The Arms Race and World Hunger

Artists for OXFAM

HOW BIG IS THE ARMS RACE?

Worldwide expenditures for military in 1981 exceeded $550 billion. That was two-thirds of the production of the poorer half of the world. It also equals the total annual income of the poorer half of the world.

50 million people are directly or indirectly engaged in military activities worldwide, including 25 million in the armed forces of the world, and another 10 million in paramilitary forces.

During 1980 and 1981, about 25-35percent of the world's industrial capability was devoted to military production.

HOW DOES THE ARMS AFFECT THE POOR?

Government leaders and others usually justify this massive expenditure of the world's resources as necessary for defense and security. But militarism-massive preparation for war, such as the current arms race-leads to less, not more, security for the people of the world. Why?

THE ARMS RACE DIVERTS PRECIOUS RESOURCES AWAY FROM PRODUCTIVE ACTIVITY AND BASIC HUMAN NEEDS.

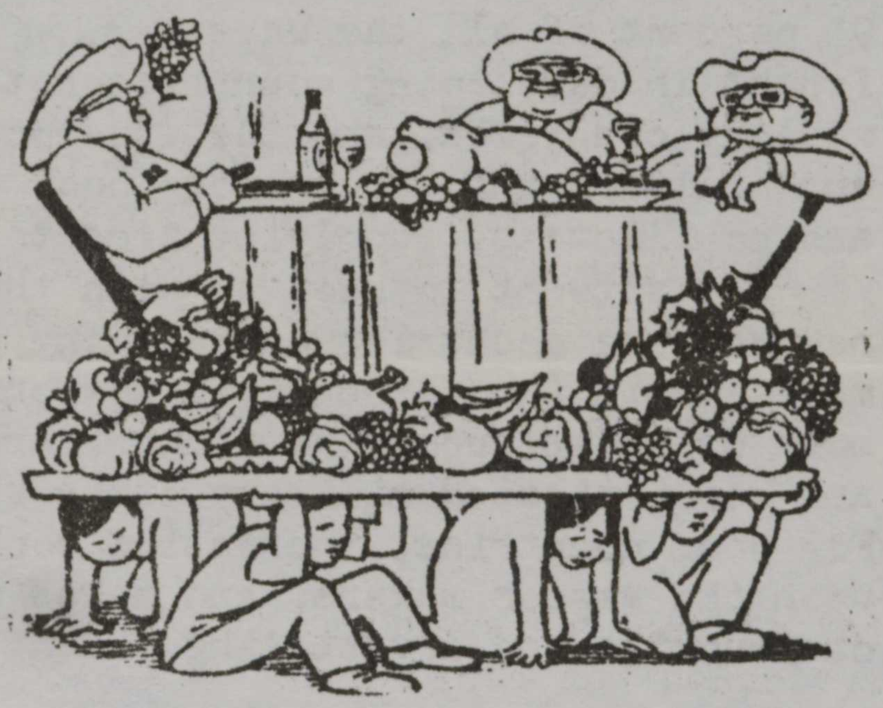
"It is vital that we see modern weapons of war for what they are-evidence of madness...This is a world where children are dying of hunger while we continue to pour our best efforts into preparing for Armageddon".

Archbishop of Canterbury 1981

In 1981, the world spent about $22for military purposes for every $1 it spent on development aid to poor countries.

5 percent of one year's world military expenditures could provide school places for 100 million children who currently do not attend school.

5 percent of one year's world military expenditures could also provide basic education to 25 million illiterate adults in the world.



THE ARMS RACE CONTRIBUTES TO REPRESSION OF LEGITMATE SOCIAL CHANGE, CREATES FEAR AND INSECURITY ABOUT THE FUTURE, AND UNDERMINES NORMAL ACTIVITY AND DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS.

The current situation in Guatemala starkly illustrates this. Many decades of poverty and repression and injustice have fostered strong movements for social change in Guatemala today. Many Guatemalans feel that peaceful avenues to change have been blocked by a small elite supported by the Guatemalan Army. The army has been using forced conscription of poor peasant youths as one of several means of repression. Eyewitness accounts in a recent Oxfam America study describe the suffering, fear and insecurity which military activity and repression have caused: "In some areas, helicoptors and army troops harass farmers and burn crops....It is obvious that there will be a shortage of food as the flight and repression grow...You can be sure that there will be a shortage again this year as the farmers disappear or are prevented from going into their fields because of fear." "All community-based work ground to a halt. Vaccination campaigns were curtailed; latrine projects could not be continued; and health promoter projects were halted. Student doctors and nurses are afraid to go to the isolated communities and therefore health care has been cut off. Many health workers have been threathened or killed..." Military aid and arms sales from some industrialized nations, as well as training of Guatemalan military and police by other countries have made it easier for the Guatemalan military to control and repress even such basic reforms as better health care and literacy programs.

THE ARMS RACE INCREASES THE DEBTS OF POOR COUNTRIES WHILE IT WORSENS THEIR ECONOMIC POSITION AND THE LIVES OF THEIR POOR.

In recent years, poor countries have bought increasingly modern and sophisticated weapons, in an effort to keep up with their neighbours. In many countries military spending has risen much faster than productivity or economic growth. This creates economic burdens for the poor, especially, by increasing the rate of inflation and decreasing the amount which the government is likely to spend on basic human needs. When popular unrest is caused by worsening economic conditions, governments may turn some of their newly-acquired weapons and military training against their own people, or engage in military adventures against neighboring countries in order to distract attention from deteriorating economic conditions at home.

NEXT MONTH'S NEWSLETTER WILL INCLUDE ANOTHER ARTICLE ON THE ARMS RACE AND WORLD HUNGER-"WHY DOES THE U.S. CONTINUE THE ARMS RACE"&"WHAT CAN WE DO?.)