

From The Sunday Times
January 5, 2003

John Humphrys: AK-47s are weapons of mass destruction too

On December 20, 1983, President Reagan sent a special envoy to Baghdad. He met Saddam Hussein for 90 minutes. By all accounts it was a cordial affair. Certainly it proved beneficial to both sides. As a result of the meeting American companies were to sell Saddam components for chemical and biological weapons, including anthrax and bubonic plague cultures.

The envoy was Donald Rumsfeld. He was then a high-powered executive in the pharmaceutical industry. Today he is the United States defence secretary. In an administration of many hawks he is one of the most hawkish. Rumsfeld wants to wage war on Iraq because he believes that Saddam has an arsenal of chemical and biological weapons and is therefore a threat to the world. He must be overthrown — by the people who helped to create his arsenal.

Of course things have changed in 20 years. Iraq had not invaded Kuwait. But it had gone to war with Iran. The difference was that Iran was the sworn enemy of the United States, which was desperate to prevent an Iranian victory.

Rumsfeld could not claim that the administration he served was unaware of Saddam's evil ways. A month before his visit, the White House was receiving intelligence reports that the Iraqis were engaged in almost daily use of chemical weapons against Iranian forces. Nor did American military help for Iraq stop when Saddam began using nerve gas against his own people, murdering thousands of men, women and children in Kurdish villages.

All this was reported in detail by The Washington Post a few days ago. Campaigners against the war claimed that the disclosures — based on declassified government documents — weakened one of the most powerful justifications for a war: moral outrage at a foul dictator. It is difficult for an accomplice to be outraged by the behaviour of his buddy, especially if he knew all along what his buddy was up to and even helped him to do it. The Post reports caused Rumsfeld great embarrassment.

Yet the story made few waves in this country. It was mostly buried on the inside pages of the broadsheet newspapers. Perhaps that is because we have always known about the hypocrisy at the heart of relations between powerful countries and dictators such as Saddam and expect nothing else. Our own hands are scarcely clean. The Scott report into Britain's arms dealings with Iraq disclosed some shameful behaviour.

So let me try to interest you in a report into another aspect of arms dealing that made even fewer waves this past week. The report was written by a couple of paediatricians — Professor David Southall and Bernadette O'Hare — and never managed to make it beyond the pages of the British Medical Journal. Southall worked for Unicef in Bosnia in 1993 and, as a result of what he saw there, set up an organisation called Child Advocacy International.

His report dealt with arms that have killed vastly more people than Saddam is ever likely to butcher with his weapons of mass destruction — even assuming he still has them and uses them again. These weapons are now used routinely on the streets of this country. They were used to kill two young women who happened to get caught in the crossfire in Birmingham on Thursday. But

Southall's concern is with the millions of women and children in the poorest countries of the world whose lives are ended or ruined by them every year. They are small arms.

In the 10 years up to 1996 there were 49 "major" conflicts in the world. The main weapons in almost all of them were small arms. Unicef says they caused 90% of the casualties; 2m children were killed, 6m were seriously injured or permanently disabled. Countless others were forced to witness or take part in the violence. The latest figures for 2001 show that small arms were involved in 1,000 deaths a day. The vast majority of them were women and children.

Even those children who were not physically harmed suffered in other ways. In Angola, for instance, two-thirds of the children saw people being murdered, tortured or beaten during their long nightmare of a civil war. The psychological damage is immense. Many were abducted, raped, used as slaves or themselves turned into soldiers. Many more suffered because they could get neither food nor medical help.

Yet what has this to do with us? There has always been war. It is possible to cause mayhem with a machete or to terrorise with a spear. True, but a child with a machete is one thing. A child with an AK-47 is another. And there is ample evidence to show that the greater the availability of guns, the more people will die and the faster the conflict will spread. If your enemy threatens you with a gun, you will not want to respond with a knife. You will want a gun, too.

Graca Machel, the wife of Nelson Mandela, has seen plenty of war at first hand in her own country of Mozambique. In a report for Unicef she wrote: "Wars have always victimised children and other non-combatants, but modern wars are exploiting, maiming and killing children more callously than ever." Modern wars are fought with guns.

It is estimated that there are 638m small arms in the world. That's about one for every 10 people. In much of Africa you can get one for a bag of maize. In Afghanistan an AK-47 will cost you \$10. Or you can spend a bit more and buy an automatic from a man in a pub in Birmingham or Manchester or London.

It is our business because it is we who produce them and trade in them. The vast majority of small arms in the world come from Europe, the old Soviet countries and North America. The richest countries in the world export them to the poorest. The global trade is worth \$4 billion. But that is only the legal trade. In theory there are "end user" certificates which control the trade in weapons. They might work reasonably effectively if you want to buy a tank or a long-range missile. But small arms are traded as freely as Coca-Cola. If a British businessman is breaking the law in this country by dealing in small arms, he hops on a plane to France or Germany with his mobile phone and sets up shop there. Nobody knows. Nobody seems to care.

The United Nations acknowledges the "humanitarian dimensions" involved in this trade. The official UN position is that it wants to control the proliferation of small arms. The slight problem is that there are five permanent members of the security council and every one of them is a major supplier.

Southall and his colleagues are campaigning for changes. They want legal arms trading and its regulation to become the responsibility of a newly configured UN, less dependent on the rich arms-exporting countries. The new UN would enforce ethical criteria on the trade. The illegal market would be policed by a new international police force. Illegal arms traders could be charged with crimes against humanity. To all this there is only one realistic response: fat chance.

It is not going to happen. Power is not surrendered. The current UN is an uneasy compromise between the wish of everyone to try to construct some sort of international order and the determination of those with the greatest power to lose none of it. Try to take power away from the powerful and they will simply walk away, just as the United States walked away from the League of Nations which its own president had had the imagination to propose.

This is how it is for idealistic dreamers. They quickly hit the buffers of the way the world really operates. It brings us back to Rumsfeld and to what is possible in a single career. It brings us back to the Scott report and the way politicians in opposition deal with the realities when they find themselves in power. Moral outrage seldom survives hard politics.

So Southall and his well-meaning doctors will achieve nothing and we would be better off if they concentrated all their efforts on curing the sick children in their surgeries and hospital wards? Well, maybe, but I'm not so sure. Practical outcomes should not be the only measure of the value of moral outrage. It is always right to make a fuss about the suffering of the world's most vulnerable people and the hypocrisy of the world's most powerful. And somebody may be listening.