



# Trident: A briefing



Quaker Peace & Social Witness  
Peace & Disarmament Programme

The UK's nuclear weapon, Trident, is expected to remain operational into the 2020s. The government has indicated that it intends to decide before the next general election whether to begin the process of replacing Trident and if so, how.

This briefing provides background about Britain's nuclear policy, the forthcoming decisions, and the debate.

## Trident in the UK

Trident is a submarine-based nuclear weapon system designed by the United States. In the UK, the system consists of four submarines built at Barrow-in-Furness and based at Faslane on Scotland's west coast. Normally, one submarine is on active patrol, armed with up to 16 missiles carrying a total of 48 independently targetable thermonuclear warheads.

The UK's 58 missiles are leased from the US, which built them and maintains them.

The warheads are based on a modified US design and built at the Atomic Weapons Establishment in Berkshire. The UK has around 200 warheads, each with an explosive yield equivalent to up to 100 kilotons of TNT. By comparison, the yield of the atomic bomb used against Hiroshima in 1945 was in the region of 12-15 kilotons.

The UK has a stockpile of several tonnes of weapons-grade fissile material (nuclear explosive)—plutonium and uranium. The plutonium was produced at British nuclear reprocessing reactors such as that at Sellafield, Cumbria. The UK and the US have often bartered fissile materials.



A Trident missile. Photo: Ministry of Defence

## World nuclear arsenals

Eight states are known to possess nuclear weapons. Five are the so-called 'declared' Nuclear Weapon States as defined in the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT): China, France, Russia, UK, USA. The other three—India, Israel and Pakistan—stand outside the NPT regime.

North Korea's claim to have developed operational nuclear weapons is unconfirmed. Iran is widely suspected of aspiring to militarise its nuclear programme, although it strongly denies this.

States are coy about the size of their arsenals. In 2005, Russia was estimated to have the largest nuclear arsenal (14,000 warheads), followed by the US (10,600), France (300), China (possibly 100+), the UK (200), Israel (200), India (50) and Pakistan (50).<sup>1</sup>



This ring is almost 100% pure plutonium. At just 11cm in diameter and weighing 5.3kg, it is enough for one modern nuclear bomb core. (Photo: Nuclear Archive)

## Disarmament and arms control

Of the international agreements aiming to limit and reverse the spread of nuclear weapons worldwide, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) is the most significant. Signed in 1968 and in force since 1970, the NPT is the most universal of international agreements relating to arms control and disarmament. The treaty is legally binding on all 188 states parties to it, including the UK. The four states not parties to the treaty are India, Israel and Pakistan, which

have never signed it, and North Korea, which withdrew in 2003.

The NPT obligates the five 'declared' Nuclear Weapon States to:

'...pursue negotiations in good faith on effective measures relating to cessation of the nuclear arms race at an early date and to nuclear disarmament, and on a Treaty on general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control.'

In 1996, the International Court of Justice reaffirmed that states were legally obligated to pursue and conclude negotiations on disarmament. It further ruled that the use of nuclear weapons 'would generally be contrary' to humanitarian and other international law regulating the conduct of warfare. In 2000, the NPT Review Conference strengthened the treaty's disarmament clause by expressing an 'unequivocal undertaking by the Nuclear Weapon States to accomplish the total elimination of their arsenals'.

The NPT contains a reciprocal obligation on all Non-Nuclear Weapon States not to develop nuclear weapons, while giving the right to develop civil nuclear power programmes.

The NPT is often described as a bargain between the Nuclear Weapon States, which must abolish their nuclear weapons, and the rest, which must not build them. The agreement has done more than any other to slow and prevent the worldwide spread of nuclear weapons and create conditions for disarmament negotiations. However, the failure thus far of the Nuclear Weapon States to abolish their arsenals, as well as some attempts by other states to build the weapons, continue to undermine the treaty. Were the treaty and the bargain it contains to collapse, nuclear weapons could spread worldwide within a few decades, greatly increasing the risk of nuclear war.

## Nuclear policy

The Nuclear Weapon States frequently reaffirm their disarmament obligations under the NPT while arguing that, for the time being, nuclear weapons are vital to their national security.

