

Measures of success: two steps closer to ending the arms trade

Beccie D'Cunha describes two recent, important victories.

The last few months have been uplifting ones for anti-arms trade campaigners. Following a high-profile campaign co-ordinated by Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT), global publishing company Reed Elsevier announced on 1 June that it would stop organising arms fairs. Then, while CAAT was still celebrating the Reed success, Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced on 25 July that the Defence Export Services Organisation (DESO) – the UK government's arms sales unit, also in CAAT's sights – would be closed by the end of 2007.

How the Reed campaign was won

The keystone of CAAT's campaign against Reed Elsevier's activities was its spotlight on the incompatibility of the company's involvement in the arms trade with its position as the largest publisher of medical, scientific and other professional journals. In his announcement, chief executive of Reed Elsevier, Sir Crispin Davis said: *"It has become increasingly clear that growing numbers of important customers and authors have very real concerns about our involvement in the defence exhibitions business. We have listened closely to these concerns and this has led us to conclude that the defence shows are no longer compatible with Reed Elsevier's position as a leading publisher of scientific, medical, legal and business content."*

Launching its campaign in 2005, CAAT's first challenge was to alert people to the issue. Few had heard of Reed Elsevier, let alone realised one of its subsidiaries was involved in the arms trade. The next stage was to engage with Reed's customers, investors and employees. CAAT co-ordinated several public letters signed by high-profile members of different professional groups – including representatives of SGR – who read, contribute to or are involved with Reed's other publishing services. The letters had a two-fold effect: they publicly condemned and embarrassed the company and also spread the message about the campaign to new audiences.

Doctors, writers, academics and investors all lent their support; each week saw letters and petitions from around the world calling on the company to change. Investors began to divest from the company

and other grassroots groups also kept up the pressure through vigils, die-ins and pertinent questions at the company's Annual General Meeting. Eventually Reed could not ignore the call.

What it means for the arms trade

By the end of 2007, Reed Elsevier plans to have sold off its five international arms fairs, including London's biennial DSEI (Defence Systems & Equipment International), one of the world's biggest. This is a huge victory for CAAT and has sent a clear signal that the arms trade is not only bad for people, but is bad for business.

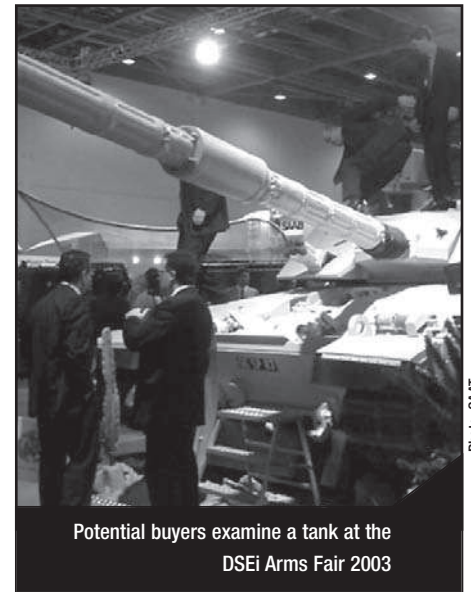
How easy it will be to find buyers for the events remains to be seen. The DSEI fair, for one, has become a hot potato and will be further threatened by the closure of DESO, which co-organised it with Reed. Of course, we must keep up the pressure on DSEI – both to dissuade potential buyers and to call for an end to government support for this event – but the exit of Reed Elsevier is a huge step towards delegitimising this deadly trade.

How the Shut DESO campaign was won

Closing the UK government's arms sales unit has remained a priority since CAAT's inception in 1974. Persistent campaigning over nearly three decades laid the groundwork for success. Nevertheless, when we started our Shut DESO campaign in spring 2006, it was in the daunting knowledge that DESO, like the arms industry it supports, is hugely influential and very much behind curtains: few people had even heard of it. We braced ourselves for the long haul. In fact, it took a little more than a year.

We first targeted the Treasury with a postcard and letter-writing campaign, presenting the economic arguments as well as the ethical ones. We highlighted the government's Comprehensive Spending Review as an opportunity to review DESO's function as a public body. We also knew that although Tony Blair was unlikely to close DESO while in power, Gordon Brown, as probable next Prime Minister, might be more likely to if we could influence him in his Treasury role.

A shorter-term aim of the campaign was to lift DESO out of obscurity. In this we succeeded, through local campaigners organising street polls, stalls, petitions,



Potential buyers examine a tank at the DSEI Arms Fair 2003

Photo: CAAT

online campaigns and public meetings; by getting the issue into the national media; by taking to the streets en masse for a DESO action day; by persuading other organisations and political parties to support a statement calling for DESO's closure; and by educating two thirds of MPs through letters and face-to-face lobbying. The resulting understanding of DESO's existence made it harder for the government to justify spending public money on it.

What it means for the arms trade

DESO employs nearly 500 civil servants to sell arms worldwide and to lobby for military exports across government. DESO's website boasts that over 75% of arms export orders to date would not have been achieved without its assistance. With DESO's closure, we have struck at the very heart of the UK arms trade. Evidence of this can be found in press reports of the fury of the arms industry immediately following Brown's announcement.

It is not over yet. We need to keep an eye on what follows DESO and continue to campaign for an end to all government subsidies and support for the arms trade. But the demise of DESO is a significant achievement, especially considering the massive counter-lobby of arms companies.

Ongoing support is vital to CAAT's work. For more information, CAAT's contact details are below.

Beccie D'Cunha is Local Campaigns Co-ordinator at Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT), 11 Goodwin St, Finsbury Park, London N4 3HQ, <http://www.caat.org.uk/> Tel: 020 7281 0297.