

Labour to host Britain's largest arms bazaar

By Tony Hyland
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Britain is to stage its largest ever arms and military equipment fair September 14-17. The exhibition brings together representatives of the UK's three armed forces, along with some 600 defence companies and official delegates from over 50 countries.

In suburban Surrey and London's Docklands, uniformed generals from some of the world's most dictatorial regimes will mingle with sharp suited businessman. Sales representatives from the leading arms manufacturers in Britain and internationally will compete for the attention of prospective buyers by demonstrating the destructive capabilities of their products.

Defence Systems Equipment International (DSEi), the company responsible for the exhibition, boasted in its brochure that "DSEi is Europe's largest and most prestigious defence exhibition ...DSEi responds to demands from the industry and from key customers for a single defence event in the UK. One exhibition at which to display and view defence systems and defence equipment solutions."

The exhibition is sponsored by Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA), a government research agency. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) is in charge of the foreign delegates invited to the event with Defence Secretary, George Robertson, opening the proceedings. The wining and dining involved is likely to run up a large hospitality bill. The UK Department of Defence alone is expected to contribute £250,000 to meet the costs of keeping the visiting officials in their customary style.

That this largest ever arms fair is being hosted by Labour belies its claim to have developed an "ethical foreign policy." This phrase was first coined by Foreign Secretary Robin Cook back in May 1997. Then the newly elected government pledged to break with the practice of its Conservative predecessors and stop British manufacturers from selling arms to countries

which then used them for internal repression.

The recent bloodshed in East Timor, and the collusion of the Indonesian security forces with the anti-independence militias, focussed attention on the arms fair's invitation list drawn up by Labour. Indonesia appeared as one of the MoD's official guests. The invite was only withdrawn earlier this week, in the teeth of opposition from the MoD.

Lady Symons, Defence Procurement Minister, initially protested that Indonesia had the right to look at what equipment was on offer for "self-defence." Her claims became increasingly untenable as news broke that a British Aerospace manufactured Hawk jet had flown over Dili, the East Timor capital, in intimidatory action by the Indonesian military. Hawk aircraft were used in Indonesia's invasion of East Timor in 1975. Since then 200,000 people, a quarter of the population, have died as a result of the occupation.

The retreat was largely a public relations exercise, however. Since it came to office, the Labour government has consistently refused to stop arming Indonesia. It refused to revoke the licenses, issued by its Conservative predecessor, for the export of 16 Hawk jets and a large quantity of armoured vehicles to Indonesia. These weapons have also been employed against the civilian population on the domestic front. During the anti-Suharto demonstrations last year British-made Scorpion tanks were in evidence among the security forces armoury.

France and Britain were among the biggest exporters of arms to Indonesia last year. UK exports were worth £112 million and French approximately double that amount. Britain exported over £100 million worth of arms, including 23 armoured combat vehicles and four Hawk jets in 1997. Information garnered from written parliamentary answers in the year up to May 1998 by the human rights group Amnesty International show that Labour also approved 64 export licenses for

military equipment destined for Indonesia.

Britain has also been involved in training the country's Kospassus Special Forces. One of the exhibitors at the forthcoming fair, the Nitor Group, provided counter-insurgency training to the Kospassus. The latter played a critical role in destabilising East Timor before Indonesia's invasion two decades ago and was recently linked with the militia's terror campaign.

Indonesia is not the only instance in which Labour has been caught with its "ethics" around its ankles. According to Amnesty International at least 30 of the countries represented at the fair are classified as repressive regimes and/or torturous states.

China has been invited, despite Britain being a signatory to an extensive arms embargo introduced by the European Union in 1989 following the Tiananmen Square massacre. The MoD described China as "a long term prospect." Other countries invited include Pakistan and India who only recently stood on the brink of war. Representatives will also come from Saudi Arabia, Oman and the other oil rich dynasties in the Persian Gulf.

The double standards of British foreign policy are also highlighted by its relationship with Turkey—another coveted guest. While the military assault on Serbia was justified on the grounds of halting ethnic cleansing, Britain continues to arm a state whose violation of human rights is well documented. The ethnic cleansing of the Kurds by the Turkish armed forces far surpasses anything practised by the Serb militia in Kosovo.

In March, Robertson had described Serb army atrocities in Kosovo in terms reminiscent of a Victorian melodrama. This was to justify escalating the NATO-led bombardment. He displayed no such sensitivity when, in his capacity as Secretary of State, he had clinched arms deals with Turkey, then engaged in aggressive action against the Kurdish population in the southeast of the country. Robertson met his Turkish counterpart, Izmit Sezkin, at a 1997 British arms fair in which Royal Ordnance, a subsidiary of British Aerospace, was exhibiting. Just months after this meeting, Royal Ordnance announced that it had secured a contract with Turkey to manufacture 500,000 HK33 assault rifles.

The government cynically claims that it is difficult for it to monitor the "end use" of the arms exported by

Britain. As if water cannons, armoured personnel carriers and fighter planes could be used to enhance democracy and further world peace.

Britain is second only to the United States in terms of arms exports. At least £4,598 million worth of military equipment left the UK for overseas countries in 1997 while new orders amounted to approximately £5,500 million. The leading British arms producers work very closely with the government. "We don't export without the permission of Her Majesty's Government and we follow HMG's policy, which we believe is an ethical policy," Marconi Electronic Systems states. The company has subsidiaries in the UK, North America and Europe. It has a workforce of 40,000 and a turnover in excess of £4 billion. Its satellite and radar systems are sold on nearly every continent, but its main selling point is the accuracy of its smart missiles.

British Aerospace conducts business with 70 countries. It is also anxious to prove that it collaborates very closely with the government, following the controversy over its contracts with Indonesia. "We rely on the Government to make decisions on customer countries and we have to give undertakings from government departments," the company states. In fact, evidence of the use of its Hawk jets in East Timor was only uncovered by investigative journalists and not from research by the government or company.

Fearing further embarrassing revelations, the government has attempted to fend off awkward questions about the arms fair. The guest list was only made available to MP's two months after Labour MP Jim Fitzpatrick requested it during parliamentary question time. Some of the exhibiting companies have approached the fair's organisers to withhold press credentials from the journalist Albert Beale, a contributor to the magazine *Peace News*.

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