

# *The Drive for*

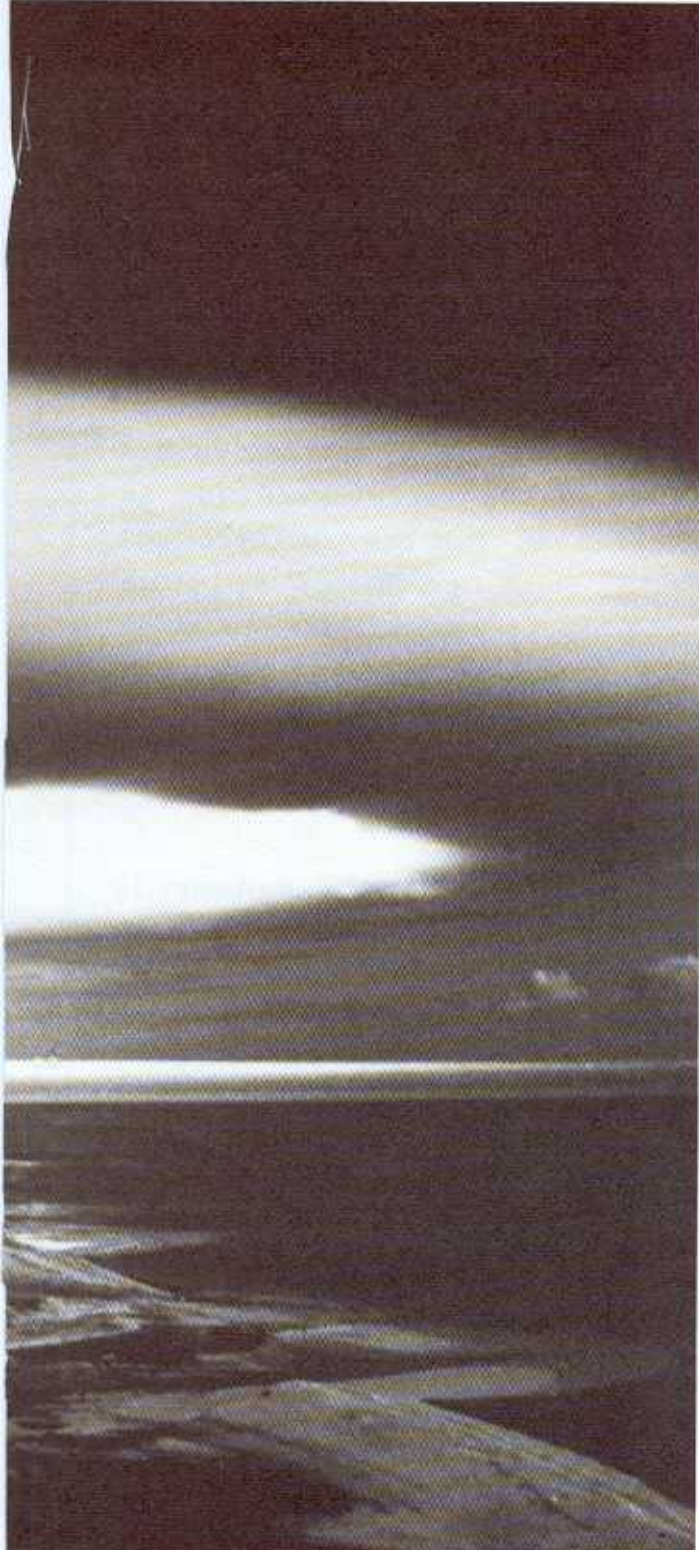


*The destructive power unleashed by the atomic bomb, and later the hydrogen bomb, led to calls in the UN for the outlawing of weapons of mass destruction. A mushroom cloud forms over a small, uninhabited island in the Pacific after the explosion of an experimental atomic bomb.*



# *Disarmament ~ making peace*

- *Global arms control*
- *Nuclear-free zones*
- *New technologies*
- *Emerging conflicts*



**I**n the shadow of the Second World War, the Allied nations in the newly-formed United Nations set themselves one major goal: to end the scourge of war. With this ambitious end in mind, arms control was given top billing. The first resolution of the 1946 General Assembly called for the setting up of a UN Arms Control and Disarmament Commission.

At the outset, the UN drew a line between weapons of mass destruction which it wanted to outlaw and conventional weapons which it sought to control. The memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was fresh in the minds of the Allied powers, while the experience of Hitler's march to power and the massive conventional forces needed to defeat the belligerent dictator caused the UN to set its sights on attaining a balance of conventional armed forces. To clarify this distinction the UN divided the Arms Control and Disarmament Commission into two sections: the UN Atomic Energy Commission and the Commission for Conventional Weapons.

