

Tories use 'take out the trash' day to dump controversial reports

 [theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jul/20/tories-use-take-out-the-trash-day-to-dump-controversial-reports](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jul/20/tories-use-take-out-the-trash-day-to-dump-controversial-reports)

Rowena Mason , Jessica Elgot and Rajeev Syal

7/20/2017

[Theresa May](#) has been accused of an “absolute affront” to democracy after dumping dozens of official documents online on parliament’s last day of term, showing the police force numbers have dropped to a 30-year low and the number of soldiers has fallen by 7,000.

The government has published very little for weeks after the election but about 22 written statements and dozens of Whitehall reports were released on Thursday, just as MPs embark on their long summer break.

The tactic – known as “take out the trash day” – means MPs will not be able to scrutinise the information properly while parliament is away for the next seven weeks. The statements included a damning human rights assessment of the UK’s ally [Saudi Arabia](#), the cancellation of the electrification of a key railway and a decision to opt into some new EU regulations on crime-fighting, even though the UK is heading for Brexit.

Toby Perkins, a Labour MP, said the rush of documents released on the last day before recess was an “absolute affront to parliament”.

Revelations in the set of documents included:

- A drop of 0.7% to 123,142 police officers across all ranks in England and Wales at the end of March this year. This is the lowest number at the end of a financial year since comparable records began in 1996.
 - Warnings in a separate Foreign Office report that there are grave concerns about the human rights situations in countries such as Saudi Arabia, China and Bahrain though many of the countries listed bought billions of pounds of arms from the UK.
- Britain has sold £3.3bn worth of [arms to Saudi Arabia](#) in the past two years alone, including licences for aircraft, drones, grenades, and missiles. The Foreign Office report said the UK is “deeply concerned about the application of the death penalty” in Saudi Arabia and restrictions on freedom of expression, as well as women’s rights.
- Bahrain, one of the first countries visited by May when she became prime minister, is criticised for locking up pro-democracy activists, such as the writer Nabeel Rajab. Other countries of concern listed included Afghanistan, Burundi, China, Iran, Iraq, Myanmar, Russia, Syria and Yemen.
- The decision to scrap the electrification of train lines, which had been heralded as a way of making the rail network faster, greener and cleaner, after massive budget overruns of billions of pounds.
 - A statement showing that the UK plans to opt into new Brussels regulations allowing for more cross-border police cooperation in cases where children are at risk of parental abduction – news that pro-EU campaigners said demonstrates the risks of a hard Brexit, which might force the UK to abandon the deal.
 - A report showing that schools and colleges do not currently have the capacity to teach all pupils [maths](#) until they are 18, with about a decade needed to expand capacity.

Sir Adrian Smith’s review said England “remains unusual” in not requiring study of maths beyond 16, compared with most advanced nations. Schools will get new funding to improve the quality of teaching for maths A-level, the schools minister, Nick Gibb, said.

Welcome to the Guardian. This site uses cookies. Read [our policy](#).

become a
supporter

subscribe / find a job
news / opinion / sport / arts / life



UK / World / Business / Environment / Tech / UK politics / more

Arms
trade

UK arms exports to Saudi Arabia can continue, high court rules

Campaign Against the Arms Trade loses fight to stop sales to Gulf state over claims weapons may have been used to kill civilians in Yemen



Campaigners hold a banner outside the high court. CAAT said the ruling would allow the sale of arms to ‘brutal dictatorships and human rights abusers’. Photograph: Jonathan Brady/PA

[Share on Facebook](#) [Share on Twitter](#) [Share via Email](#)

Alice Ross

Monday 10 July 2017
11.12 BST

Campaigners have lost a high-profile case calling for UK arms sales to [Saudi Arabia](#) to be stopped over humanitarian concerns, as the high court ruled exports could continue.

