



Australian Section

The Hon Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister

ARRIVAL OF US MARINE ROTATIONAL FORCE IN DARWIN

We noted an announcement in March of a deferment to the 2020 Marine Rotational Force visits due to the restrictions associated with the COVID-19 epidemic. We now understand that the Marine Rotational Force is going ahead in Darwin, with the first contingent of US troops due to arrive in Darwin in early June. We have seen news reports that they are currently in Okinawa and that they will be quarantined in Darwin for 14 days after their arrival. Their current location could position their arrival in Darwin as early as this coming week.

However, there has been very little information available publicly on this. It is doubtful that the majority of Australians, even in the Northern Territory, are aware that the arrival of the troops is imminent, nor what specific arrangements are in place given the risk of COVID-19. Precautions will need to be stringent given that these Marines, potentially including asymptomatic carriers, will be mixing with Australian military personnel and/or with the civilian population of the Northern Territory.

The Northern Territory has had remarkably low numbers of COVID-19 cases to date. Extraordinary measures have been taken to protect Top End residents, and in particular to protect vulnerable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

The United States, on the other hand, has the highest number of positive cases in the world. There is no information available, that we are aware of, on the number of cases amongst US military personnel, other than the early April report of the USS Theodore Roosevelt with a coronavirus cluster, and the USS Kidd with an outbreak during April-May. Given that the US troops coming to Darwin are Marines, not Army personnel, how much time, and when, have they spent on ships recently? What is the testing regime for them? What access do Australian authorities have to the information necessary to act appropriately for the safety of Australian communities prior to the arrival of the troops as well as during their time in the Northern Territory.

The COVID-19 global health crisis has been framed by many as a 'war' on the virus. But rather it is a health crisis which we have had to scramble to deal with – with some success so far in Australia – but at great cost.

Australia's borders continue to be closed to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. Only Australian citizens,

residents and immediate family members can travel to Australia.

Bringing large numbers of foreign troops here at this stage will be endangering rather than adding to our human security. It is a very poor decision to make when Australia is just now starting to emerge from the strict isolating measures taken so successfully for the past couple of months, with the results of this relaxation yet to be seen.

In the Territory, movement is now beginning to open up but this could make control of any introduced infection considerably more problematic.

It is vital to protect the people of the Northern Territory including First Nations communities and Australian Forces who may be undertaking shared exercises with the US troops.

We call on the Australian government to delay the arrival of the US troops for the remainder of this year so we can be sure that their presence is not going to cause any fresh outbreaks of the virus.

If the government continues with their current plans to host 1,200+ US forces in the Darwin area, the public needs to be properly informed of their arrival. It is critical that we have in place world's best practice around screening, testing and monitoring of troops before arrival as well as on arrival. The public needs to be informed about the health precautions planned to be in place while they are here, so the general community is prepared and can make appropriate arrangements for keeping themselves safe – especially those vulnerable members of the community.

Bringing in a large number of troops from a country with the highest number of COVID-19 cases in the world is a great risk in the current situation.

We ask that you reconsider this decision and defer the arrival of these troops for 2020.

This letter has also been sent to the Minister for Defence, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Minister for Health and the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory.

Yours sincerely

Christine Henderson
President
Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (Australia)
31 May 2020



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WILPF is a non-government organisation committed to disarmament, the peaceful resolution of conflict, economic and social justice, and environmental sustainability.
On 28 April 1915, more than 1200 women met in The Hague to advocate an end to war. WILPF celebrates 100 years of peace and human rights building.

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