

# Summary

*'It is like we are mopping the floor with the taps on. It takes five minutes to shower bullets, but it takes three hours and immense resources to repair each person.'*

Dr Olive Kobusingye,  
trauma surgeon in Uganda<sup>3</sup>

## Arms fuel poverty and suffering

Every day, millions of men, women, and children are living in fear of armed violence. Every minute, one of them is killed. From the gangs of Rio de Janeiro and Los Angeles, to the civil wars of Liberia and Indonesia, arms are out of control.

The uncontrolled proliferation and misuse of arms by government forces and armed groups takes a massive human toll in lost lives, lost livelihoods, and lost opportunities to escape poverty. An average of US\$22bn a year is spent on arms by countries in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America – a sum that would otherwise enable those same countries to be on track to meet the Millennium Development Goals<sup>4</sup> of achieving universal primary education (estimated at \$10bn a year) as well as targets for reducing infant and maternal mortality (estimated at \$12bn a year).<sup>5</sup>

Every day in our work around the world, Oxfam and Amnesty International witness the abuse of arms which fuels conflict, poverty, and violations of human rights.

## Arms are out of control

The impact of the widespread proliferation and misuse of arms is now critical. The 'war on terror' should have focused political will to prevent arms falling into the wrong hands. Instead, since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001, some suppliers have relaxed their controls in order to arm new-found allies against 'terrorism', irrespective of their disregard for international human rights and humanitarian law. Despite the damage that they cause, there is still no binding, comprehensive, international law to control the export of conventional arms.

At the same time, we are seeing a long-term change, as guns are becoming an integral part of life – and therefore an increasingly common instrument of death – in more communities and cities around the world. From the pastoralists of northern Uganda to the gangs of Rio de Janeiro, the carrying and use of increasingly lethal weaponry is becoming the norm.

## The time to act is now

Every government in the world has a responsibility to control arms – both their possession within its borders, to protect its own citizens, and their export across its borders, to ensure respect for international human rights and humanitarian law in

the wider world. The world's most powerful governments, who are also the world's biggest arms suppliers, have the greatest responsibility to control the global trade. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council – France, Russia, China, the UK, and the USA – together account for 88 per cent of the world's conventional arms exports; and these exports contribute regularly to gross abuses of human rights.

The challenge to all governments is urgent. They must co-operate to control and limit the flow of arms and the spread of arms production. At the very least, arms-exporting countries must not supply arms where there is a clear danger that they will be used for violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. But to use the words of Olive Kobusingye, a surgeon treating the victims of gun violence in Uganda, it is not enough *either* to mop the floor *or* to turn off the tap – *both* the trade in arms and safety at community level must be addressed. Thus it is vital for communities directly affected by such violence to co-operate in removing lethal weapons. To achieve this, women, men, and children must be given protection by legitimate security forces which respect human rights.

To those who say that nothing can be done to control the flow of arms, Oxfam and Amnesty International argue that it can. The 1997 Landmines Treaty was brought into being by the combination of active governments and worldwide popular support. Although the scourge of landmines has not yet been eradicated, no country has openly traded in these weapons since 1997. The same combination of public pressure and action by sympathetic governments is needed to secure an Arms Trade Treaty.

Governments are acting too slowly to control arms. Amnesty International and Oxfam therefore propose urgent and interlinked action, from community level to international level, to control their proliferation and misuse more effectively.

- ▶ **International level** Governments are urged to agree an Arms Trade Treaty by 2006, to prevent arms being exported to destinations where they are likely to be used to commit grave violations of international human rights and humanitarian law.
- ▶ **Regional level** Governments are urged to develop and strengthen regional arms-control agreements to uphold international human rights and humanitarian law.
- ▶ **National level** Governments are urged to improve state capacity and their own accountability to control arms transfers and protect citizens from armed violence, in line with international laws and standards.
- ▶ **Community level** Civil society and local government agencies are urged to take effective action to improve safety at community level, by reducing the local availability and demand for arms.