At the NPT Review Conference in May 2005, the UK restated its 'unequivocal undertaking to accomplish the total elimination of nuclear

arsenals'. Similarly, the 1998 Strategic Defence Review states: 'The Government wishes to see a safer world in which there is no place for nuclear weapons...' However, the text then continues: 'Nevertheless, while large nuclear arsenals and risks of proliferation remain, our minimum deterrent remains a necessary element of our security.' The Defence White Paper of 2003 saw a 'continuing role of nuclear weapons as the ultimate guarantor of the UK's national security'. The 2005 Labour Party Election Manifesto stated that a Labour government would be 'committed to retaining the independent nuclear deterrent'.

All the Nuclear Weapon States seek to reconcile their nuclear policies with their disarmament obligations by arguing that the conditions are not yet right for disarmament negotiations, although none has been specific about what those conditions might be. Furthermore, they each point to their own record on disarmament and arms control as evidence of their commitment to their NPT obligations. For example, at the 2005 NPT review conference, the UK reminded delegates that it downsized its nuclear posture in the 1998 Strategic Defence Review to reflect the passing of the cold war.

By continuing to possess nuclear weapons, states could be exacerbating the threat that they wish to reduce. In 2005, Mohamed ElBaradei, Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, said:

'As long as some countries place strategic reliance on nuclear weapons as a deterrent, other countries will emulate them. We cannot delude ourselves into thinking otherwise.'

However, no state with nuclear weapons accepts this; the UK government states that there is no evidence for the argument made.

## The rationale for nuclear weapons in the UK

The UK's security context has altered significantly since the days of the cold war: the Soviet Union is long gone and the only countries with the capability to launch a nuclear attack on the UK are our allies. There is no threat from China and the new nuclear weapons states have neither the motive nor the capability to strike. The 1998 Strategic

Defence Review stated:

'There is no direct military threat to the United Kingdom or Western Europe. Nor do we foresee the re-emergence of such a threat...'

The 2003 Defence White Paper reaffirmed this.

Facing no strategic threat, the official rationale for UK nuclear policy is that a deterrent is needed to reduce unforeseen future risks, although the government is not specific about what these might be.

## Factors driving UK nuclear policy

The government's claim that the sole purpose of nuclear weapons is to deter future aggression does not stand up to scrutiny. The aspirations to retain the status of a world power, to sustain the transatlantic relationship, and to support the British arms industry are all major factors. Although these are largely unvoiced, they have a strong—possibly decisive—influence on the government's position. This means that the government might choose to retain nuclear weapons primarily for political reasons in the absence of a credible security-related purpose for them.

'World power' status

Nuclear weapons have always been seen as a means of exerting strategic political influence in the international community. According to the Ministry of Defence's own history of the British thermonuclear programme, Winston Churchill justified it in 1954 by claiming that Britain needed *firstly* to belong 'to the club' of world powers.<sup>2</sup> Whilst national security concerns were certainly in the foreground for policy-makers, most important was the requirement for Britain to 'prove her worth as a partner [of the United States]'.<sup>2</sup>

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**Mohamed ElBaradei**

## The transatlantic dimension

The British nuclear programme is closely integrated with that of the US. Despite the official description of UK Trident as an 'independent nuclear deterrent', it is wholly dependent on US design, manufacture and maintenance. The government says that it could use Trident without US political and technical support but even this is in question.<sup>3</sup>

The UK considers that nuclear sharing with the US is vital for the preservation of the transatlantic relationship. This would be a major consideration in deciding whether or not to replace Trident, if not the determining one.

Yet just as the UK relies on the US for its nuclear policy, so the US relies on the UK in return. This unspoken bargain would have made it difficult for the UK to stand aside from the wars over Afghanistan and Iraq in recent years, should it have wished to do so. A successor to Trident, depending as it would on US assistance, would 'continue to tie the UK to US policy', as Admiral Raymond Lygo, former head of nuclear programmes for the Royal Navy, said in 2005.<sup>4</sup>

Moves in the US to develop smaller nuclear weapons amplify this concern. Smaller weapons would enable the US or UK to lower the 'nuclear threshold' – the point in an escalating dispute when nuclear weapons could be considered for use in a pre-emptive strike to eliminate a perceived threat.

