Welcome: this way for cluster bombs

Arms fair fails to stop promotion of controversial weapons. Unexploded cluster weapons have maimed and killed civilians in Kosovo and Afghanistan as well as Iraq. Charities and humanitarian agencies say they should be declared illegal along with anti-personnel landmines

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Cluster weapons were on show yesterday at the opening of Europe's largest arms fair in London Docklands despite an appeal from the organisers to hide them away.

The controversial weapons, which pose a potential threat to civilians because they contain many bomblets which can fail to explode in the initial attack, were on offer at the stand of an Israeli arms company, Israel Military Industries Ltd.

The company said it could provide new types of cluster weapons, now described as "cargo ammunition". One is called Bomblet M85, which, IMI's catalogue says, has been tested successfully in England.

The company has manufactured tens of millions of the bomblets for Nato, central and eastern European, and Asian countries.

Another IMI weapon on display, the Anti-Personnel, Anti Materiel Cartridge, or APAM, with assorted ammunition designed to hit armour and bunkers as well as soldiers in the open, is described as providing a "real breakthrough in anti-personnel warfare".

IMI's catalogue recognises that "hazardous duds normally constitute a very serious problem for users of cargo ammunition". These duds, it admits, are "in essence mines".

But it adds that IMI has the "safest self-destruct bomblets in the world, the best penetration, and the widest lethal area". A salesman for IMI told the Guardian that he could not speak about the supply of the controversial weapons to the British army, which fired hundreds of them during the war against Iraq. However asked how many weapons his company sold to Britain, he replied: "Officially none."

A spokesman for BAE Systems, Britain's largest arms company, said last night that it had bought 26,000 rounds of Israeli L20 artillery cluster shells in a contract agreed shortly before the Iraqi war. The Ministry of Defence has admitted that the army fired more than 2,000 Israeli cluster munitions from howitzers during the battle for Basra.

Israeli coyness may be explained by a request from Spearhead, the company organising the Defence Systems and Equipment Exhibition International, for companies not to show off cluster weapons. "We suggested it was inappropriate. Though they are not illegal there is a very strong feeling in this country about cluster bombs," said Paul Beaver, exhibition spokesman.

Cluster weapons contain multiple small bomblets, a significant number of which fail to explode leaving a potentially fatal attraction for civilians, children in particular.

Unexploded cluster weapons have maimed and killed civilians in Kosovo and Afghanistan as well as Iraq. Charities and humanitarian agencies say they should be declared illegal along with anti-personnel landmines.

Richard Lloyd director of the campaign, Landmine Action, said yesterday dozens of Iraqis had been killed and maimed in southern Iraq and there was a "high probability" some unexploded bomblets were those fired by British guns.

The UN children's fund, Unicef, says more than 1,000 children have been injured by cluster bomblets and other unexploded munitions since the official end of the war in Iraq.

The MoD said yesterday its policy was one of buying the most effective weapons for the best value for money. British defence officials said with Israeli cluster weapons "the legacy problem is reduced".

They say that Israeli cluster weapons have a failure rate of 2%, compared with between 5% and 10% for older types of cluster weapons dropped by Britain and US aircraft and fired by American rocket systems during the Gulf war.

Each L20 shell is believed to contain 49 bomblets. With 2,000 fired from British guns around Basra that would leave about 2,000 unexploded bombs.

The MoD said during the war that British howitzers with a range of 30km fired Israeli-made L20 cluster shells on targets "in the open".

Adam Ingram, the armed forces minister, said after the war: "Cluster bombs are not illegal. There were troops, there was equipment in and around the built-up areas...the bombs were used accordingly to take out the threat to our troops."

The arms fair was opened yesterday by Geoff Hoon. There are about 950 companies showing their wares, half of them British.

Von: Richard Norton-Taylor, The Guardian, 10.09.03

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