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USA repeatedly shipped arms supplies to Egyptian security forces

Data obtained by Amnesty International shows that the US has repeatedly transferred ammunition to Egypt despite security forces' violent crackdown on protesters.

A shipment for the Egyptian Ministry of Interior arrived from the US on 26 November carrying at least seven tons of "ammunition smoke" - which includes chemical irritants and riot control agents such as tear gas.

It was one of at least three arms deliveries to Egypt by the US company Combined Systems, Inc. since the brutal crackdown on the "25 January Revolution" protesters.

"US arms shipments to Egypt's security forces must be stopped until there is certainty that tear gas and other munitions, weaponry or other equipment aren't linked to bloodshed on Egyptian streets," said Brian Wood of Amnesty International.

On 8 April, Combined Systems, Inc. shipped 21 tons of ammunition (42,035 pounds) from the US port of Wilmington to the Egyptian port of Suez.

On 8 August, another shipment of 17.9 tons of ammunition (35,793 pounds) was loaded from New York and transferred to Port Said in Egypt.

According to the commercial trade database, PIERS, both these shipments were listed under the product code of bullets, cartridges and shells, but the latter was also described as "ammunition smoke".

A third shipment, aboard Danish ship the Marianne Danica, which is owned by the Danish company H.Folmer & Co, arrived at the port of Adabiya near Suez on 26 November.

This shipment was organized by the defence logistics company, Nico Shipping. The munitions were loaded at the US Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point, North Carolina and left on 13 October, according to shipping information tracked by Transarms for Amnesty International.

Combined Systems, Inc., which is based in Jamestown in the USA, manufactures a range of munitions for military forces and law enforcement agencies, including impact munitions such as rubber batons and irritant munitions such as CS tear gas.

On 1 December, a US State Department spokesperson confirmed that "export licences were approved to two US companies for the export of tear gas and other non-lethal riot control agents to the Egyptian Government. And the most recent export license approval occurred in July".

"These licences were authorized during a period where the Egyptian government responded to protests by using excessive and often lethal force. It is inconceivable that the US authorities did not know of evidence of widely documented abuses by the Egyptian security forces. These licences should not have been granted," said Brian Wood.

A US State Department spokesperson said on 29 November, “we haven’t seen any real concrete proof that the Egyptian authorities were misusing tear gas.”

As recently as November, protests against the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) were violently dispersed with tear gas, resulting in at least two dozen deaths and hundreds of injuries.

Many of the cartridges and grenades picked up by protestors in Tahrir Square were US-made tear gas, including those marked Combined Systems Inc. or Combined Tactical Systems, which is the company’s law enforcement division.

“Even in situations where protesters clash with riot police, it is no licence to use excessive force and tear gas recklessly” said Brian Wood.

“Egypt’s security forces, including the riot police, must be reformed and trained to respect UN standards on use of force and firearms. Without fundamental change in the behaviour and accountability of the security forces, it is irresponsible for foreign countries to provide arms and other equipment to forces that are most likely to misuse them.”

The Egyptian security forces’ use of foreign-made tear gas and other ammunition is a clear example of the urgent need for the establishment and implementation of an effective global Arms Trade Treaty (ATT).

Amnesty International is calling for munitions use for law enforcement operations like tear gas to be included among the conventional arms to be regulated by the treaty.

“An effective Arms Trade Treaty, which includes a comprehensive scope and robust national licensing controls, would help ensure that arms exports of the USA and other major arms-transferring countries do not fuel serious human rights abuses,” said Brian Wood.

Notes to the Editor:

The tonnage has been calculated using US short tons. In 2010, the USA authorized direct commercial sales (DCS) of 94,384 items worth \$1,748,743 under category of toxic agents, which covers tear gas. It also authorized the sale of 2,002 items worth \$1,087,155 under the category of firearms, assault weapons and combat shotguns; 46,001,501 items worth \$1,978,865 under the category of ammunition.

The US NGO Transarms tracked the ship’s movements for Amnesty International during the two month voyage from the USA to Egypt. The ship was in the following ports on these dates:

- Wilmington, North Carolina, the USA on 26 September;
- Military Ocean Terminal Sunny Point, North Carolina, the USA arriving on 4 October, where the munitions were loaded, and departing on 13 October;
- Cherbourg (military port), France on 29 to 31 October;
- Papenburg, Germany, on 3 November;
- Cagliari, Sardinia, Italy on 15 November;
- Izmir, Turkey on 21 November;
- Arrives at Adabieh, Suez, Egypt and departs on the same day on 26 November.