This trend was broken, however, by two factors: the onset of the Cold War and the explosion of the first hydrogen bomb. The underground test at Eniwetok Atoll, a US-controlled island in the Pacific, dug a crater 60 metres deep and two kilometres long where the island of Engulab had once been. The explosion – the equivalent of 14 million tons of TNT explosives – left the atom bomb far behind and raised the tempo of demands in the UN for total disarmament.<sup>1</sup>

By 1959, the General Assembly – with its growing non-aligned membership – had staked out its new position with a sweeping resolution calling for

'General and Complete Disarmament'. The new goal was a global ban on weapons of mass destruction and the cutting back of conventional forces to levels sufficient for internal policing and rotation in UN forces. The campaign for disarmament became one of the UN's major preoccupations.

### **Treaties galore**

Ironically, however, the UN's new tone was also an expression of its impotence in the face of the Cold War deadlock that had emerged between the two superpower camps. During the succeeding decades, the UN's burgeoning Third World membership used the UN as a forum for expressing growing anger at the superpowers' nuclear hold, while the superpowers themselves used it as an arena for scoring propaganda points. But the UN General Assembly did manage to push through a number of nuclear treaties designed to temper the superpowers' flourishing nuclear weapons programmes. These carried varying degrees of weight. All the treaties dealt with nuclear testing and nuclear-free zones and were useful to the extent that they put certain areas off-limits for nuclear activity. However, many of these forbidden zones were not of great importance to nuclear states. The first such treaty, the 1959 Antarctica Treaty, kept the vast wastelands of Antarctica free of military weapons. Four years later, the 1963 Limited Test Ban Treaty prohibited the testing of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere, in outer space and under water. The treaty merely succeeded in pushing nuclear testing – literally – underground.

The 1967 Outer Space Treaty prohibited the placing of weapons of mass destruction in outer space or on 'celestial bodies'. A more down-to-earth treaty was the 1972 Seabed Arms Control Treaty. It banned countries from putting nuclear weapons on the ocean floor more than 12 nautical miles (23 kilometres) from the coastline. The same year, 21 Latin American states signed the Treaty of Tlatelolco, which, in theory, transformed Latin America into the world's first nuclear weapons-free continent. When Brazil and Argentina renounced their nuclear

ambitions at the end of the Cold War, the treaty could finally be fully implemented.

The UN's most notable success was the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Although the most substantial of the UN's nuclear treaties, it has predictably proved to be the most controversial. Approved in 1968, the NPT sanctions the possession of nuclear weapons in five countries – the Soviet Union, the US, the UK, France and China – and bans non-nuclear states from going nuclear. Instead, in what has been dubbed the 'nuclear bargain', the NPT promises non-nuclear states total freedom to develop and use nuclear energy for peaceful ends. The bargain has been especially contentious among Third World leaders who resent the perceived injustice of a treaty that endorses nuclear weapons among the world's most powerful nations, while outlawing them in the developing world.

Yet, since the treaty came into effect in 1970, the majority of the world's nations have signed up – either as a result of international pressure or trading off the disavowal of nuclear weapons for the where-withal to develop peaceful nuclear industries. Only a handful of countries have refused to join. More damagingly, signatory countries have also been accused of pursuing clandestine nuclear weapons programmes in violation of their treaty commitments. Critics blame the consensus ethic of the treaty that has prevented the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), the international body that acts as the inspectorate for the NPT, from flexing its muscles. Though IAEA has the power to demand inspections of suspect sites, it has in the past only investigated sites with advance approval by the inspected country. Yet, despite these evident drawbacks, there is a broad consensus that the treaty has been a useful instrument in establishing a norm of nuclear non-proliferation and lessening fears that runaway proliferation is unavoidable. Popular predictions in the late 1950s estimated that the following three decades would see the emergence of 25-30 nuclear powers. Instead, the number of nuclear powers is believed to be about a third of that.

*“broad consensus”*



## *The drive for complete disarmament*

To illustrate its commitment to disarmament, the UN General Assembly declared the 1970s the First Disarmament Decade. When this had little effect – with the one exception of the landmark Biological Weapons Convention in 1972 – the 1980s became the Second Disarmament Decade. The UN-convened First Special Session on Disarmament in 1978 produced a final document, informally dubbed the UN's 'bible on disarmament', which laid the foundations for the UN's disarmament agenda and set up a number of institutions that some defence analysts argue could now be usefully resuscitated. Within the context of the Cold War, however, the UN's attempts at stealing the march on disarmament negotiations were doomed to failure. Despite back-up from a New York-based Disarmament Affairs Department and a Geneva-based UN Institute for Disarmament Research, the Conference on Disarmament, the 40-nation negotiating group set up by the 1978 Session, was too weak to come up with a single multilateral disarmament agreement until 1992 when it concluded negotiations on the Chemical Weapons Convention.

### **Bilateral is best**

The loudly-proclaimed goal of complete disarmament – however unattainable – thus made a welcome diversion from the paralysis that dogged the UN during the Cold War. But it did have one benefit. By keeping the issue of disarmament – and, in particular, nuclear disarmament – at the forefront of the political and military agenda, it made it extremely awkward for the nuclear powers to abandon their search for arms control.

