



### Australian Section

## How to demilitarize global and local crisis action?

The COVID-19 global health crisis has been framed by many as a 'war' on the virus. But in fact it is a health crisis which we are not well equipped to deal with. Since 2015, WILPF has been calling to "Move the Money from War to Peace". WILPF's call - for reduced military expenditure and increased expenditure on health and on human security and well-being - is proving more relevant than ever now.

In Australia we are suffering not just the effects of the pandemic but also a prolonged drought and the traumatic summer of fires that devastated millions of hectares of bushland, killed billions of wildlife, destroyed nearly 1,000 homes and untold numbers of businesses and cost the lives of residents and fire fighters.

It is of significance then that the Australian Defence Force (ADF) was called in to assist with logistical support for fire fighters and to evacuate residents in remote coastal areas trapped on beaches by the fires. The ADF has also been called in to assist with people returning from overseas who have been required to go into quarantine, helping to police social isolation in suburban areas, and even providing support in the north-west area of Tasmania struck by a coronavirus cluster.

The military are called upon to undertake these tasks because Australia has no system in place for such tasks to be undertaken by civilian organisations. The government only responds when the situation becomes a crisis. The world spends a huge amount of money on military expenditure – \$1.917 trillion in 2019. Australia is ranked 13<sup>th</sup> with 1.4% of global military spending for just 0.3% of the global population, i.e. per capita we spend 4 times the global average for each Australian. Australia has an annual defence budget of \$40 billion and has committed \$200 billion for the purchase of submarines, frigates and fighter planes. The 'through life' of these could amount to three-quarters of a trillion dollars.

By any standards, these are huge sums of money. Moving some of this money to civilian organisations to deal with domestic crises would be consistent with a more peaceful approach to national security, reserving the military expenditure for the, hopefully never needed, defence of Australia in case of an actual external threat to our nation.

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Rather than relying on the military in peacetime, resources could be put into creating a coordinated and a well-resourced support for all those services that are needed to prepare for and deal with the consequences of health crises, natural disasters and the ever increasing threats of climate change. This would require training, equipment and logistical support for the wide array of health workers, fire fighters and all types of emergency services. Moving the money from military expenditure would require proper budgetary analysis that identifies the cost of those aspects of crisis response tasks that the military are currently called upon to do, and that would be better undertaken by civilian entities.

The domestic threats to our national security are here and now, particularly the devastating effects of climate change – prolonged severe drought, rising temperatures, lower rainfall, intense bushfires – and now the coronavirus pandemic that is infiltrating every aspect of our lives and the economy and turning our world upside down. Currently there are few policies covering such areas as climate action, energy, fuel security or transition to a low-carbon society, let alone how to deal with serious health threats or natural disasters.

Let's redirect some of the military expenditure to dealing with the domestic threats to our national security and well-being. Five per cent of our annual defence budget, say, would be \$2 billion per year. This would go a long way towards meeting the requirements to plan for and cope with national disasters and other emergencies in a properly coordinated way and with all the necessary resources. A rational approach is needed, not just the 'easy' way of tasking the military to fill the gaps.

We could even try harder to make friends with the neighbours in our region so that we feel less vulnerable to external threats and freer to attend to domestic threats without the need to call on military assistance to deal with them. We could try relationship building rather than military spending.

Guns and bombs don't help deal with a virus.

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