical details to be included. However, we urge governments to constantly remind themselves that by agreeing the toughest Code possible, they have the opportunity to help prevent great human suffering. The European Union accounts for 40 percent of all arms exports to the developing world. Recent reports of the violent suppression of pro-democracy demonstrators in Indonesia - one of the main recipients of arms from Europe - are a stark reminder of the need for tougher guidelines governing exports to countries that abuse human rights. Europe must not supply regimes with the equipment to terrorise or suppress innocent civilians.

More rigorous consultations between countries to prevent one from granting an export which another has refused are also essential. Furthermore, the Code should include improved measures for transparency and parliamentary scrutiny so that the public can effectively monitor weapons sales.

A strong European Code will also be an essential building block for the establishment of an International Code of Conduct on Arms Transfers such as the one we Nobel Peace laureates have written. First proposed in 1995 by Oscar Arias, former president of Costa Rica, our initiative establishes clear moral guidelines that all nations, rich and poor, must uphold when considering arms transfers. While the day may not have arrived for global approval of our International Code, the European Union has the opportunity now to demonstrate its moral leadership on the world stage.

We urge European governments to agree a tough and restrictive Code that champions accountability and openness, and makes a real contribution to human rights, development and international security. This vital opportunity should not be missed.

Signed:

Dr Oscar Arias
José Ramos-Horta
Betty Williams
Prof Joseph Rotblat
Patti Whaley for Amnesty International