## British military industry

Replacing Trident would also be seen as an opportunity to safeguard the British military industry, which is concerned that jobs will be lost if the decision is not made soon.<sup>5</sup>

Following the US lead, a new submarine-based system is the most likely option for replacing Trident. There are no reliable figures for the cost of replacement but estimates are in the region of £15-25 billion. A portion of this would probably be used to commission new submarines from the Barrow shipyard at a possible cost of around £1.2 billion each, taking as long as 14 years to build.

The shipyard is owned by arms giant BAE Systems.<sup>6</sup> Given that successive governments have championed the British arms industry more than any other industrial sector, this would be a further major influence on the Trident replacement decision.

## Public opinion

When asked which are the most important issues facing Britain today, fewer than 5% of Britons mention nuclear weapons or other disarmament concerns.<sup>7</sup> The result is that public opinion is largely uninformed.

Polls show divided opinion on nuclear weapons and results vary wildly depending on how questions are formulated. The most recent poll, by MORI in September 2005 using neutral language, found that 46% opposed replacing Trident and 44% supported it. When the possible costs of replacement are mentioned, opposition grows. Support for replacement is higher among Conservative than Labour voters.<sup>8</sup> Opinion in Scotland, where Trident is based, tends to oppose it.

Other research reveals that unexamined fear characterises much public opinion on nuclear weapons. Many believe that Britain needs the bomb simply because they see the world as unstable. However, they may not be able to say what threats the UK actually faces or how nuclear weapons could provide security against them. In particular, many assume without reason or evidence that the prospect of a Muslim state with nuclear weapons poses one of the greatest risks to the UK. In part, this stems from a lack of public awareness about global security issues, combined with some media portrayals of Islam and the Muslim world as threatening.<sup>9</sup>

## The security debate

Most of the nuclear weapons debate centres on a pragmatic assessment of whether they serve peace and security or undermine them.

Proponents of the British nuclear policy argue that nuclear deterrence is a prudent hedge against unknown future threats in an uncertain world. A primary duty of the state is to protect the nation from harm, and a strong deterrent is the best means to prevent nuclear conflict. As Julian Lewis MP writes: 'The unpredictability of future military threats constitutes the *raison d'être* of the British nuclear deterrent.'<sup>10</sup>

Critics say the logic of deterrence is that every nation should acquire nuclear weapons. Conceptualising security in global terms, they argue that the possession and justification of nuclear weapons encourage their global

proliferation, making a nuclear exchange in the future more likely. Typical of this view is a statement in 1996 by 60 retired Generals and Admirals from 17 countries, arguing that the very existence of nuclear weapons presented a 'peril to global peace and security'.<sup>11</sup>

Other arguments are based mainly on points of principle or ideology, rather than pragmatic considerations about delivering security. The neoconservative organisation *Project for the New American Century (PNAC)*, which is closely allied to the Bush Administration, takes such an ideological view. It argues that the world needs US leadership, through which a hostile world may be held in relative peace and the US itself may prosper. This requires 'military strength, diplomatic energy and ... moral principle', and US nuclear weapons are an essential component of the strategy.<sup>12</sup>

Standing in opposition to this view are many faith and activist groups, including Quakers and many other church groups, who believe that nuclear weapons are inhumane and immoral. Nuclear weapons are not seen to keep people safe but to enable the few to gain power over the many and perpetuate global injustice, generating insecurity in turn. The Quaker activist Helen Steven writes:

'If I see the base at Faslane as morally wrong and against my deepest convictions – as wrong as the gas chambers of Auschwitz, as wrong as the deliberate starvation of children – then by keeping silent, I condone what goes on there.'<sup>13</sup>

## Arguments for disarmament

In addition to those already mentioned, some arguments of principle follow:

- The testimonies of the *Hibakusha* – the survivors of the nuclear blasts in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, 1945, which together killed 130,000 immediately and many more thousands in the aftermath – show the inhumanity of the weapons in use.
- Nuclear testing has usually taken place on the land of indigenous peoples, often displacing them from their homes and poisoning their land. Representatives of indigenous peoples directly affected by the nuclear age made a statement in 1997: 'Colonised and indigenous

peoples have, in the large part, borne the brunt of this nuclear devastation – from the mining of uranium and the testing of nuclear weapons on indigenous peoples land, to the dumping, storage and transport of plutonium and nuclear wastes, and the theft of land for nuclear infrastructure.'<sup>14</sup> Similarly in Scotland, where Trident is based, most of the population oppose it.

