



Sveriges Kristna Råd

Christian Council of Sweden

This is a debate article issued by the Christian Council of Sweden on 27 September 2009, on the eve of the informal meeting of EU defence ministers in Gothenburg, Sweden. It has been translated from Swedish.

Clearer rules needed for EU arms trade

The EU is often described as a peace project of which foreign policy favours prevention of armed conflicts, civilian crises management, development aid and dialogue before military solutions.

Today the EU's legally-binding rules restrict arms exports to countries which breach humanitarian law, seriously violate human rights or are involved in terrorism. In addition, the socio-economic situation of the country must be considered. This presupposes that rules are interpreted in a strict manner. However, the lack of legal clarity of the EU's Common Position on arms trade enables the Member States to authorize export which undoubtedly contradicts the purpose of the law, for instance, exporting war material to Saudi-Arabia, Colombia, Israel and Iran. The vagueness also allows the countries to interpret the rules in different ways. This leads to a risk that countries which now apply a stricter interpretation will little by little adopt lower standards in order to avoid competitive disadvantage. To counter such negative development churches encourage the Swedish Government to work towards improved legal clarity of the EU laws and to ensure that it gets more difficult to grant an export license in case it has already been denied by another Member State.

In 2007 the United Kingdom exported heavy machine guns to Saudi-Arabia, a country which systematically violates human rights. It should be self-evident that all EU Member States must have guidelines which forbid *all* arms trade to countries seriously infringing human rights.

EU countries also sell arms to countries suffering from severe poverty and thereby directly and seriously hamper sustainable development. In 2004-2008, Pakistan was the second biggest buyer of French arms, the world's fourth largest arms exporter. In 2006 Sweden gave a go-ahead to export a military radar surveillance system to Pakistan against 814 million euros, which is 12 times more than Pakistan's annual budget for water and sanitation. Another example is the export of light arms by the Czech Republic and Slovakia to Colombia in 2005, a country in the grip of an internal armed conflict with serious violations of human rights. Sweden has also been discussing for a year with Colombia about the possible export of a radar system.

Sweden should - together with the European Union - demand that the International Arms Trade Treaty negotiated within the UN framework become both restrictive and legally-binding. Sweden should strive for a Treaty which forbids trade of conventional arms and munitions in cases where there is a risk that they could be used to perpetrate serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law or that they could undermine sustainable development.

Arms trade is one of the key topics highlighted by the churches in Sweden during the Swedish EU Presidency. The Gothenburg Process, headed by the former Archbishop of the Church of Sweden KG Hammar, manifests the churches' endeavour to pursue the dialogue about the legal international trade of conventional arms. It aims at fostering a more responsible way of trading war material as well as a deeper ethical analysis of the matter.

Sweden is one of the ten largest arms exporters in the world, and the churches see an ethical problem there. But we have realised that it is not enough to protest against the Swedish arms exports; we must also act at the international level. We believe that the Swedish Government should take the leadership in the international process in this area and, through the European Union, promote stricter rules governing arms trade.

Rev. Karin Wiborn, General Secretary Baptist Union of Sweden, Chair of the Christian Council of Sweden

Mgr. Anders Arborelius, Roman Catholic Bishop of Stockholm, Vice-Chair of the Christian Council of Sweden

Tikhon Lundell, Archimandrite of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Sweden, Vice-Chair of the Christian Council of Sweden

Anders Wejryd, Archbishop of the Church of Sweden, Vice-Chair of the Christian Council of Sweden