



## ONE STEP TOWARD A SAFER WORLD

After more than a decade of campaigning by Oxfam and other rights organizations, a historic UN vote in April gave us the world's first-ever international Arms Trade Treaty.

BY COCO MCCABE

When Hollywood actor and Oxfam ambassador Djimon Hounsou visited South Sudan recently and saw young boys toting AK-47s, memories of his own childhood in Benin came flooding back.

"I distinctly remember the atmosphere of unrest that came with two coups d'états," Hounsou wrote in a blog post after his return. "I remember my mother carrying me on her back as we fled Cotonou, the capital of Benin, while gunshots and screams filled the air."

Hounsou was in South Sudan on a mission for Oxfam: to see firsthand, and to spread the word about, the deadly consequences of a poorly regulated international arms trade that allows guns to flow freely across borders into the arsenals of war criminals and human rights abusers—and even into the hands of boys. The people of South Sudan—the world's newest nation—have endured

decades of armed conflict fed, in part, by this trade.

But on April 2, in a historic vote at the UN, world governments took a step that will begin to alleviate some of the horrors the South Sudanese and millions of others on our planet confront daily. Following more than a decade of campaigning by Oxfam and other rights organizations, 156 countries including the US voted resoundingly in favor of a global Arms Trade Treaty—the world's first. The treaty will require governments to determine whether the arms they want to sell or transfer could be used for human rights abuses, violations of humanitarian law, or terrorism. If there is a major risk of any of that happening, the deal stops there—and there is no transfer.

Although there were 23 abstentions, only three countries voted against the treaty: North Korea, Iran, and Syria, where a deadly

conflict has displaced two million people and forced more than 1.1 million others to flee to neighboring countries. The UN predicts the number of refugees streaming out of Syria could reach three million by the end of this year—a crisis that could overwhelm hosting countries.

It is exactly because of human-created disasters like this—where schools and medical facilities, water services, and power supplies have been damaged or destroyed, leaving millions of people in need—that Oxfam pushed so hard for a treaty. And Syria is only one chilling example.

"Millions of people have stood up and called for governments to put an end to the irresponsible arms trade and to develop rules of behavior that put human rights and the protection of civilians at the center of

**ABOVE:** At a water point in Lac Vert Camp in Goma in the Democratic Republic of Congo, a scrap of plastic, twisted tight, helps to keep water sloshing from this jug. Oxfam has been providing aid, including water and sanitation services, to thousands of Congolese forced to flee their homes by violent conflict. *Katie Holt / Oxfam*



Right the Wrong **OXFAM**  
America



In early March, Oxfam ambassador Djimon Hounsou visited a cattle camp in South Sudan, where many communities are suffering from the consequences of the unregulated flow of arms and ammunition. *Mackenzie Knowles-Coursin*

arms trade decisions,” said Scott Stedjan, a senior policy adviser for Oxfam who has worked for years on the treaty. “The most heartrending appeals are from the civilians who have endured the chaos and horror of unregulated combat, irregular combatants, and loose arms flowing over borders.”

## OXFAM JOINS A COALITION

Efforts to control the global arms trade date back almost 100 years to when members of the League of Nations tried unsuccessfully to develop an agreement in the wake of World War 1. Deadly conflicts in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and the Balkans in the 1980s and 1990s brought the question to the forefront again, and in 2001, a group of Nobel Peace laureates circulated

a draft framework for a pact on international arms transfers, giving birth to a global drive to build support for the treaty. Two years later, Oxfam joined Amnesty International and the International Action Network on Small Arms and formally launched the Control Arms Campaign.

Ten years ago, when that campaign kicked off in the fall of 2003, only three small countries—Costa Rica, Cambodia, and Mali—supported the idea of a global arms trade treaty. Today, the vast majority of the world’s countries agree with them.

What did it take for us to come so far? An enormous amount of work, culminating last July in a monthlong conference at the UN where governments gathered to hammer

out final language for a treaty. But at the last moment, the politics of a presidential election year, in which gun lobby groups like the National Rifle Association (NRA) figured prominently, derailed the process. The US withdrew its support, saying more time was needed to get the text of the treaty right.

Campaigners—so close to their goal after a decade of intense activism—felt the loss almost physically. But knowing there would be one more chance to get agreement in the months ahead, Oxfam America, as part of the Control Arms coalition, redoubled its effort, focusing sharply on the US and using every campaign tactic in its toolbox.

Oxfam America staffers fed analysis and draft treaty language to key US officials. They instigated letters to President Obama signed by retired generals and admirals, faith leaders, and celebrities. The team wrote op-eds and briefs. They tweeted and blogged and crafted ads countering the NRA’s lies. They launched online actions prompting activists to send 40,000 messages to the White House, pushed out digital ads, and produced a video animation that within days had been viewed by more than 60,000 people.

All of it—finally—paid off.

“At last we have a legally binding international treaty that will regulate the world’s deadliest business,” said Anna MacDonald, Oxfam’s head of arms control, the day of the vote. “The agreement of the Arms Trade Treaty sends a clear message to arms dealers who supply warlords and dictators that their time is up.”



## DO ONE MORE THING TODAY: HELP SEE THE ARMS TRADE TREATY THROUGH

While members of the UN have voted to adopt the treaty, there are several more steps before its terms actually go into force. The treaty opens for countries to sign on June 3. Urge President Obama to sign onto the Arms Trade Treaty as soon as possible at [oxfamamerica.org/signATT](http://oxfamamerica.org/signATT).



226 CAUSEWAY STREET, 5TH FLOOR  
BOSTON, MA 02114-2206  
(800) 77 OXFAM  
[oxfamamerica.org](http://oxfamamerica.org)

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