

Focus: On Conventional Arms Control and Disarmament

Focus is designed primarily for secondary school students. We welcome your comments and suggestions for future topics.

When people think about arms control and disarmament, they usually think first about nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons are the most powerful weapons known to humankind. They have the capacity to cause widespread death and destruction in a single blow and, if used in large quantity, could threaten life on the planet as a whole. For this reason, nuclear weapons have been the main subject of arms control discussions, negotiations and agreements since 1945, like the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty discussed in the last issue's *Focus*.

However, nuclear weapons have not been used in war since 1945. All of the wars since that time — over 150 of them — have been fought mainly with another category of weapons, known as conventional weapons. It is hard to say for certain how many people have lost their lives in these wars, but the United Nations estimates the death toll at over 20 million.

A conventional weapon can be defined as any weapon that is not a nuclear, chemical, biological or radiological weapon. Conventional weapons include the things we usually think of as weapons, such as guns, tanks and fighter aircraft. They can be delivered to their targets from land, sea or air. When people speak of conventional "weapons," they often mean conventional "means of warfare" in the widest sense. Thus, conventional weapons include armed forces, actual weapons and weapon delivery systems, as well as other conventional military equipment and facilities.

The world arsenal of conventional weapons includes approximately 140,000 main battle tanks, some 35,000 combat aircraft and 21,000 helicopters, about 1,000 major surface warships and some 900 attack submarines. Approximately 80 percent of the world's total military expenditure goes towards conventional weapons and armed forces.

Even for the nuclear-weapon states, conventional weapons make up the bulk of military spending.

Conventional weapons have become more destructive since 1945. New types are being produced that use highly sophisticated technologies to help them reach and destroy their targets with greater accuracy and effectiveness. Certain conventional weapons, such as cluster bombs and fuel-air explosives, have the potential to cause death and destruction on a scale comparable to that of chemical weapons or a very small nuclear weapon.

The United Nations has considered the question of conventional arms control and disarmament several times since 1945. In 1980, at a UN-sponsored conference, a number of countries agreed on a Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Weapons Which May be Deemed to be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects. In short form, this is known as the Inhumane Weapons Convention. The Convention prohibits and restricts the use of especially cruel and inhumane conventional weapons, such as those that leave fragments in the human body that cannot be detected by X-rays, incendiary weapons (e.g., napalm), land mines and booby traps. Over 30 countries are parties to the Convention and its Protocols. Canada is a signatory to the Convention. Until recently, this was the only international conventional arms control agreement in effect.

The world's greatest concentration of conventional weapons is found in Central Europe, where NATO and Warsaw Treaty Organization (WTO) forces face each other directly. Beginning in 1973, the two alliances held negotiations known as the Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction (MBFR) talks, aimed at reducing and limiting their forces and armaments in Europe. The MBFR talks ended without agreement in February

1989, but immediately after that, in March 1989, the members of NATO and the WTO opened a new set of talks known as the Negotiation on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, or CFE for short.

The goals of Canada and its allies in the CFE negotiation were to: establish a secure and stable balance of conventional forces in Europe at considerably lower than existing levels; eliminate any inequalities between forces that made the balance unstable; and eliminate the capability to launch a surprise attack or to begin large-scale offensive action. Helped by the recent improvement in East-West relations, the CFE negotiation progressed very quickly and ended successfully in November 1990 with the signing of a treaty that achieves these goals.

The CFE Treaty sets equal levels in Europe between NATO states and members of the WTO for those weapons that are most suitable for surprise attack and offensive action.

All wars since 1945 have been fought mainly with conventional weapons. The CFE Treaty makes a start in reducing such weapons.

These include tanks, artillery, armoured personnel carriers, combat aircraft and attack helicopters. In addition, the Treaty limits the amounts of these weapons that can be held by any one country. The Treaty also has strong provisions for checking to make sure that countries live up to their obligations. Any equipment above and beyond that allowed in the Treaty must be destroyed or irreversibly converted to civilian use, so there is no chance that it will be sent to countries in other parts of the world. Other articles in this *Bulletin* describe the CFE Treaty in more detail.

Canada helped to negotiate the CFE Treaty and will play a role in verifying that its provisions are carried out. However, since the Treaty does not apply to North America, and since Canada's