This search did finally yield some results. Bilateral talks between the US and the USSR culminated in a handful of nuclear-limitation treaties in the 1970s, including the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) in 1972 – although this treaty was aimed at freezing strategic arms rather than cutting them. It was not until Communism began to collapse at the end of the 1980s that the superpowers lost faith in the sacred canons of nuclear deterrence. The nuclear détente, when it eventually came, showed just how ineffective the UN had been in eradicating the nuclear threat. It took Soviet



leader Mikhail Gorbachev's glasnost and the disintegration of the Communist empire to gradually dispel the distrust that had divided the two superpowers.

The decisive moment in reversing the Cold War's nuclear momentum came with Gorbachev's 1986



*USSR President Mikhail Gorbachev and US President George Bush marked the end of the Cold War when they signed START, the first treaty in four decades to substantially cut nuclear weapons.*

© Rex Features. London



agenda for nuclear disarmament. Though his argument for radical disarmament was dismissed as over-ambitious at the time, it injected the necessary boost into negotiations on strategic arms reductions. A year later, US President George Bush and Gorbachev started rolling back the shadows of the

Cold War nuclear arsenal with a treaty eliminating all intermediate-range weapons.

In July 1991, the superpower leaders signed the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) in Moscow. The treaty – which had taken just under



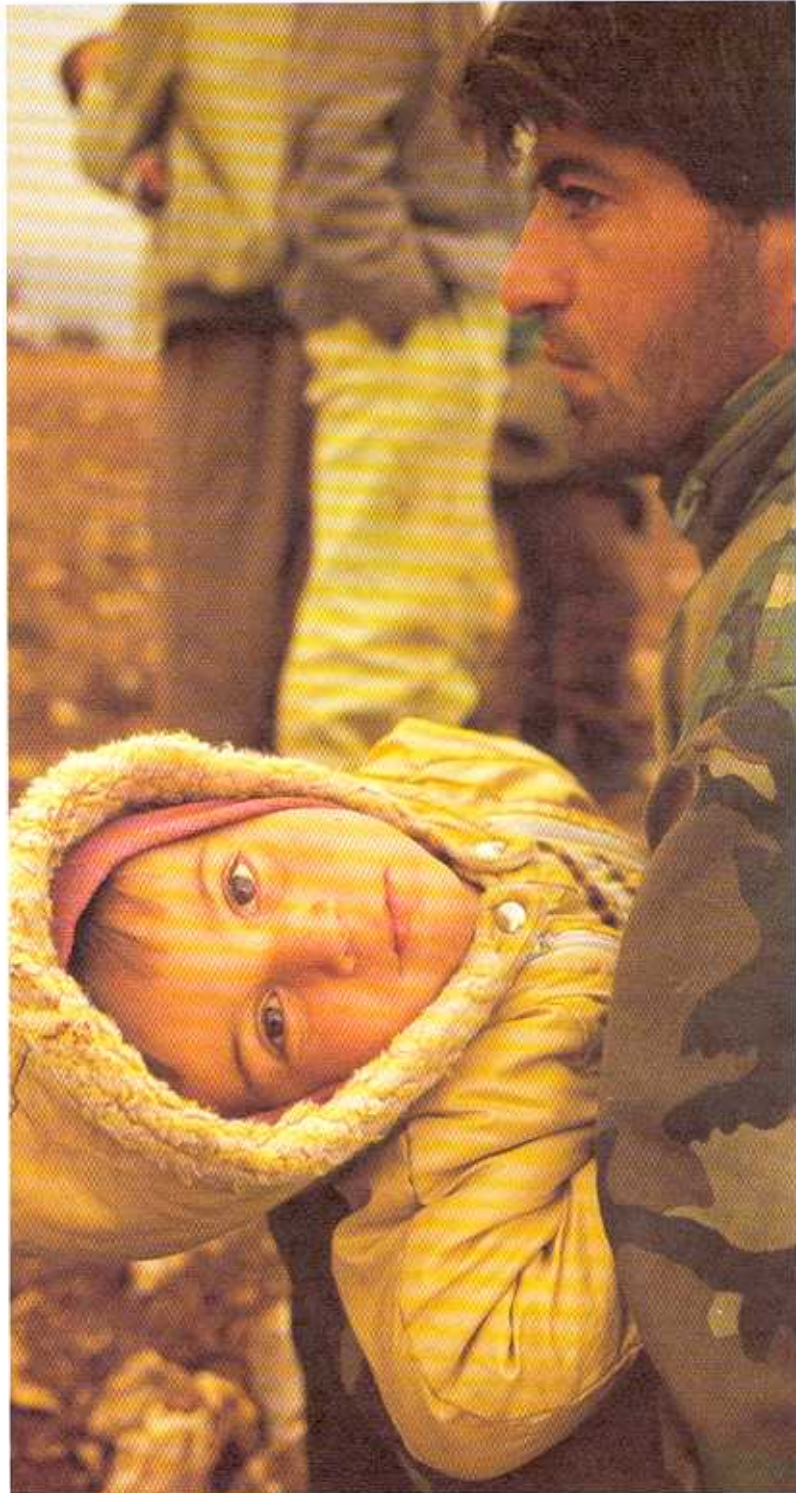
a decade to negotiate – marked the first time in over four decades that the world's nuclear weapons stockpile was to be substantially cut back in size. Under its terms, both superpowers agreed to limit themselves to 6,000 nuclear warheads and equalize their forces at 4,900 ballistic missile warheads. These reductions, however, were to a large extent symbolic. The remaining warheads could still unleash a nuclear Armageddon if deployed. Instead, START I was important as a gesture of newly-won trust that laid the necessary groundwork for halting the superpower nuclear arms race.

