
Sent: Wednesday, 1 October 2008 20:56
To: White Paper
Subject: WWW Submission: 5. Other Defence Capabilities [SEC=UNCLASSIFIED]

Name: Megan Sheard

Submission: Submission to Community Consultation Process for the Australian Defence Force White Paper, 2008.

I believe it would be beneficial for the Australian Defence Force to develop a nonviolent taskforce in which participants are trained in nonviolent protective and intervention skills useful for both local and overseas situations.

As a participant in a delegation to Israel/Palestine with Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) in January, I was able to see first-hand the significant role nonviolent intervention and accompaniment could play. This potential has been explored by a number of international groups including CPT, who have worked in Colombia, the Middle East, Africa and the U.S., the Ecumenical Accompaniment Program in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), and Peace Brigades International, who work to protect human rights defenders in South America, Mexico, Nepal and Indonesia.

While organisations such as CPT and the EAPPI draw on a Christian belief in nonviolence and a number of proponents of nonviolent action believe in it as a matter of spirituality (well-known examples being Mohandas Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.), I do not believe it necessary to have a spiritual belief in nonviolence in order to consider nonviolent action as a viable option.

In his book, "Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential"¹, Gene Sharp argues for the value of nonviolent action from a deeply pragmatic perspective, drawing attention to the fact that most nonviolent struggles throughout history have not been waged because of deep ethical commitments to nonviolence, but because of the participant's pragmatic assessment of their most likely chance of success. Despite popular perception to the contrary, Sharp argues that while nonviolent approaches to conflict cannot be assured success and may still have many casualties, historically these casualties have been less than where the approach to conflict has been armed. Sharp's idea of social or civilian-based defense has not been adequately explored.

While arms manufacturers stand to profit from wars, I believe that most Australians consider violence a last-resort option. It therefore seems important to invest in exploring what could be the first, second and third 'resorts' before violence, something we have left untried - between traditional political diplomacy and military response there exists a large gulf into which nonviolent action could step. As a secular country, we should take pragmatic arguments for nonviolent action seriously, and as a nominally-Christian one, we should not disregard the tradition of Christian nonviolence altogether.

While I do not speak for a formal organisation, I do speak on behalf of a large community of people who at the least share my concern with our society's tendency to see solutions to violent conflict only in terms of violent responses, and who wish for a greater exploration of those alternatives not altogether untried in history, but generally eclipsed in our thinking by the gun.

Can we afford such a force? Given the waste of human life in armed conflict, I believe we can't afford not to try.

Megan Sheard

1. Sharp, Gene (2005). Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential. Porter Sargent Handbooks.

I agree to my submission being published on the Defence website