- A replacement of Trident would run against the spirit, if not the letter, of the UK's obligation under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to negotiate disarmament.
- The interrelated desires to remain a world power, to project power over other nations, to preserve the transatlantic relationship, and to support the British arms industry, are no justification for possessing nuclear weapons.

Some pragmatic arguments:

- The vast majority of states, most of which face greater insecurity than the UK, do not believe that nuclear weapons enhance global security and see no need for them in their own national security postures.
- Nuclear Weapon States justify retention of nuclear weapons indefinitely, while insisting that other states such as Iran renounce similar aspirations of their own. This double standard is unsustainable and makes nuclear proliferation more likely.
- With the exception of the US, the UK now spends more on the military than any other country, yet faces no conventional security threat.<sup>15</sup> The large cost of acquiring a new nuclear weapon system could be used more effectively to help tackle the systemic causes of future global insecurity: climate change, economic injustice and militarism.
- The Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, as well as a number of false alarms of attack during the Cold War, show that nuclear deterrence is unstable and unreliable.
- A number of Cold War accidents involving critical damage to nuclear weapons – all kept secret at the time – show that the risk of a devastating nuclear accident is always present while the weapons exist.
- Nuclear power programmes, which are used to produce the fissile material for weapons, are financially unsustainable, generate highly radioactive waste that cannot be disposed of safely, present a target for terrorist attack, and always run a risk of repeating the kind of catastrophe seen in Chernobyl in 1986.



The Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston, Berkshire. Photo: Getmapping

## The decision

Although the government wishes to decide the future of its nuclear policy before the next election, it does not need to do so, nor has it made a formal commitment to this. The working life of parts of the Trident system could be extended, while others are replaced. US support would be needed for either a lifetime extension or replacement, therefore much depends on parallel decisions in the US about its own nuclear posture.

Decisions about nuclear weapons in Britain have always been made in secret by the prime minister and a select group of Cabinet colleagues. Parliament has been excluded from the process and presented after the event with a *fait accompli*. There is wide agreement that the future of Britain's nuclear policy should not be decided until an informed public and parliamentary debate has taken place. Many are calling for the final decision to be made by parliamentary vote, which the government is unlikely to countenance without strong public and parliamentary pressure.

Many analysts believe that a decision to replace Trident has already been made in principle, although ministers and officials insist that all options including non-replacement, remain open. Immediately before the NPT Review Conference in May 2005, at which the UK would assure the international community of its good faith in seeking the global abolition of nuclear weapons, the prime minister stated in a BBC interview:

'Well, we've got to retain our nuclear deterrent, and we've had an independent nuclear deterrent for a long time. Now that decision is for another time, but in principle, I believe it's important to retain our own independent deterrent. I believe that is the right thing for the country, I think it's important that however we look at all the different aspects of it. Any decision hasn't yet been taken.'<sup>16</sup>

The government is investing £1 billion over three years in the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston, Berkshire, recruiting new scientists and engineers and acquiring new technology. The government says that this is to assure the safety of the warheads without explosive testing and to keep options open for a successor to Trident, 'should this prove necessary'.<sup>17</sup>

