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OPINION

Arms firms fanning flames in Yemen

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THE sale of arms by South African arms companies to parties involved in the Yemen conflict is exacerbating a crippling humanitarian crisis, and flouting the values enshrined in our Constitution, as well as stripping millions of Yemen civilians of their basic right of access to water.

The export of weapons to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), estimated to be worth billions of rand, has led to the decimation of Yemen's infrastructure, especially the water infrastructure on which the population depend for survival, and the ability to eke out a living in the war-ravaged country.

The coalition of Saudi Arabia and the UAE is party to the war in Yemen, and supports President Abdrabuh Mansour Hadi Mansour against the Houthi rebel forces.

Allowing unrestricted export of weapons to countries that have taken one or the other side to the conflict in Yemen is a serious deviation from the commitments South Africa has made to the international community to prevent arms from landing in wrong hands. This also takes into account the reality that the weapons may be misused to cause harm to the civilians.

South Africa, having, during the apartheid heyday, implored other countries to desist from selling weapons to South Africa to maim and kill its own people, it's a troubling aberration that today we continue to see an outflow of arms from this country to parties that may be guilty of gross human rights violations in Yemen.

Denying civilians in that country the right to access water by destroying the water infrastructure is a grave infraction of international law.

By all accounts, this departs from South Africa's moral compass as a country that promotes and upholds the right to life of all people. By establishing an entity such as the National Conventional Arms Control Committee (NCACC), a committee of Cabinet ministers and an arms trade watchdog, South Africa has sought to continue the tradition to safeguard human rights, and to enforce the National Conventional Arms Control Act 41 of 2002, which seeks to ensure accountability in the conventional arms trade.

The moral conviction that underpins the establishment of structures such as the NCACC is that South Africa should regulate its arms trade, and refrain from being a party to fanning fires of violence against civilians. Yet earlier this month, Open Secrets published a report titled "Profiting from Misery: South Africa's Complicity in War Crimes in Yemen". It makes startling findings that Rheinmetall Denel Munitions, and other South African companies, have regularly supplied Saudi Arabia and the UAE-led coalition with weapons before and since the civil war began in Yemen.

Open Secrets argues that the NCACC should have exercised its mandate and held the arms companies accountable for the export of weapons from South Africa.

However, the arms companies have not refrained from exporting arms, even as they were aware of the devastation and human suffering the arms caused to the Yemen civilians.

It seems the drive for profits at all cost has triumphed, showing no regard for the rights of the Yemen civilians at the mercy of warring parties.

The destruction of water infrastructure in Yemen using weapons exported from South African is most egregious, given that the world is moving towards the celebration of the annual World Water Day on March 22 under the theme: "Valuing Water." This is a theme that should nudge the South African arms companies to stop the practice, and reconsider their stance of selling arms to countries that exacerbate conflict, and in the process cause damage to basic water infrastructure.

As the world focuses its attention on the water crisis on March 22, the reality of a water crisis facing the Yemenis will not be a hearsay for them, but a lived reality.

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