

## **Submission by Women in Black (Adelaide) Response to the Defence Policy Discussion Paper**

Women in Black was started in Israel in 1988 by Israeli, Palestinian and US women protesting against Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The Women in Black movement has since spread to many countries including Italy, the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Belgium, Azerbaijan, Colombia, India, Australia, Mexico and Serbia. Women in Black now comprises an international network of women who share a common philosophy of opposition to militarism and violence, and use a similar style of silent demonstration or vigil. Women in Black vigils are held in approximately thirty-one countries around the world. This submission is made on behalf of Women in Black in Adelaide, South Australia, henceforth referred to as WiB. We welcome this opportunity to comment on the future of Defence spending in Australia.

Equipping a modern defence force in Australia is an increasingly difficult problem for a small population with a large boundary. In addition, our treaty obligations overseas with allies, and our responsibilities in former territories, have seen us engage recently in very expensive conflicts and actions.

WiB acknowledges the large volume of work and planning involved in efforts to defend our country's population against threats from outside our borders, and recognises the challenges involved in meeting these threats.

While WiB recognises the problems involved, we are nevertheless disturbed by the very large amounts of public funds expended on defence while pressing environmental and social needs remain underspent by the Australian Government. For instance, the Rudd Government has allocated \$618.9 million in 2008-09 to the Afghanistan conflict alone<sup>1</sup>. This can be compared with the total budget for buybacks of water allocations from Murray-Darling River System irrigators of \$170.1 million in 2008-09 and \$482.7 million in 2009-10, that is a total of only \$652.8 million over three years<sup>2</sup>. Underspent, the security implications of environmental and social threats (such as global poverty) can only continue to burgeon.

As early as 2007, conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan were recognised as unwinnable by many commentators. Increasingly, commentators are predicting that conflicts will continue to occur over resources such as land, water and fuel. Humanitarian tragedies such as massacres in Africa over the past decade are widely acknowledged to be due to population movements caused by famine. Famine and resulting disease is in turn often triggered by population pressure and desertification caused by removal of vegetation for farming, grazing and

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<sup>1</sup> Minister for Home Affairs, media release, May 2008

<sup>2</sup> Australian Government budget 2008

firewood. Thus, these military conflicts in Africa have been acknowledged by many analysts as the first wars due to global warming.

While it appears that we cannot win in the military conflicts in which we are engaged, it is also apparent that we can inflict terrible hardship and suffering on helpless people in these nations. Even discounting injuries and death immediately caused by conflict, we and our allies damage infrastructure and environment by our actions, and cause health and educational deficiencies for the most vulnerable on a scale that is difficult to imagine, in a way which lasts for many years after our forces return home.

So we cannot escape the facts that we are pouring money into wasteful enterprises in a way which causes further problems and fails to address the root causes of the conflicts.

In addition, as we in the Western world continue to amass wealth and as population levels soar in poorer countries, improved global communications mean that our relative wealth is on clear display to those in the world who are hungry and disenfranchised. To add insult to injury, some of our mineral-sourced wealth comes from Australian-owned or part-owned companies operating overseas with some disastrous environmental effects on poor communities in majority-world countries. Because of the gross global inequities which are becoming increasingly apparent in a globalised world for all to see, our relative wealth and comfort puts us at serious risk in world terms.

At the same time, the Australian Defence Forces are staffed and equipped to world-class levels. We employ and train people to high standards and we have developed extensive skills in many areas including but not limited to logistics, deployment, intelligence gathering, mapping, supply, medical outreach, engineering, planning and project management. Our forces also have a strong tradition of community service and attract many recruits who wish to serve their country. They are renowned for their work on peace-keeping and humanitarian missions throughout the world and have a high level of public respect for this.

We challenge the Australian Defence Forces to change their focus to one of seeking out and acting against the causes of conflict. This is already being done in many ways - for example by offering direct help to people involved in natural disasters. But we can go further. By promoting the health, security and ultimately the wealth and safety of our immediate and further neighbours, we will build strong bonds with others which will be the best defence our population can have. For example, by deploying our own technical and engineering skills to solve problems of scarce resources, we can help to avert armed conflict. By engaging with diplomats and scientists to map and predict conflict areas and resource problems, we can work with other partners to step in, not as a global peace force but as a global conflict averter.

Incidentally, a fear expressed by many people is that by giving assistance to poorer people overseas we allow their populations to increase and therefore we risk exacerbating the resource problems which lead to conflict. However, studies currently show that increased prosperity, health and education - particular education and wealth for women - actually lead to decreased population. In particular, families who invest in a large number of children are often trying to secure their future in countries where there is no social welfare safety net and a high rate of infant mortality - the aim is to have as many children as quickly as possible. In contrast, when infant mortality falls, birth rates also drop.

The solutions we develop for others will also help our own population. With scarce water and poor soil in Australia, we need to plan for a different future where logistics and careful thinking will be our mainstays and where we need to find new solutions to problems of scarce resources.

In an interconnected and globalised world, we look forward to a future where the Australian Defence Force defends our security by making Australia an indispensable part of joint international efforts towards world safety, security and survival.

*Submission prepared by Cathy Cox  
for Women in Black (Adelaide)  
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