Saudi Arabia's standing is damaged despite ruling on arms exports

Read

more

Campaign Against Arms Trade (CAAT) launched the judicial review of the government's decision to continue granting weapons-export licences to Saudi Arabia despite widespread concern over the civilian death toll of its two-year bombing campaign in [Yemen](#).

CAAT called the ruling a “green light” for the UK government to sell arms to “brutal dictatorships and human rights abusers”.

Delivering an open judgment in the high court in London, Lord Justice Burnett, who heard the case with Mr Justice Haddon-Cave, said: “We have concluded that the material decisions of the secretary of state were lawful. We therefore dismiss the claim.”

The court is also handing down a closed judgment, following a case in which half of the evidence was heard in secret on national security grounds.

UK and EU arms sales rules state that export licences cannot be granted if there is a “clear risk” that the equipment could be used to break international humanitarian law. Licences are signed off by the secretary of state for international trade, Liam Fox.

The UK government's arms sales to Saudi Arabia have come under sustained scrutiny from NGOs and MPs since the start of the campaign in Yemen, where the Saudi-led bombing campaign is accused of killing civilians and damaging vital infrastructure. But the kingdom is the UK's largest weapons client and has bought more than £3bn of British arms in the past two years.

The case, which was heard over three days in February, included uncomfortable disclosures for the government, including documents in which the export policy chief told the business secretary, Sajid Javid, then in charge of licensing, “my gut tells me we should suspend [weapons exports to the country]”.

Documents obtained by the Guardian showed that the UK was preparing to suspend

exports after the bombing of a funeral in Yemen in October 2016 killed 140 civilians. But the foreign secretary, [Boris Johnson, advised Fox that sales should continue](#), adding: “The ‘clear risk’ threshold for refusal ... has not yet been reached.”

CAAT presented “many hundreds of pages” of reports from the UN, European parliament, Red Cross, Médecins Sans Frontières, Amnesty International and others documenting airstrikes on schools, hospitals and a water well in Yemen, as well as incidents of mass civilian casualties.

Saudi Arabia and UK-supplied cluster bombs: what do we know?

Read
more

The reports “represent a substantial body of evidence suggesting that the coalition has committed serious breaches of international humanitarian law in the course of its engagement in the Yemen conflict”, the judges wrote. “However, this open source material is only part of the picture.”

Thanks to close military cooperation and diplomatic ties, the UK government has “considerable insight into the military systems, processes and procedures of Saudi Arabia adopted in Yemen”, the ruling said.

As the government faced increasing scrutiny of its arms sales to Saudi Arabia, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) devoted considerable energy to tracking the conflict’s impact on civilians, even though the UK is not part of the coalition, the case revealed.

The Foreign Office compiles a regular report on international humanitarian law in Yemen, based on information provided by the MoD. These reports frequently recorded concerns – the October 2015 update found “worrying levels of civilian casualties in some reports” – but said there was not enough evidence to establish whether these were deliberate.

Johnson sees all applications for weapons that are likely to be used by the Royal Saudi Air Force and provides a decision on all “particularly sensitive or finely balanced applications”, the court heard.

The Saudi government had conducted its own investigations into allegations of concern, the judges noted, dismissing CAAT’s concern that the Saudi civilian casualty tracking unit was working too slowly and had only reported on 5% of the incidents. The kingdom’s “growing efforts” were “of significance and a matter which the secretary of state was entitled to take into account” when deciding whether British weapons might be used to violate international humanitarian law.

Saudi Arabia's standing is damaged despite

There was “anxious scrutiny – indeed what seems like anguished scrutiny at some stages” within

ruling on arms exports

Read
more

government of the decision to continue granting licences, the judges wrote. But the secretary of state was “rationally entitled” to decide that the Saudi-led coalition was not deliberately targeting civilians and was making efforts to improve its targeting processes,

and so to continue granting licences.

Burnett said he would consider an application for an appeal, which CAAT and its solicitors, Leigh Day, said they would be lodging immediately.

