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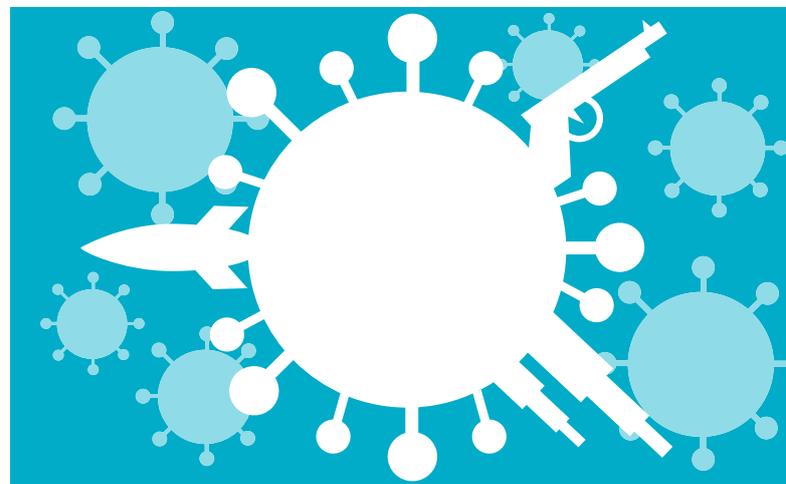
Save lives or destroy them - Militarism and COVID-19

The threatening unprecedented global chaos is quietly informing us as to what needs to be done to create a better world. Many are asking what must we do. The call is to work cooperatively 'to save humanity from massive global death and economic collapse rather than continue to devote \$1.8 trillion a year to waging wars and engaging in vast military build-ups with the goal of slaughtering one another.'¹

Nearly \$2 trillion is devoted annually to war and armaments in the name of security. It is beyond comprehension. Protecting borders and national interests are the primary function of national leaders by maintaining a military to deal with any issues leaving us ill-equipped to save people's lives in a time of health crisis, but extraordinarily able to kill people in a time of war. Is the coronavirus waking us up?

The division of the planet into nation states, each desperately maintains a sense of identity where anyone beyond the border is potentially seen as an enemy to hate and fear. However, have national leaders been deprived of the ability to think wholistically beyond the imaginary borders of the worlds they rule? It is not difficult to see how the national security priorities of some governments have been so askew of reality that left them unprepared for the acute threat to millions of their people.

As leaders continue to arm themselves for war, other threats percolate, viz. COVID-19. In the USA, David Swanson has set up a Department of *Actual* Defense (DAD), as opposed to the Department of Defense (DOD) – more accurately called the Department of War – that is focused on human survival by addressing our collapsing ecosystem, poverty, physical and mental health, the ongoing global pandemic of violence, the inadequacy of our prison system, the nature of crime and the nature of healing and issues of safety. Such a work would train pro-environment workers, disaster-relief workers, and suicide-prevention workers in the tasks of protecting the environment, relieving disasters, and preventing suicide, as against preparing



people to kill large numbers of people and thus destroying the biodiversity of the environment. **It is a matter of disbanding the military, not redirecting it.** Unfortunately, it seems that there is a push in the USA for aggressive new action against Iran, its proxy forces, and countries such as Venezuela, who are distracted by the pandemic crisis. Under cover of COVID-19, the USA has escalated its military threats against other nations, ordering stepped-up action by its forces that risks war with Iran and, possibly Venezuela.

In March 2020, the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, called for 'an immediate global ceasefire' because 'the fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war.' He was joined in this plea by Pope Francis.²

Guterres said it was time to 'end the sickness of war and fight the disease that is ravaging our world.' He 'urged warring parties across the world to lay down their weapons in support of the bigger battle against COVID-19: the common enemy that is now threatening all of humankind.' Calling on member countries to 'end the sickness of war and fight the disease that is ravaging our world' with Syria, Yemen and Libya.

In supporting Antonio Guterres, Pope Francis said that the coronavirus pandemic 'exposes our vulnerability' and that we – all people of good will – have

responsibilities: 'We were not shaken awake by wars or injustice across the world, nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet,' but we need to 'seize this time of trial as a *time of choosing*'.

Was it possible that we as human beings could behave rationally and recognise this call in the face of a common enemy to save humanity from massive global death and economic collapse rather than continue to devote \$1.8 trillion a year to waging wars and engaging in vast military build-ups? A case in point is Afghanistan where the Taliban and the Government have been waging war for the best part of 2 decades – yet are in discussions to negotiate a cease fire so they can deal with COVID-19, and the threat it poses to all of them.

These enormous resources earmarked for war and preparation for war could be used to meet the needs of one's own people, and others in need, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. All heavily-armed governments that currently shovel the human and economic and environmental wealth of their nations down the endless hole of war, would benefit by reordering their priorities.

However, as history shows us, we are not living in a thoroughly rational world. Even 75 years after the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with atomic bombs, nations continue to arm themselves with roughly 14,000 nuclear weapons, preparing for and sometimes threatening a nuclear war that will destroy most life on earth.

COVID-19 appears in some countries to be strengthening authoritarian political tendencies that, have gone hand-in-hand with militarism. Recognising the fear and panic that gripping many of their people, the crisis is being used by power hungry people to proclaim a state of emergency and limit political freedom.

We cannot know if the current pandemic will weaken or strengthen war and militarism. What will the citizens demand? Will they press for a reorientation of national priorities from preparing for war to meeting the needs of people? Or, will they rally behind their often unscrupulous and incompetent rulers and shed more blood despite the enormous challenges posed by COVID-19. Will humanity turn over a new leaf and work together to solve our common problems?³

For Christians, indeed all people, the current pandemic,

means rediscovering a way of living, a basic faith, that does not depend on external constructs. Pope Francis' emphasis on discernment as an engine of interior mobility is even richer now when external mobility is not possible. When he, in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, evoked the image of 'the saints next door', he implied that goodness, compassion, kindness and commitment is found in our next door neighbours, who, living in our midst, reflect the presence of the Sacred and an encounter with others.⁴

The current pandemic provides the perfect cover in Australia for a covert way of doing things or not doing things that should be done. We could get into a war in the Persian Gulf, with no explanation. We can withdraw from a reliance on allies that have presented our Asian neighbours as threats for decades. We have an opportunity to assert our independence by reorienting our priorities by withdrawing our troops out of the Middle East, the Philippines, and the South China Sea. We could scrap the French submarine contract in lieu of offsetting the debt that will be faced for the COVID-19. We could put our efforts into saving lives, not destroying them. We could build up goodwill with our Asian and Pacific neighbours – something that more armaments cannot achieve.⁵

'May our joint effort against the pandemic lead everyone to recognize our need to strengthen our brotherly and sisterly ties as members of one human family... In particular, may it inspire national leaders and other concerned parties to a renewed commitment to overcome rivalries. Conflicts are not resolved through war. It is necessary to overcome antagonism and differences through dialogue and a constructive search for peace ...It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives.' Pope Francis ⁶

Full set of resources and references are on the ERC website www.erc.org.au



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