

The merchants of death

By Kumar Rupesinghe

Technically, nobody should want to have war. War is so horrendous and so devastating that nobody in their right minds would desire it. But unfortunately, this is not the case. There are those who benefit from war and make enormous amounts of money. They are called the Merchants of Death. These are arms dealers who make exorbitant sums of money through the legal and illegal manufacture and sale of weapons, mainly small arms. They often sell arms to both sides in a conflict.

The global picture

The largest arms manufacturer is Lockheed-Martin, closely followed by Boeing and Raytheon. The War Resisters' League's Anti Militarism Coordinator Simon Harak has noted that 'these companies and corporations are literally calling the shots of the US government's war making policies. It is not so much that they are making profits from war – their power and influence are so great that it is more accurate to say that they are making war for profit'. What all these companies have in common is that they fund election campaigns and influence the direction of American policy. As you can imagine, the American war in Iraq and Afghanistan have created huge profits for American arms dealers. Apart from the USA, there are many other countries who manufacture weapons, such the U.K, Russia, Czechoslovakia and India, to name only a few.

Annual world military spending today has gone beyond \$1000 billion. At present, it is reported that there are over 500 million small arms in circulation around the world. It was the weapon of choice in 46 out of 49 major conflicts, most of which have been armed insurgencies and intrastate conflicts. In fact, the extent to which human security is threatened by the diffusion of small arms in South Asia is still under-appreciated. In addition to the substantial number of casualties, the costs to the families afflicted by this violence are immeasurable. But to most arms dealers, the profit accumulated far outweighs the human costs.

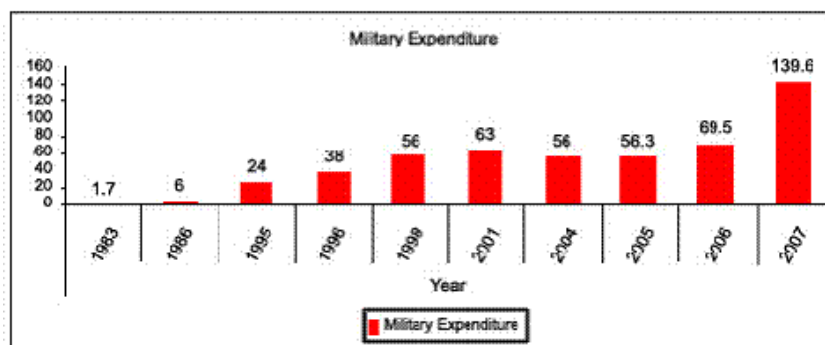
The Sri Lankan scenario

According to Mugabe, a researcher for the Small Arms Survey, there is an estimated fifty two thousand deserters from the Sri Lankan Army and many thousands from the LTTE who have either acquired weapons after deserting or left their posts with their firearms. The survey estimates that there are approximately 300,000 illegal weapons owned by civilians. It is no

wonder that the crime rate in Sri Lanka is so high and contract killings have increased

Year	Military expenditure in Rs. billion
1983	1.7
1986	6
1995	24
1996	38
1998	56
2001	63
2004	56
2005	56.3
2006	69.5
2007 [est]	139.6

Source: Sri Lanka Budget Estimates Vol-1 Page 549



astronomically.

Sri Lanka is the most militarised state in South Asia. Sri Lanka's defence expenditure as a percentage of its GDP is the largest not only in the South Asian region, but overall in the world. Reports indicate that defence expenditure has gone up to Rs. 100 billion a year and is set to increase further, given the new dimension the war has taken in the recent weeks. In the last decade, Sri Lanka has spent almost Rs. 400 billion on defence as a result of the conflict.

At the same time however, the expenditure for education for the year 2005 was a mere Rs. 26 billion, whilst for the same year for the entire health service it was Rs. 30 billion. Just imagine the benefits to the country if the money spent on arms purchases was diverted to health and education. Whilst Sri Lanka boasts that 90% of its population is literate, a deeper analysis shows that a majority of our children do not have access to good schools, school text books and sufficient numbers of qualified teachers. The same goes for the health services. Our hospitals are overcrowded and people are greatly inconvenienced in obtaining proper health services. Often pregnant mothers have to wait in line to be admitted. There is a shortage of hospital beds for patients. Still, it is the very same citizens, who bear the cost of these arms purchases. The figures given Above give a very graphic picture of the staggering increase in military expenditure in Sri Lanka for the period 1983 - 2007.

Laser guided bombs

The average price of a MiG 29 is said to be US \$ 15 million [Rs. 1665 million]. According to Iqbal Athas, in 'Fight Now and Pay Later ' [*Sunday Times*, 20th May, 2007] ,the government is now considering leasing these combat aircraft on a 7 - 10 year pre arranged credit basis from Russia at an undisclosed cost, which means it will be a successive government that would need to meet the payment for this procurement. It has also been pointed out that the acquisition of

these aircraft alone would not mean the SLAF will be able to defend the country's air space. For the MiG 29s to be able to carry out their mission effectively, it would also be necessary to purchase radar guided, heat seeking infra red or laser guided missiles, the approximate cost of which is US \$30,000 apiece. In addition, the Air Force is also planning to acquire a new MiG 29 UB trainer, a spares package, a UAV system, brand new helicopters, overhaul and upgrade existing helicopters, the total cost of which is estimated at a staggering US \$ 145 million [Rs. 16,095,000 million]. Thus, it seems to be a very expensive business to destroy the fledgling Tiger Air Force [TAF]. Interestingly, it has been likened to buying a brand new Mercedes Benz to knock down a bullock cart, with the question being raised as to whether all these exorbitantly priced and highly sophisticated equipment are really necessary to attack the small Czech built Zlin Z-143 aircraft that the LTTE is said to have in its possession?

A review of international experiences in Israel and Iraq are instructive. For example, the Israeli Government is one of the most sophisticated military powers with sophisticated intelligence, air capacity and a well trained military capacity but they have not been able to deal with the Hezbollah in Lebanon or quell the Palestinian uprising. A more recent example is the military debacle which the USA is currently facing. During the initial invasion of Iraq, the US military boasted that the war in Iraq would be short and swift and would end in a year and also affect a transfer of power to a National Council. After several years it is now clear the death toll faced by Allied soldiers has become intolerable and that the citizens are suffering enormously with daily suicide bomb attacks killing over 50.

Information on LTTE military expenditure is not available. However, a recent report on the Cost of Conflict has calculated that its annual income is around \$250 - 300 million a year. Part of this money is spent on its cadres and in development work, but the bulk of the money goes into arms purchases. Another report by Human Rights Watch published in the USA indicates that apart from its regular collections, the LTTE recently called for a collection of taxes from the Diaspora for the 'Final War'. It collected \$3000 from each family, over \$10,000 from business houses and \$100,000 from Hindu temples. In a calculation I made, based on these figures, it would seem that the LTTE collected a staggering amount which could be over Rs. 100 billion. Apart from 'taxing' Tamils abroad and in Sri Lanka, they operate a fleet of shipping vessels, invest in businesses and also engage in drug trafficking. All this allows the LTTE to purchase deadly weapons in the pursuit of its war objectives.

If the war continues it is clear that costs will rise exponentially and this would mean that both the Tamil people and the Sinhalese will be the losers. Children will be deprived of an education, the people will not have proper public transport and the country as a whole will be trapped in an ever increasing morass of continuous military expenditure. The people of Sri Lanka have a role to play. They cannot be bystanders, for it is they who pay for the war and it is their children who will have to bear the burden of the massive investment in arms