The reduction was speeded up by the abortive August 1991 coup in Moscow. The coup, which triggered the disintegration of the Soviet Union and quadrupled the number of former USSR countries with nuclear weapons on their soil, spurred fears in Washington that the collapse of central Communist command could leave nuclear weapons in the hands of unstable, and potentially hostile, regimes. Further talks finally culminated in START II. Signed in January 1993, START II calls for the halving of the number of nuclear warheads by 2003 and the elimination of all land-based missiles with multiple warheads. By any measure it was a remarkable agreement. Even the most sceptical observer was forced to admit that it signalled the end of the superpower nuclear arms race – for the foreseeable future. But problems remain. Even after these dramatic cutbacks, the number of warheads in the former foes' nuclear arsenals has merely been reduced to the levels of the early 1970s, when strategic arms talks first began in earnest. On top of this, the majority of the deactivated warheads have been dismantled rather than destroyed, prompting concerns that they could easily be reassembled, as well as fears that the resulting glut of fissile material could fall into hostile hands.

However, while the nuclear détente has virtually eliminated the threat of a superpower nuclear war, the post-Cold War era has swapped one nuclear threat for another. Although officially the 'nuclear club' still includes only the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, at least five other states are suspected of standing on the nuclear threshold, if they have not already crossed it. The threat of a nuclear war has now

shifted to the developing world where there are fears that nuclear weapons could be used in a regional nuclear war or even a domestic political upheaval.

© Jasper Young/Panos



**Children are the defenceless victims of modern warfare.**  
*A young child is brought in for emergency treatment after a military raid.*



## *The UN's answer and dilemmas*

Since the end of the Cold War, the UN has stepped up its activity in the area of nuclear non-proliferation. The extension of the NPT has become the focus of its activity.<sup>2</sup> In his 1992 *New Dimensions of Arms Regulation and Disarmament in the Post-Cold War World* – or 'Agenda for Disarmament' – the UN Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, singled out the indefinite and unconditional extension of the NPT as a crucial step towards building a nuclear containment strategy. Its supporters argue that whatever the treaty's shortcomings it is the only nuclear-control regime in place.

Nuclear testing is another area where the UN has been flexing its muscles. In 1994, the Conference on Disarmament began formal negotiations on a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty to replace the current Limited Test Ban Treaty. Support for the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty is strong in the United States and Russia. In 1991-92, both countries announced moratoriums on nuclear testing until the mid-1990s. The UN has also been working hard on the chemical and biological weapons front. In 1993, the UN Conference on Disarmament in Geneva negotiated an international ban on production and stockpiling of chemical weapons. It has so far been ratified by 19 countries but requires ratification by 65 countries before it can go into effect. The Chemical Weapons Convention was modelled on the 1972 UN Biological Weapons Convention, which imposed a blanket ban on biological weapons. The Gulf War's exposure of preparations to use biological weapons was, however, evidence that the Biological Weapons Convention was not infallible. It has prompted demands that the Convention's verification measures be strengthened at the Fourth Biological Weapons Convention Review Conference in 1996.

Another thorny issue that the UN looks likely to have to grapple with is a ban on the production of weapons-grade plutonium and uranium. The end of the Cold War has left a glut of fissile materials removed from nuclear warheads and has removed the rationale for the endless recycling of plutonium. The 1970s dream of nuclear power as the energy source of the future has evaporated, and the bottom has fallen out of the uranium and plutonium market.



*High military spenders in the developing world receive two-and-a-half times as much aid as other developing countries.*





© Kevin Weaver/Rex Features, London

According to a study by the US-based Rand Corporation, by the year 2003 there will be enough weapons-grade plutonium to produce 87,000 nuclear weapons. But while the US has proposed an international convention banning the production of fissile materials for weapons purposes, the issue is pitting Washington against France, the UK and Japan, who fear a ban on fissile material could put at risk their huge investments in domestic plutonium. The UN Conference on Disarmament has recently established an *ad hoc* Committee on Fissile Materials to keep the pressure on governments.

### **Non-nuclear conflict**

While the thawing of the Cold War and the resulting reversal in nuclear escalation have enabled Moscow and Washington to make drastic cutbacks in their weapons of mass destruction, it has opened a Pandora's box of potential conflicts as the old ideological allegiances have broken down. But fears that a rash of conflicts would spread across the globe have so far proved overly pessimistic. However, where the break-up of the Cold War status quo has resulted in conflict, the UN's attempts at containment have been hamstrung by its contradictory roles as both negotiator and peace enforcer.

