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Global military spending increase threatens humanity and the planet Militarism will cost us the earth

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In the face of multiple escalating threats to humanity and life on earth, global military spending increased to its highest ever recorded level last year according to new figures released by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) today - the Global Day of Action on Military Spending.

SIPRI has estimated global military expenditure last year was at least \$2,443 billion (USD, ±\$4,150 billion NZD), an increase of 6.8% in real terms from 2022 and the steepest year-on-year increase since 2009. ^[1] On average, this is equivalent to more than \$6.6 billion (USD, ±\$11.3 billion NZD) squandered every day on incessant preparations for war.

By way of comparison, global funding for official development and humanitarian assistance last year was only 9% of the amount of military spending; and on average more than 13,424 children under the age of five died every day from mainly preventable causes - lack of access to adequate food, clean water and basic medicines: that is one tragically senseless death every 6 seconds. ^[2] 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.

At COP 28 last year, pledges for loss and damage funding for vulnerable countries most susceptible to the devastating impacts of climate change amounted to just two and a half hours of global military spending; while the total amount pledged for the global Green Climate Fund by December 2023 is equivalent to two days of military expenditure. ^[3]

It is inexcusable that many states - including New Zealand - continue to prioritise spending on combat-ready armed forces over human health and wellbeing, and care for the planet. The opportunity cost of military spending is multiple opportunities lost. Every dollar of military expenditure is a dollar taken away from socially useful spending - a dollar that could be used to take real action on climate change, to ensure a decent standard of living for all, and to ensure health and social welfare systems can function well in national, regional or global emergencies: it is a dollar that could be used to save lives, to promote climate justice, flourishing communities and care for the planet, rather than being spent on endless preparations for war.

The multiple threats to humanity and the planet - the rapidly escalating climate emergency, intensifying extreme weather events, humanitarian catastrophes, devastating armed conflicts, environmental disasters, collapsing ecosystems, loss of biodiversity, species extinction, and increasing levels of social inequity - are devastating lives and livelihoods

around the world; while highlighting and exacerbating systemic social, economic and political inequities, and exposing multiple flaws in government spending and other priorities, including the folly of maintaining armed forces in a constant state of combat readiness when there are so many other more pressing needs.

It is obvious that none of these threats can be addressed by increasing military spending and militarisation, and that all are compounded by the deadly priorities of those governments that continue to cling to outdated narrow notions of military security. Armed forces cannot turn the tide on rising sea levels, and no military umbrella can provide shelter from cataclysmic storms: instead, militarisation is exacerbating the climate emergency and other catastrophes facing humanity.

Now more than ever, with the future of life on earth at stake, states must work together collectively to find sustainable solutions, instead of continuing to pour public money into wasteful destructive military activity - the ultimate in unsustainability, with military emissions estimated to be at least 5.5% of the global total.

The five largest military spenders in 2023 were the US (37% of the global total), China (12%), Russia (4.5%), India (3.4%) and Saudi Arabia (3.1%), which together accounted for 61% of world military spending. Overall, average military expenditure as a share of government expenditure in 2023 was 6.9%, and the global military burden (military spending as a share of gross domestic product) was 2.3%. ^[1]

New Zealand's military spending

While New Zealand does not feature in the SIPRI table ranking the highest increases in military spending around the world this year, that is simply because other states increased their spending by more, not because there has been any reduction in New Zealand's military spending.

Despite the urgent need for action on climate mitigation and adaptation, as well as the desperate need for increased funding for essential public services including health, education, housing and support for persons with disabilities - currently being slashed to fund tax cuts for the better off - successive New Zealand governments continue to prioritise military spending.

In last year's 'Building for the future' Budget, \$6,631,269,000 (NZD) was allocated for military spending - an average of more than \$127.5 million every week, and a 12.3% increase on actual spending in 2022. ^[4] The spectre of an additional \$20+ billion (NZD) to be spent over the next decade on increased combat capability, warships and military aircraft continues to threaten the possibility of substantive action on human health and wellbeing, and climate justice. ^[4]

Pacific leaders have repeatedly stated that climate change is the existential security threat to the region, but New Zealand's focus appears to be on more militarisation rather than climate action. The Pacific is already one of the most highly militarised regions in the world, although only four Pacific island nations have armed forces. The overwhelming majority of militarisation in the Pacific comes from outside the region - military bases, military live training exercises, new military alliances such as AUKUS, and military occupation by the armed forces of Indonesia, France and the United States, in particular, along with Australia,

Britain, China, Russia and ... New Zealand. Clearly there are better things New Zealand could be doing in the Pacific based on a dedicated focus on demilitarisation so that existing threats can be properly addressed and resourced, rather than fabricating more.

The ongoing prioritising of military spending - whether here in Aotearoa or around the world - is a reflection of the deadly ideology of militarism, a destructive mindset focused on obsolete concepts of military security that continue to harm the future of humanity and the planet, rather than real human security that meets the needs of all.

It is totally reprehensible that military spending continues to rise in the midst of the rapidly worsening climate catastrophe, humanitarian crises, and ongoing social inequities that are often caused, and always made worse, by militarisation: a transition from combat-ready armed forces to civilian agencies to meet the needs of all peoples and the planet is long overdue. ^[5]

The IPCC warned last year that if we want to have a liveable future, taking the right action now is needed for the transformational change essential for a sustainable, equitable world ^[6] - clearly it is time to invest in the future for peoples and planet, and budget for peace, not war. Unless there is an immediate and meaningful change in the priorities of New Zealand and other states, militarism will cost us the earth.

Resources and references:

- Aotearoa New Zealand Campaign on Military Spending, <http://www.converge.org.nz/pma/gdams.htm>
- SIPRI, <https://www.sipri.org>

^[1] ‘Global military spending surges amid war, rising tensions and insecurity’, SIPRI, 22 April 2024, and ‘Trends in world military expenditure 2023’, SIPRI Fact Sheet, April 2024, both are available at <http://www.converge.org.nz/pma/gdams.htm>

^[2] ‘International aid rises in 2023 with increased support to Ukraine and humanitarian needs’, OECD, 11 April 2024 / ‘Levels and trends in child mortality: 2023 Report’, UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation, 12 March 2024

^[3] ‘The Loss and Damage Fund and Pledges at COP 28’, Julie-Anne Richards and Tariq Jowahir, 11 December 2023 / ‘Green Climate Fund reaches record funding level’, Green Climate Fund, 3 December 2023

^[4] ‘Budget 2023: Building for tomorrow? NZ military spending increases by 12.2%’, Peace Movement Aotearoa, 18 May 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/PeaceMovementAotearoa/posts/6186729694707681>

^[5] As outlined, for example, in ‘Budget 2023: Building for tomorrow?’, note above.

^[6] See, for example, ‘Urgent climate action can secure a liveable future for all’, IPCC, 20 March 2023, <https://www.ipcc.ch/2023/03/20/press-release-ar6-synthesis-report>