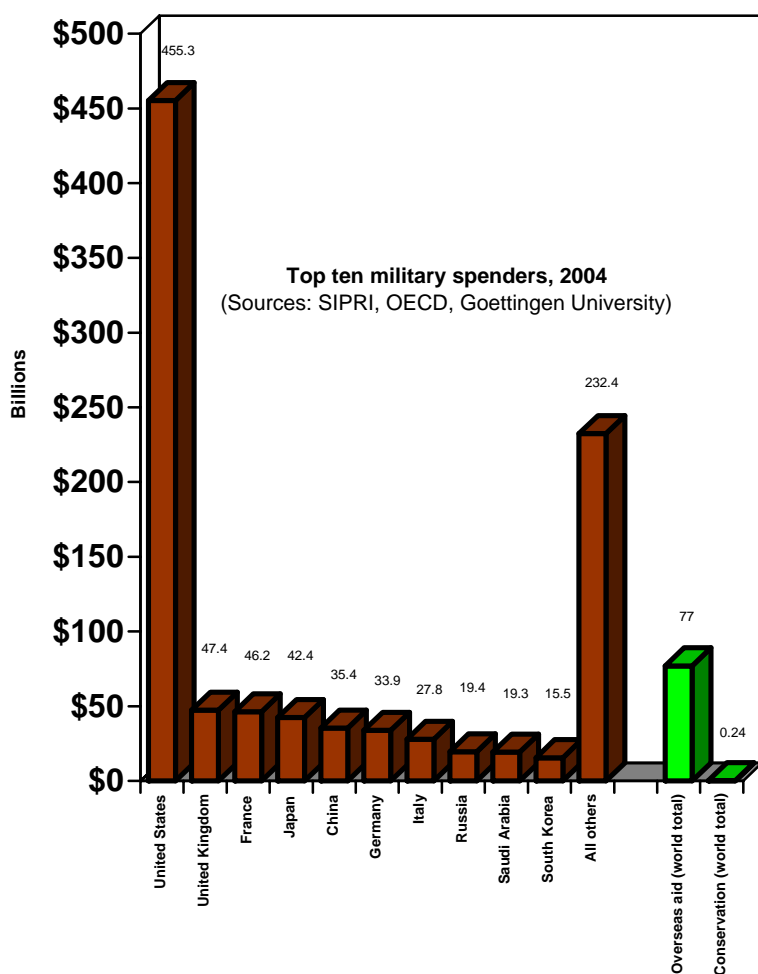
## Quaker and other church views

Although not all Churches in Britain advocate the non-replacement of Trident, many do and there is much common ground on the issue.

As the Archbishop of Canterbury has put it, the Gospel entails 'a presumption against violence', and in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, the 'foundations of authentic peace rest on the truth about God and man'.<sup>18</sup> It follows that Christian views about nuclear weapons should be determined in the light of the Gospel, informed by security needs of the nation and the wider world. Churches therefore generally consider the global abolition of nuclear weapons to be a moral and theological imperative. Most also agree that the Nuclear Weapon States as a group have fallen short of their disarmament obligations under the NPT. A letter in *The Guardian* from five church leaders in April 2005 called for the decision about replacing Trident

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**Tony Blair**



'You cannot foster harmony by the apparatus of discord, nor cherish goodwill by the equipment of hate. But it is by harmony and goodwill that human security can be obtained.'<sup>22</sup>

Quakers have tended to take a global perspective on questions of peace and security and a long-term view. Nuclear weapons are seen to be both morally wrong on principle and pragmatically self-defeating in practice. More fundamentally, Quakers and Christian peace organisations regard reliance on nuclear weapons as idolatrous – a form of false faith in which humanity loses sight of itself and of God.

By asking what we can affirm about our humanity in the light of the Gospel, the foundations of a sustainable, practical agenda for global peace and security are possible. This involves reconceptualising 'security' in terms of inclusive justice and common human needs, rather than primarily the physical defence of the nation state achieved through military might. Ecological responsibility, economic justice and progressive

global demilitarisation are three core ingredients of a sustainable system of security that places equality and justice at its heart, rather than the power of few over many.

to be made openly and democratically and for the government 'to spell out the conditions under which the UK might be content to forego a replacement of Trident'.<sup>19</sup>

The historic peace churches – Brethren, Mennonites and Quakers – believe that there is no ethical, practical or theological justification for nuclear weapons. The pacifist strands in other churches – represented by organisations such as the Anglican Pacifist Fellowship, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Pax Christi, among others – share this view. In January 2006, Pope Benedict XVI expounded a similar view, describing the doctrine of nuclear deterrence as 'not only baneful but completely fallacious' and calling for 'a progressive and concerted nuclear disarmament'.<sup>20</sup> In February 2006, the World Council of Churches passed a minute urging Churches to 'prevail upon governments until they recognize the incontrovertible immorality of nuclear weapons'.<sup>21</sup>

Quakers have always opposed nuclear weapons in Britain, believing that genuine security depends on flourishing relationships free from the threat of violence.

## Abolishing nuclear weapons

Abolishing nuclear weapons is both possible and imperative. People of faith have much to offer to the debate, not least on the vital question of why a handful of states are beholden to the seductive, dangerous notion that nuclear weapons can enhance their interests in the world community.

**'Churches must prevail upon governments until they recognize the incontrovertible immorality of nuclear weapons.'**

**World Council of Churches**

Disarmament carries risks of its own, but the dangers of continuing the current trend of indefinite retention of nuclear weapons, which could lead to their global proliferation within a generation, are far greater.

