

Friends of the Earth Brisbane

Member Queensland Nuclear Free Alliance

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To: The Secretary
Public Works Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
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Re: Combined Joint Training Facility at Shoalwater Bay

Friends of the Earth Brisbane opposes the proposed Combined Joint Training Centre project and its proposed Urban Operations Training Facility. We believe this development at the Shoalwater Bay Military Training Facility to be a totally inappropriate.

The Shoalwater Bay Military Training Facility and exclusion area sits on Aboriginal land, encompassing some of Queensland's (and Australia's) most pristine coastal regions. Building a city (whether actually inhabited or not) and constructing agricultural land within this site – for military – or other purposes is inappropriate. Defence has claimed to have a record of environmental stewardship and minimal impact on this site. The construction of this urban training area will greatly disrupt flora and fauna in the region: its use as training zone will actually be lethal to them. We are concerned about both current military use and expansions to the military site for the following reasons:

Disregard for the Human rights of traditional land-owning people

Friends of the Earth Brisbane is greatly concerned traditional owners organisations have not been consulted in this development process, or at least are not listed in the list of "organisations consulted" in the proposal.

It is our understanding that the Darumbal people, traditional owners of the land at Shoalwater, although acknowledged to be the traditional custodians, have not been given native title to their land, which is designated a military exclusion zone, and are only allowed limited access to it. The land and seas at Shoalwater contain sites important to Darumbal culture and heritage. We believe that the denial of access to traditional lands is an infringement of the human rights of these people. Furthermore, we are concerned that the threat of losing access completely forces traditional owners to submit to military use of their land, without equitable debate. It has long been federal government practice to impose nuclear and military sites on indigenous people's land. Rather than spending money on further developing the site militarily, the government should invest in infrastructure and support for this aboriginal community to give it just options for maintaining its culture and heritage and empowering its future.

Environmental destruction

The actual area used for military training at Shoalwater is not limited to the area designated in the development proposal. Exercises in this region extend out to and traverse the Great Barrier Reef. Being combined exercises, training at Shoalwater includes army, navy and air force practice. It is inappropriate to expose some of our last coastal wilderness areas, threatened and endangered species, to bombing, on-shore landing practice, and raiding drills. Friends of the Earth Brisbane believes the entire Shoalwater Training Facility military to be inappropriate on environmental grounds and calls for an immediate halt to all military activity in the region. The site must then be rehabilitated, returned to traditional owners, and maintained for future generations.

The military, in particular the US military, whom are going to be using this facility, are known to be some of the world's greatest polluters and producers of toxic chemicals. It is no secret that both napalm and depleted uranium weapons were used at Vieques, Puerto Rico, a training range no longer available to the US, and that the US military has a history of environmental damage and detrimental social impact around its overseas stations.

In January 2006, a US nuclear powered aircraft carrier, the USS Ronald Reagon, was found to have left a trail of rubbish in Moreton Bay during a short visit to the port of Brisbane. Soon after leaving the port, a pilot was forced to evacuate his plane during a routine exercise. The plane, never recovered, now sits off the southeast Queensland coast.

As part of the US current global military re-alignment, the US is looking for closer partnership with Australia. The facility at Shoalwater is now designated to be a joint US - Australia training facility. June 2006 Prime Minister Howard stated that he welcomed US bases, not just training facilities. Operation Talisman Sabre which will take place at Shoalwater in May/June 2007 is expected to be the largest ever military exercise to take place in Australia. The Joint Combined Training Centre at Shoalwater is expected to be "on-line" by that time to practice "high-tech" warfare.

The US uses nuclear powered vessels (and has done so in military exercises in Australia), carries nuclear weapons, and now uses depleted uranium weapons as standard armaments. All of these pose long term radiological risk to the environment and community.

Depleted Uranium (DU): Not only do the US now regularly use DU, Australia has maintained its own small arsenal of depleted uranium weapons. The military has stated that DU would not be used in the 2005 Talisman Sabre exercises. No such guarantee has been made for the long-term. In fact, in response to questions about Australian support for US use of DU in 2003, then Defence Minister Robert Hill stated: "In relation to DU used by our allies we have said that, if they believe it is the most appropriate element to use in their particular munitions in certain circumstances, we do not think it is appropriate for us to press a different view upon them." (24 June 2003, Senate Questions without Notice: DU: p 12315)

Despite their questioning, the community in the Shoalwater region has, of yet, received no denial that depleted uranium weapons were used in the region in the past.

Promotion of militarism in the region

Friends of the Earth Brisbane opposes joint military training and operations with the US. We oppose the use of violence as a solution to global problems. We believe the Urban Operation Training Facility development to be unnecessary, as there is no need for Australians to be further training in, or investing, in urban warfare. We reject the Australian supported, US lead "war on terror" believing, war itself to be terror.

We believe that practicing warfare, with the world's largest nuclear - armed superpower, sends an aggressive signal to our neighbours and potential allies throughout the world. We question the benefits outlined in the proposal: "improve interoperability", contribute to "future capability development", "enhance high end, bilateral training."

With Pine Gap, Australia is already home to one of the US's most strategic military satellite bases. Australia's agreement to allow US bombing fly-overs over NT, US Sea Swaps and bombing practice in WA, three new US joint training facilities further entrenches Australia's involvement in the US military machine, whether Australia is an open participant or not. For example, with only several hundred Australians troops deployed in Iraq, it is clear that Australia's greatest contribution to US military efforts is to act as a base for US military activity.

We believe Australia should be seeking peaceful solutions to conflict at home and overseas. Investing time, energy and resources into infrastructure that perpetuates war, rather and promoting peace, is a detriment to our community and world.

Social Impacts:

Friends of the Earth Brisbane also notes with alarm none of the following organisations have been consulted, or listed in the list of "organisations consulted": local community, arts, non-governmental political, social justices, women's health (rape and crisis), student, academic, scientific or environmental organisations. Only current political seat-holders and business councils appear on the list. While military bases and exercises may bring capital in to a suffering local economy, such as Rockhampton's, they are also fraught with serious health and social impacts. Military exercises are bases are linked to increased violence, drug-related crime, rape and crisis in hosting communities.

Conclusion:

Friends of the Earth Brisbane calls of the government to engage in open and equitable dialogue with the community over all military issues, such as the proposed development at Shoalwater and the Joint Military Exercises. We oppose the Joint Combined Training Centre, the Urban Operations Training Facility, and the use of the land and sea for military purposes.

We believe the detriment to the environment, the health and safety of the community, the destruction of indigenous heritage, and the threat to safety, security and peace that this development brings far outweigh any financial or immediate military alliance building benefit this may bring. We believe that all of the land and sea at Shoalwater Bay should be returned to its recognised traditional owners and that is its cultural and environmental dignity and beauty should be protected for future generations.

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