At the same time, the end of the Cold War has precipitated a major slump in the world arms market. Ironically, however, this collapse – world arms exports in 1994 were half the 1984 total – could work against efforts to regulate the arms trade. It has left supplier countries jostling for a corner of the dwindling market and in no mood to talk about regulating the arms industry.

In contrast to its dynamic efforts to curtail the spread of weapons of mass destruction, the UN has so far been reluctant to set limits on the scale of conventional arms – the tinder of many of the world's conflicts. In this case its ability to act has been severely hampered by a mandate that enshrines self-defence as a fundamental right of states, and by the vested interest of supplier countries that see their arms industries as a vital cog in their economic wheel.



## *The technology leap*

The UN has also remained paralysed in the face of the global military spin-off of the technological boom. In South Africa, it was, ironically, a UN arms embargo on the apartheid regime that spurred the technologically-advanced country into working overtime to develop its own indigenous arms industry. Now the embargo has been lifted, South Africa could join the ever-growing list of supplier countries.

Southeast Asia has raced ahead in developing locally-produced arms. With some of the world's most dynamic economies, and huge spending on technology, Southeast Asian countries are increasingly able to maintain a modern defence industry. At the same time, Southeast Asia's arms imports are falling off. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, total imports of major arms by Asian nations in 1993 were \$4,646 million, compared with \$6,900 million in 1988. Despite the declining arms imports, the pace of the region's rising domestic defence spending has prompted fears that a slow-motion arms race is under way.

The newly established Regional Forum of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), is the region's first attempt at a comprehensive regional security structure. But delegates at its first meeting in 1994 quickly became involved in a tug-of-war over the mineral and oil rich Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. In contrast, Europe has made some headway in securing a regional security framework under the umbrella of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Using confidence-building measures as the foundations of an arms reduction strategy, NATO and the former Warsaw Pact countries signed the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe in 1990. This treaty, which sets limits on five major categories of 'large-scale offensive attack' conventional weapons, has ushered in a new era of military transparency in the region and has been touted as a model for a global arms trade control agreement. A second, complementary treaty, the Open Skies Treaty, which allows for observation flights over the territory of

other signatory countries, has yet to go into effect.

Another initiative, the US-inspired Partnerships for Peace, has also helped broaden the security cordon in Europe. By bringing Eastern bloc countries into a closer arrangement with NATO, without yet giving them fully-fledged NATO membership, it has helped to alleviate their sense of isolation. But hopes that Partnerships for Peace would allay Russia's fears of a NATO alliance stretching to its borders proved short-lived, with Russia last year expressing anger at its perceived 'neo-isolation'.

Not only has Partnerships for Peace failed to 'square the circle' – in the words of US Ambassador to the UN Madeleine Albright – but it has also come under fire from peace lobbyists who claim that it has spawned a potentially dangerous by-product. The Cascade Programme, set up in tandem with the Partnerships for Peace initiative, enables NATO signatories, in the interests of 'inter-operability', to transfer to their new Eastern bloc partners military stock which exceeds their limit under the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe. Peace lobbyists and defence analysts claim the off-loading of extra military stock could have a destabilizing effect in a region already fraught with tensions.

The transfer of military stock under the Cascade Programme is a reminder of the temptation of arms sales to countries that are watching their once-guaranteed arms markets dry up. Hopes were high among peace lobbyists after the Gulf War that arms exporting nations had learned a painful lesson. The five permanent members of the UN Security Council held their first-ever arms control meetings in 1991 and 1992 at which it was hoped they would agree on new restrictions on transfers of conventional weapons or, at the very least, a code of conduct. There were also discussions on making the Middle East a permanently nuclear-free zone. However, these talks appear to have lost momentum. Indeed, far from shrinking, arms exports to the region have been stepped up since the Gulf War.<sup>3</sup>

*“a slow-motion arms race”*



### **Under-powered arms controls**

With countries unwilling to renounce their arms exports, there has been growing support for greater openness on the transfer of weapons. In the aftermath of the Gulf War, the UN resurrected an earlier plan for a UN Register on Arms Control. Put to the vote in 1991, 150 countries voted in favour and three abstained.

The register became operational in 1993, with some 80 states voluntarily providing data on the import and export of weapons in the preceding year. While the level of detail is left to the discretion of each country, the data can be cross-checked to build up an overall picture. The register is thus widely regarded as a promising first step towards transparency in the arms trade. But transparency and restraint are two different things. Among the major criticisms of the scheme are the fact that there are no punishments in place for non-compliance; the register covers only large-scale weapons and not small arms; it totally ignores the 'black market' in arms, and it does not look at home production, thus obscuring the huge military arsenals of the major arms producers.<sup>4</sup>