A common argument against abolition is that one state could develop nuclear weapons in secret and hold a nuclear-free world to ransom. This is tenuous: nuclear facilities are difficult to conceal, and producing the weapons is technologically challenging and time-consuming. It would be extremely difficult to build nuclear weapons in secret or without disruption by a united international community.

Unilateral and multilateral approaches to disarmament need not exclude each other. In practice, disarmament takes place in a multilateral context, but is driven by unilateral gestures of cautious goodwill, and it can work. The Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, instituted in 1988 by the Soviet Union and the United States, offers an example of a successful nuclear disarmament agreement. In three years, it eliminated all medium-range nuclear weapons, verified by both sides through on-site inspections over a period of 13 years.

Nuclear abolition would require a new treaty to agree a process for disarmament and allow regular inspections in all states to verify their nuclear-free status. The Model Nuclear Weapons Convention, drafted by non-governmental lawyers, scientists and disarmament experts in 1997, provides the kind of framework that would be required, and the International Atomic Energy Agency is an existing mechanism for inspections.

Nuclear disarmament may also require that states forego nuclear power as the mainstay of their energy supply. Civil nuclear power technology can be diverted to weapons programmes and carries other risks of its own. Nuclear disarmament and clean, renewable energy go hand-in-hand.

When the UK committed to abandon its chemical and biological weapons programmes in 1956, it freed resources to focus on building a treaty regime to reduce the threat worldwide. Similarly, the UK could now play a leading role by choosing not to replace Trident, and by initiating discussions on nuclear disarmament with the other nuclear weapon states.

## About the QPSW Peace & Disarmament Programme

The Peace & Disarmament Programme is one of a number in QPSW working to further Quaker peace and social justice concerns.

We work to develop a deeper understanding of the Quaker peace testimony; campaign for sustainable global security through disarmament; support the peace movement; and lead the Quaker response to international military crises.

Visit [www.peaceexchange.org.uk](http://www.peaceexchange.org.uk) for the latest peace resources and action opportunities. To make a query or comment, please contact us at [disarm@quaker.org.uk](mailto:disarm@quaker.org.uk) or 020 7663 1067. Alternatively, write to:

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<sup>1</sup> Natural Resources Defense Council: [www.nrdc.org](http://www.nrdc.org)

<sup>2</sup> Lorna Arnold, *Britain and the H-Bomb* (Palgrave: Basingstoke, 2001 - © Ministry of Defence), p.51, 37, 54.

<sup>3</sup> See Dan Plesch, *The Future of Britain's WMD*, (Foreign Policy Centre, March 2006 - report)

<sup>4</sup> Cited in *The New Statesman*, 27 March 2006

<sup>5</sup> *The Financial Times*, 4 April 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Lee Willett, Head of Military Capabilities, Royal United Services Institute, cited in *The Financial Times*, 4 April 2006.

<sup>7</sup> T Milne et al, An End to UK Nuclear Weapons, [undated]

<sup>8</sup> MORI poll for Greenpeace, September 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Opinion research for the Weapons of Mass Destruction Awareness Programme, 2006

<sup>10</sup> [www.julianlewis.net](http://www.julianlewis.net)

<sup>11</sup> [www.comeclean.org.uk](http://www.comeclean.org.uk)

<sup>12</sup> [www.newamericancentury.org](http://www.newamericancentury.org)

<sup>13</sup> Quaker Faith & Practice, 24.27 (1984)

<sup>14</sup> Moorea Declaration, [www.abolition2000.org](http://www.abolition2000.org)

<sup>15</sup> Based on 2004 figures (latest available), Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

<sup>16</sup> BBC *Newsnight*, 21 April 2005

<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Defence Memorandum to Commons Defence Committee, 14 March 2006

<sup>18</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury, *Just War Revisited* (Lecture to the Royal Institute for International Affairs, 14 October 2003). Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for the Celebration of World Day of Peace*, 1 January 2006

<sup>19</sup> The Guardian, 30 April 2005

<sup>20</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Message for the Celebration of World Day of Peace*, 1 January 2006

<sup>21</sup> Ninth General Assembly of the World Council of Churches, *Minute on the Elimination of Nuclear Arms*, 14-23 February 2006

<sup>22</sup> Quaker Faith & Practice, 24.40