

With the exception of combat, all of the activities carried out by the armed forces - such as search and rescue, disaster relief, humanitarian assistance, fisheries protection, peace building, fundraising for charities and so on - can be done by civilian agencies; and certainly at far lower cost because civilian agencies do not require expensive military hardware and weapons systems.

Which raises the question of why we have combat forces? Despite being called the 'New Zealand Defence Force' (NZDF), it is clear that the armed forces are mainly an instrument of foreign policy, a force to be deployed offensively in other countries rather than for the defence of this country. But is the deployment of armed forces overseas really one of the ways we want to relate to people in other parts of the world?

Family violence is not okay ...

There are other questions raised by the use of the NZDF overseas, including the anomaly in government policy around the acceptability of violence as a way to resolve conflict. For the past few years, the government has been running a campaign against family violence with the message: "Family violence is not okay. Not at any level."

Yet since 2001, for example, successive governments have deployed SAS combat troops to Afghanistan where they have been involved in laser targeting of villages for US and British missile strikes and bombing runs - why is family violence not okay here, but it is okay if it is inflicted on families elsewhere?

Isn't it time to have some real public discussion about the costs and use of armed force and armed forces?



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Global Day of Action on Military Spending

Last year global military expenditure was \$1,630 billion (US\$) - on average, nearly \$4,500,000,000 every day.

By way of contrast, an average of more than 24,000 children under the age of five die every day from mainly preventable causes - lack of access to adequate food, clean water and basic medicines.

This is one of the prices paid, the collateral damage that is seldom talked about, for maintaining armed forces in a state of combat readiness around the world.

It would take an amount less than 7% of global military expenditure to eradicate extreme hunger and poverty around the world, and less than 20% of military expenditure to meet the cost of all of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

Yet prioritising military expenditure over social spending is only one of the costs of militarisation.

Even when armed forces are not deployed in combat, military training activities involve excessive consumption of non-renewable resources and destruction of the natural environment.

The production and testing of weapons systems, as well as the operation of military aircraft, vehicles and warships, causes widespread toxic contamination and pollution.

Militarism and militarisation

One of the definitions of militarism is the policy of maintaining a military organisation in aggressive preparedness for war.

Militarism is the ideology that underlies the global cycle of violence and keeps it going round and round in an ever-downwards spiral.

Militarisation is the outcome of that way of thinking - the establishment and maintenance of the military capacity to carry out state violence, and normalisation of the idea that violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflict.

Militarism is the theory, militarisation - and all too often, armed conflict - is the practice. When there is 'a policy of maintaining a strong military organisation in aggressive preparedness for war', there is an increased likelihood that armed force will be used - whether for repression within a state, or as an instrument of foreign policy, or both.

Weapons research and development wastes scientific knowledge that could otherwise be utilised for life enhancing purposes. A sizeable proportion of the world's population is engaged in military activity, an incredible waste of human endeavour.

The establishment of military bases is generally associated with an increase in levels of violence in surrounding communities; and armed forces around the world are generally associated with increased levels of sexual violence, against women and girls in particular.

Beyond all of this, perhaps the most harmful cost of militarism is the acceptance of the belief that violence is an acceptable way to resolve conflict, an acceptance that seldom occurs in other aspects of daily life, and the way this acts to prevent the exploration of other ways of resolving conflict.

What about Aotearoa New Zealand?

This country is often described as peaceful, but in reality we are very much part of the global cycle of violence, albeit on a comparatively small scale because of our small population size.

For example, the government maintains armed forces in a state of combat readiness at a cost of more than \$3 billion (NZ\$), an average of almost \$8,500,000 every day.

By way of contrast, one in five children here lives in a family with an income below the poverty line, and a further one in four is in a family with "a restricted standard of living".

The level of overseas development assistance this year is less than 17% of the amount of military expenditure.

While the primary purpose of the armed forces is supposed to be to secure NZ "against external threat", the 2009 Defence Review document stated: "a realistic assessment of New Zealand's security environment is that the country is not currently threatened by a direct military attack".

When asked, 'What is the most significant maritime security threat facing your nation and how do your sea services address this challenge?' NZ Navy Commander Rear Admiral David Ledson replied ...

"the most significant threat is actually the lack of a tangible - to many of our sailors and the majority of our citizens - significant threat. Without a threat that has definition and "realness", there are significant challenges in developing and maintaining credible - but expensive - military capabilities, equipment, and personnel." ('Commanders respond', Proceedings Magazine, US Naval Institute, March 2009)

Which raises an obvious question - why does the government maintain expensive military capabilities?