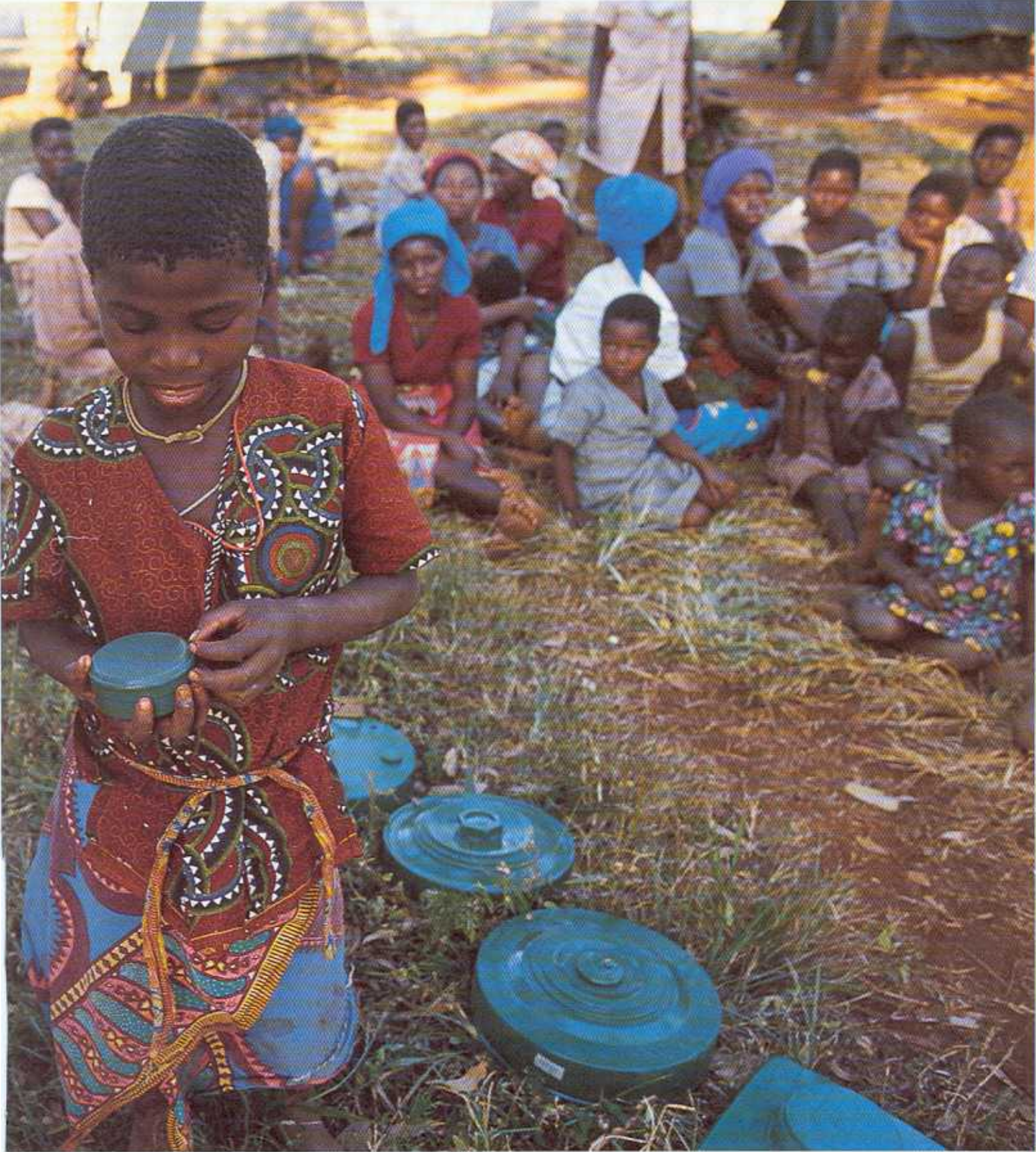
A further threat is the unchecked spread of missiles, particularly through dual-use equipment or technology that can be used to build up an indigenous missile production base. The biggest worry is that missiles can be loaded with nuclear, chemical or biological warheads. As a result, there are moves afoot to strengthen the Missile Technology Control Regime. The membership has already been expanded to 25 states and the Missile Technology Control Regime has adopted more stringent guidelines for exporting equipment and technology. But it remains an informal regime with guidelines self-imposed by member states and no system for punishing transgressors.

*“greater  
openness”*



*The UN estimates there are 100 million mines in conflict zones around the world. A mine awareness class in Mozambique.*





© Liba Taylor/Panos



## *Prospects for the future*

The Cold War threat of a nuclear Apocalypse has given way to a cluster of smaller security threats. The superpowers' policy of arming client regimes resulted in proxy wars as far apart as Afghanistan and Angola, but at least had the advantage of providing a crude balance of power. Now the breakdown of the Cold War's ideological stand-off has left the world in a state of flux with the US, the sole superpower, no longer defending rigid 'principles'.

