Submission from the Campaign Against Arms Trade to the 2015 Inquiry of the Committees on Arms Export Controls

1. The Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) made a submission to your Committees’ Inquiry last month. In the light of the use of UK-made tear gas by the Hong Kong police on 28th September, CAAT hopes your Committees will accept this supplementary submission.

2. All arms sales convey to the recipient a message of international acceptance and respectability. Successive UK governments, however, have looked at export licence applications on a case-by-case basis. They have only been refused where it considered there was a "clear risk" the particular equipment to be exported might directly be used for internal repression. Recently, the Coalition government appears to be moving away from even the loosest possible interpretation of this test, effectively abandoning it.

3. The Hong Kong police used tear gas against protesters on 28th September 2014. The UK had granted eight licences for tear and CS gas, as well as associated training products, to Hong Kong since 2010, the most recent in January 2014. (http://bitly.com/1skaZUl) The total value of the seven individual licences was £180,000. The value of the Open Individual Export Licence is not known.

4. Manufacturer Chemring confirmed that it had supplied the tear gas. It told the Guardian (30.9.14) its sales were “ultimately controlled by the UK government through the issue of export licences, and end-user certificates”, but said it would review its sales policy. A UK government official also said that it would "take the current Hong Kong disturbances into account in assessing further export licence applications."

5. However, on 30th September 2014, Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond told the BBC’s Daily Politics Show the canisters being used by the riot police in Hong Kong were a legitimate export: “CS gas is available from large numbers of sources around the world. ... They could buy CS gas from the US.”

6. This is a totally unacceptable statement from a UK government minister, especially from the head of the department responsible for promoting human rights overseas and for checking export licence application compliance with the human rights criteria. It is a long time since a UK government has publicly used the excuse that "if we didn't sell, someone else would" and it is deplorable that the Foreign Secretary has done so now.

7. In its original submission, CAAT explained the case of Israel. On 12th August 2014, Business Secretary Vince Cable had said that twelve licences had been "identified for components which could be part of equipment used by the Israel Defence Forces in Gaza". These licences were to be suspended only if the fighting started again. CAAT would have expected the twelve licences to be revoked immediately and was amazed that they were not even suspended.

8. It has long appeared that UK governments have put arms sales before human rights. However, from the lack of action over the twelve Israel licences taken together with the Foreign Secretary’s comment about the tear gas exports to Hong Kong, it seems as though the Coalition government has stopped even pretending it cares about human rights.

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