

# War and Conflict

- An estimated 191 million people died as a result of conflict in the 20th century
- Between 1991 and 2003 up to 500,000 children perished due to a lack of food, clean water or medicines as a result of war
- Between 1990-2001 there were 57 armed conflicts in 45 locations
- In 2003, world military spending increased by 11% to US\$ 956 billion. 50% of this expenditure was by the US government

Wars and conflict devastate families, communities, nations, cultures and the environment.

Survivors may be chronically disabled or scarred for life. The psychological damage of war is incalculable – among raped women, child soldiers, people forced to watch family members being tortured or killed, their homes and communities destroyed. Children are especially vulnerable.

Military spending has spiralled out of control. Money and resources which could be used to strengthen health services are being diverted into preparation for war, further increasing the costs of conflict. Aid is even being used to fight the ‘war on terror’.

Military power is all too often used to defend and increase the political and economic advantages of the wealthy nations.

According to the Commission on Human Security (CHS), four nations – France, the Russian Federation, the United States and the United Kingdom – are responsible for 78% of global exports of conventional weapons. Germany, the remaining major contributor, is responsible for a further 5%. Two-thirds of these exports go to the developing world.

Small arms are a particular threat in poorer countries. There are around 640 million small arms in the world – and many are inexpensive. Although the data are poor, the CHS estimates

that these weapons kill 500,000 people a year. Campaigns on this issue are growing, but need further backing.

Meanwhile, the threat posed by nuclear weapons has not gone away, and may even increase through proliferation and setbacks in progress towards nuclear disarmament. Treaties on chemical and biological weapons must be implemented too.

## What needs to happen

- An international treaty on the arms trade is urgently needed, and is being now being taken up by some governments. A key focus needs to be on campaigning against the weapons’ producers in the developed countries named above. In developing countries civil society groups should monitor government spending on armaments.
- Donors should increase funding for effective interventions that break the cycle of violence (these currently receive less than 1% of the funds available for military intervention).



Chechnya destroyed. War has wide ranging implications for people’s health (Heidi Bradner/Panos Pictures)

## Health professionals' responses to war

Health professionals have a long record of responding to war and have been at the forefront of efforts to measure and mitigate its effects and in actively seeking to prevent its occurrence.

In 1985, for example, International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War won the Nobel Peace Prize for dispelling the myth that nuclear war was survivable and for helping to build bridges between doctors and politicians on both sides of the Cold War.

Health researchers, as the *Watch* shows, have studied the effects of conflict around the world, identifying causes of violence and exposing the hidden costs of war, particularly for the livelihoods and health of ordinary people.

Recent work on the health effects of war in Iraq has been debated worldwide. WHO has also promoted greater understanding of the costs of war in its *World Report on Violence and Health*, including the need for improved efforts in health sector reconstruction after conflict.

## What can health workers and campaigners do to promote peace?

- Demand and campaign for: WHO to take a leading role in promoting a global arms treaty – similar to their efforts on other health hazards such as tobacco.
- Call on WHO to follow up on its *World Report on Violence and Health* by focussing on actions that health sector agencies can take to promote conflict prevention.
- Join existing campaigns against small arms (<http://www.iansa.org>) and weapons of mass destruction (<http://www.ippnw.org>).
- Monitor government spending on arms production and arms sales.
- Encourage debate on and implementation of the recommendations of the Commission on Human Security (<http://www.humansecurity-chs.org>)



In Najaf, Iraq, a child is carried across the street by his father on the outskirts of the city (Kael Alford/Panos Pictures)