

U.S. arms race just a war on terrorism

By Thalif Deen

NEW YORK (IPS)-The U.S. "war" against global terrorism threatens to trigger a new arms race in the Middle East and Asia, say defense analysts.

Oman already has chalked up a major munitions purchase under Washington's new policy of unrestricted arms sales and military assistance to countries willing to join its coalition against suspected terrorists.

"Once again, it appears that U.S. weapons transfers are being used as party favors, to reward countries that do our bidding," says Natalie Goldring, executive director of the disarmament program at the University of Maryland.

She describes as "unfortunate" the U.S. decision to sell \$1.1 billion worth of sophisticated weapons to the sultanate.

"Given that our pilots are likely to face U.S. weapons that we transferred to the region in previous years, you'd think we'd be more careful," she says.

"We are already facing the possibility that the Taliban will use our own weapons against us," she adds. "And we think the answer is: transfer more weapons to this region, with less oversight?"

The arms package to Oman includes 12 F-16 C/D advanced fighter jets, 10 anti-aircraft air-to-air medium range anti-aircraft (AMRAAM) missiles, 10 Sidewinder missiles, 20 anti-ship Harpoon missiles and new radar equipment.

"The proposed sale will contribute to the foreign policy and national security of the U.S. by helping to improve the security of a friendly country," the Pentagon says in a statement.

The Defense Department also says the sale will "strengthen Oman as a coalition partner" by enhancing cooperation with the U.S. and "other coalition forces in the region."

Since Washington has reached agreements with Pakistan, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Uzbekistan to either use their airfields or overfly their territories during military strikes against Afghanistan-it is expected to reciprocate by providing unrestricted arms and military assistance to all of these countries.

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The United States is Saudi Arabia's largest arms supplier, with more than \$2 billion in sales projected for this year. This year's sales are estimated at \$375 million to Turkey and \$1.7 billion to Uzbekistan.

Washington has lifted its ban on arms sales to Pakistan, paving the way for fresh military supplies to Islamabad.

Erik Floden, editor of the Washington-based Arms Trade News, says "lifting all restrictions on U.S. arms exports to any country willing to provide rhetorical support for the war against terrorism may provide human rights violators the equipment to imprison, torture or kill their own people."

Arms sales may seem poised to increase, he adds, but the region's arms race has been under way "since the days when we supplied weapons and training to Iraq and Iran."

Before the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, the U.S. was the largest single supplier of arms to Tehran. During the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, Washington covertly supplied arms and military assistance to Iraq.

The Middle East continues to be the largest regional market for weapons, according to Floden.

The U.S. Congressional Research Service (CRS) recently reported that the Middle East accounted for 74.8 percent of all U.S. arms transfer agreements to developing nations during 1993-1996, or about \$46 billion worth of business. In 1997-2000, the region accounted for 47.2 percent of all arms agreements, or about \$38.4 billion.

Oman, which has traditionally depended on British jet fighters, is for the first time being armed with American combat aircraft. U.S.-built F-16 fighters also are in service in Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, all longstanding U.S. allies.

Last year, Oman announced plans to spend an average of about \$2.2 billion on defense annually through 2005, up from an average of about \$1.7 billion through 1999.

Russia and Iran, traditional supporters of the Northern Alliance opposition in Afghanistan, announced they would provide additional arms and military aid to the rebel group as it intensifies its fight against the Taliban regime.

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Ashcroft urges caution with government data

WASHINGTON (AP) - Obtaining government records may be more difficult under a Bush administration policy change made a month after the terrorist attacks.

Attorney General John Ashcroft directed agency leaders to be cautious in releasing records to journalists and others. He said agencies must "carefully consider" things like threats to national security and the effectiveness of law enforcement.

Ashcroft also said that agencies that legitimately turn down requests made under the Freedom of Information Act will have the backing of the Justice Department.

"Any discretionary decision by your agency to disclose information protected under the FOIA should be made only after full and deliberate consideration of the institutional, commercial, and personal privacy interests" that could be implicated, Ashcroft said in a memo dated Oct. 12 and released last Tuesday.

The FOIA allows reporters and others to get unclassified government records that officials would not otherwise

release. Journalists have used the law to reveal government wrongdoing and abuses.

Caesar Andrews, editor of Gannett News Service and president of the Associated Press Managing Editors, said public access should not be weakened.

"We certainly understand that during these very volatile and sensitive times there will be information that needs to be kept classified. At the same time, given the same volatile environment, there is a tremendous need for the public to have access to certain information. I'd bemoan any holding back," he said.

Ashcroft said the Bush administration is committed to complying with FOIA so that Americans "can be assured neither fraud nor government waste is concealed."

He said that must be balanced with other issues, including national security and protection of business information. The attorney general told agency leaders to consult with Justice Department lawyers about significant requests for information.

The new guidelines replace ones in place since 1993, according to the memo.

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