In this context, the traditional goals of arms control have become outdated. Instead, the UN has to become alert to the emerging threats of the post-Cold War era and shape its arms control agenda accordingly. One of the major threats derives from the unchecked diffusion of technology that is enabling countries to build up their own high-tech defence industries. On top of this, the spread of technology has been a major influence in the proliferation of nuclear states. At the same time, the controls on the world's stockpiles of nuclear warheads, fissile material and conventional weapons have slackened. The former Soviet bloc is the most glaring example of this. The winding down of the Communist armies has increased the threat of the spread of missile launching capabilities, seepage from stockpiles of nuclear warheads and fissile materials, and the proliferation of cheap conventional weapons on the market.

For many in the developing world, the proliferation of cheap arms has brought the security threat closer to home. Of the 82 armed conflicts between 1989 and 1992, only three were between states – the rest took place within the borders of states. The kindling of these wars is for the most part, however,

not the tanks and heavy artillery of tracked arms shipments but the unregulated supply of small arms being hawked around the world. The ubiquitous AK47, better known by its nickname 'Kalashnikov', can be picked up for next to nothing in the world's arms bazaars. Around the developing world, these arms are being used by undemocratic regimes against their own people or by insurgent groups who have abandoned the democratic process and taken up arms.

### **The UN's juggling act**

The break-up of the solid ice of the Cold War into dangerously drifting ice-floes has made the UN's job far harder. It is now being asked to deal with ethnic violence and rogue nationalism; develop the art of peace-keeping; turn its hand to becoming an on-the-ground arbitrator in conflicts, and contain the proliferation of both nuclear and conventional weapons. Weighed down with demands, the pillars on which the UN rested during the Cold War – the preservation of existing sovereignty and the right to self-defence – appear to be buckling. The creation of the Kurdish 'safe haven' in northern Iraq in the aftermath of the Gulf War, for instance, was the UN's first departure from its rigid defence of a country's sovereignty.<sup>5</sup>

The peacekeeping activities of the UN have forced governments to rethink some basic assumptions. Governments are increasingly having to face up to the thorny question of whether concerns other than the preservation of borders – in particular, the defence of basic human rights – can legitimize the use of force. This has thrown up a tricky contradiction: even as states are questioning the inviolability of sovereignty they continue to invoke it in defence of the arms industry. Fundamentally, the UN remains dogged by the dollar signs that pop into the eyes of the world's arms suppliers at the mention of the arms trade. Despite this, the UN does have a role to play. On the nuclear front, an indefinite extension of the NPT could be the bedrock of a strategy of containment. IAEA could also be strengthened to make full use of its right to carry out 'suspect site' special inspections and to help nuclear suppliers in the agency share intelligence.

*“the post-  
Cold War  
era”*



But the UN and IAEA both have their hands tied as multilateral bodies with competing interests and claims. The UN, while happy to deal with the less controversial issue of weapons of mass destruction, is less able to mobilize states in curbing conventional weapons transfers. The UN Register on Arms Control will help create a less suspicious atmosphere, but it lacks the teeth to contain arms flows and completely fails to address proliferation among producers. The UN's disarmament institutions have also been criticized for being underfunded, under-staffed and, in some cases, duplicating each other's work. Some private analysts' suggestions for reform have included increasing the financial contribution to the Centre for Disarmament Affairs in recognition of the key role it could play in circulating information, and combining the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva with the UN Disarmament Commission into one dynamic negotiating and agenda-setting body.<sup>6</sup> There is also a groundswell of opinion, from both within and outside the UN, in favour of broadening the scope of the UN's disarmament institutions to work towards global security – rather than limit their work to isolated disarmament agreements. Defence analysts see a future disarmament strategy as twin-track. The UN would work as monitor, manager and enforcer of a number of global arms agreements, while regional security structures would create the stability needed to build up a network of regional arms control agreements.