The CAAT spokesman, Andrew Smith, said: “This is a very disappointing verdict and we are pursuing an appeal. If this verdict is upheld then it will be seen as a green light for government to continue arming and supporting brutal dictatorships and human rights abusers like Saudi Arabia that have shown a blatant disregard for international humanitarian law.

“Every day we are hearing new and horrifying stories about the humanitarian crisis that has been inflicted on the people of Yemen. Thousands have been killed while vital and lifesaving infrastructure has been destroyed.” The case had exposed the UK’s “toxic relationship” with Saudi Arabia, he added.

Rosa Curling of Leigh Day said: “The law is clear: where there is a clear risk UK arms might be used in the commission of serious violations of international law, arms sales cannot go ahead.

“Nothing in the open evidence, presented by the UK government to the court, suggests this risk does not exist in relation to arms to Saudi Arabia. Indeed, all the evidence we have seen from Yemen suggests the opposite: the risk is very real ... Our government should not be allowing itself to be complicit in the grave violations of law taking place by the Saudi coalition in Yemen.”

James Lynch, Amnesty International’s head of arms control, said: “Irrespective of this ruling, the UK and other governments should end their shameless arms supplies to Saudi Arabia. They may amount to lucrative trade deals, but the UK risks aiding and abetting these terrible crimes.”

Mark Goldring, chief executive of Oxfam GB, said: “This sets back arms control 25 years and gives ministers free rein to sell arms to countries even where there is clear evidence they are breaching international humanitarian law. With little legal oversight on arms sales, it is now imperative that parliament holds the government to account.”

An online poll conducted by ICM for Avaaz at the weekend found that two-thirds of the 2,011 respondents opposed arms sales to Saudi Arabia, with 14% in support.

Topics

- [Arms trade](#)
- [Saudi Arabia](#)
- [Yemen](#)
- [Middle East and North Africa](#)
- [news](#)

[Reuse this content](#)

more on this story



Saudi police question woman accused of wearing 'indecent' clothing

Religious police begin inquiry but woman says she didn't post Snapchat video herself of visit to Ushaqir in skirt and crop top, without veil
18 Jul 2017

Saudi Arabia's standing is damaged despite ruling on arms exports

High court has concluded that Britain acted lawfully over weapons sales, but judgment will do little to help end war in Yemen
10 Jul 2017

Saudi Arabia boosting extremism in Europe, says former ambassador

Sir William Patey says Riyadh may not be aware of how its support for a 'certain brand of Islam' is leading to radicalisation
13 Jul 2017

UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia under threat as court ruling on terrorism looms

Verdict due on Monday over humanitarian challenge claiming weapons may have been used to kill civilians in Yemen
9 Jul 2017

Saudi bombs are

**decimating
Yemen.
Yet
May's
glad-
handing
goes
on**

Emily
Thornberry
5
Apr
2017

**Saudi
security
foils
terror
plot
targeting
Mecca
Grand
Mosque
and
pilgrims**

24
Jun
2017

**Britain
has
blood**

**on
its
hands
over
Yemen**

Owen
Jones
8
Feb
2017

**Saudi
king
ousts
nephew
to
name
son
as
first
in
line
to
throne**

21
Jun
2017

most viewed



back to top



world › arms trade

Sign up to our daily email

Email

address

- [jobs](#)
- [dating](#)
- [become a supporter](#)
- [make a contribution](#)
- [Guardian labs](#)
- [about us](#)
- [work for us](#)
- [advertise with us](#)
- [contact us](#)
- [report technical issue](#)
- [terms & conditions](#)
- [privacy policy](#)
- [cookie policy](#)
- [securedrop](#)
- [digital newspaper archive](#)
- [complaints & corrections](#)
- [all topics](#)
- [all contributors](#)
- [modern slavery act](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [subscribe](#)

© 2017 Guardian News and Media Limited or its affiliated companies. All rights reserved.