*“to work  
towards  
global  
security”*



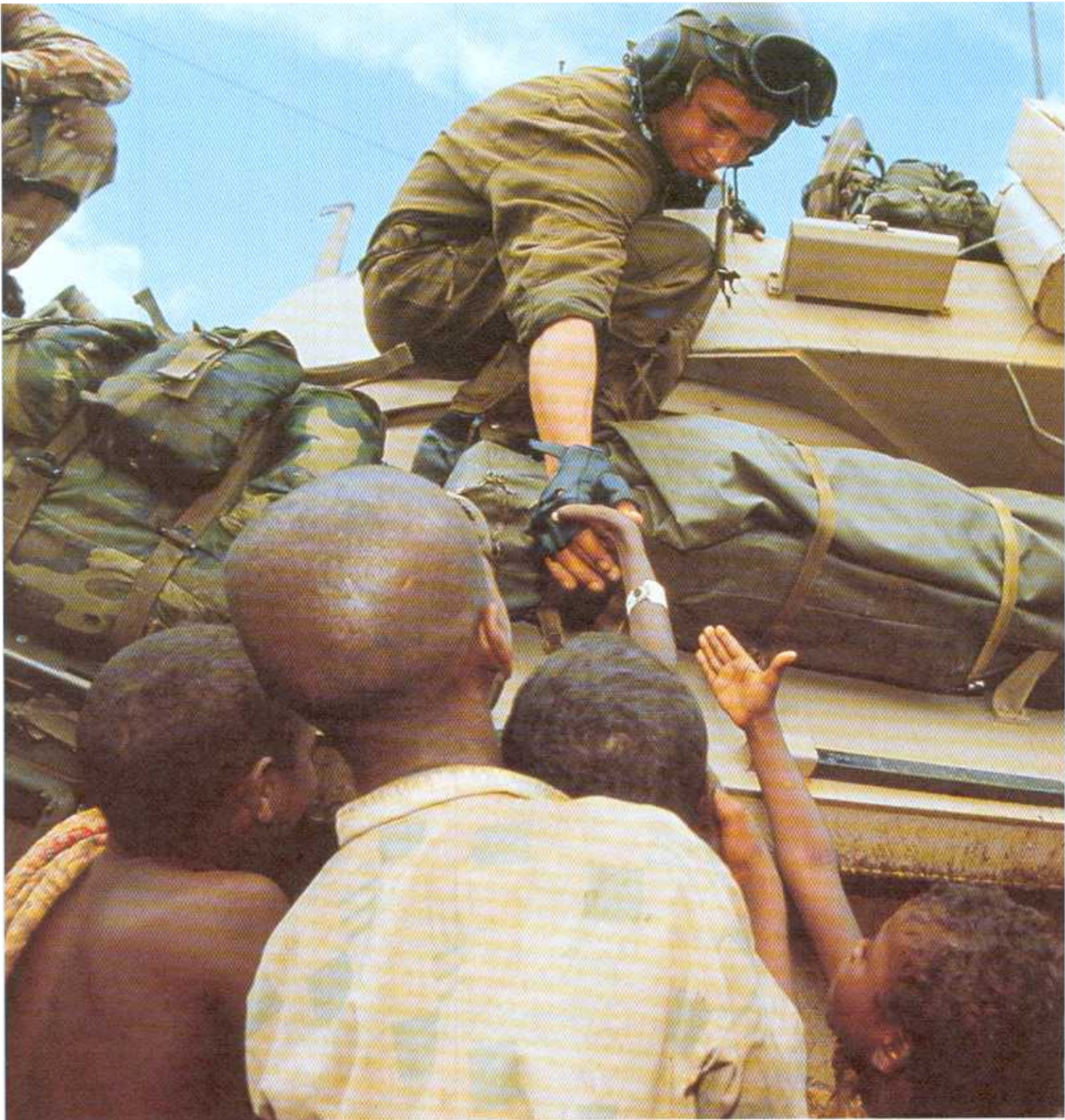
*The daily cost of Operation Desert Storm was about US\$1 billion.  
Two French Gazelle aircraft fly low over the desert during the Gulf War.*







*The Drive for Disarmament*





## Balancing the equation

However, supply-side control is only one side of the equation. During the Cold War, aid was often used as a way of strengthening strategic alliances and consequently went hand-in-hand with military transfers. Until 1986, bilateral donors on average gave five times as much aid per capita to high military spenders than to low military spenders. In 1992 this figure had dropped, but high military spenders were still receiving two-and-a-half times as much aid. Broken down by individual countries, these sums appear even more stark.

This runaway military spending – often at the cost of social spending – has had horrendous consequences in the developing world. It is no coincidence that the highest military spenders in relation to their Gross National Product (GNP), in Africa for instance, are now seeing violent upheavals within their borders. The link has prompted growing pressure

on arms exporting nations to stop using aid to curry favour with arms clients and to explore the relationship between development and disarmament. One approach that is increasingly being mooted would be to link defence spending to aid in the same way as donor countries tie aid to human rights and – in the 1990s buzzword – ‘good governance’.

In the long run, the spread of weapons – conventional and otherwise – will be dictated by demand. Supplier countries are unlikely to adopt stringent rules on exports and, even if they do, determined arms dealers, whether governments or black marketeers, can always find a way to side-step them. While arms control regimes are a necessary factor in helping to slow the stream of arms, it is only when the world starts addressing the causes of conflict that it has any chance of diminishing the scourge of war.

## Endnotes

- 1 The force of the first atomic bomb test, Trinity, that took place in the New Mexico desert in July 1945, was the equivalent of 19,300 tons of TNT chemical explosive. See *Nuclear Explosions and Earthquakes: The Parted Veil*. Bruce A. Bolt, 1976.
- 2 *Disarmament: A Periodical Review by the United Nations: Strengthening the NPT*. Vol.16, No.2, 1993.
- 3 According to the SIPRI Yearbook 1994, imports to the Middle East dipped in 1991 after the Gulf War from US\$6,909 million in 1990 to US\$4,350 million in 1991, then started climbing again to US\$5,515 million in 1993.
- 4 *Moving Towards Transparency: An Evaluation of the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms*. BASIC Report 93.6, 1993.
- 5 The ‘safe haven’ was set up in support of Resolution 688 with the full backing of the UN Security Council.
- 6 *The UN's Role in Disarmament: Retrospect and Prospect*. John Simpson. Contemporary Security Policy. Vol.15, No.1, 1994, p.66.